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BEING A CHRISTIAN OR A MUSLIM – HOW? – THE QUESTION IS NOW

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Abstract

Christianity and Islam can do a great deal for the cause of human justice and inter-ethnic peace. The most important task today is to work on reconciliation and on creating an atmosphere of mutual trust. This is the only way in which we can avoid the Balkans being once again, in the future, a region with an “excess of history.” But as regards the Church and Islam, they must work on a theology that will ensure mutual respect and eliminate mutual prejudices. However, a theology of this kind has yet to feature in our Eastern Orthodoxy.

From Crisis to Building Mutual Trust

Today we encounter a crisis not only within the Church but also a universal crisis that is shaking up the roots of our human being. At the same time, in our Eastern Orthodox-Muslim relations we can observe a crisis of mutual trust and respect, which is leading all the more towards reciprocated tension and polarization. However, what comforts us is the following: the response of our faiths to all our crisis situations is completely clear, so leaning on their advice can help us get oriented toward a better future. Because their responses exclude new tensions and polarizations, they do not offer an alternative, only disagreement that further complicate our current, already deplorable situation. At the same time, what creates an even greater growth of mutual tensions is first of all related to one thing, namely, because we do not attach enough importance to the concept of unity and community, even today we live in a time of mutual alienation. Although we are in unity with the Muslims concerning belief in one God, concerning the struggle for peace, justice and human rights, the aspects of our unity do not even appear on the official level, so there is a great chasm gaping between us. Concerning other issues there are no proper official contacts or meetings yet.

¹ Translated from Znakovi vremena (Sarajevo), Vol. 9, No. 31 (Spring 2006), pp. 104-125 with the permission of the author.

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although there is a basic consensus and agreement on them in private conversations. When it comes to the question of Islam, I would say that some Orthodox churches are barely visible and audible. Their silence and invisibility are primarily the result of a traditional theology that is not proving itself timely in light of the current signs of the times and modern paradigms. Since our Balkan setting is neither exclusively Christian, nor Eurocentric, there has been more talk about ecumenism of the Abrahamic faiths as something that characterizes it. Now the main question is the following: With which theology will the Orthodox churches and Sunni ulema’s legitimate another, different kind of politics, one that would not block useful initiatives?

Actually, first we have to be aware of the fact that our theologies have mainly presented Islamic and Christian responses to the challenges and situations of that time. That is why today we must relativize them and re-examine them theologically in order to harmonize them with today’s standards and the spirit of our time. Since they carry the mark and stamp of their time, they are not pertinent to the current situation. So, referring to them could present an obstacle to building a constructive future, primarily due to their exclusive nature and their claim not to a particular but to a universal absolutism. Our national Orthodoxy substantially remains within the theological confines of the Byzantine period, as we relate its positions and those of our St. Sava about Islam to the Byzantine theological context, while also taking into account the views of St. John of Damascus. Although the building of mutual trust will undoubtedly be very difficult in this field, we believers must work on this relationship, as it is also a part of our religious calling. However, we will surely not be able to begin this process without first confessing our sin – or the sin of certain members of our nation – relating to Srebrenica and asking for forgiveness from the victims that survived.

From Forgiveness to Reconciliation

Since the Balkans, including former Yugoslavia, have always been “a region with an excess of history” (Winston Churchill) whose general structure has for all Yugoslav peoples been more or less disastrous, we as believers are now asking what we and our institutions should be doing so that the Balkans would not be living in history any longer. Before that, however, we remember that our relationships have always been marked by interpersonal

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2 Muslim scholars trained in Islam and Islamic law.
3 Reference to the genocide of about 7,000 Muslim men by Serb military and paramilitary units in that Bosnian town in 1995.
tensions. The relationship of Serbs with the Muslims living in Serbia and elsewhere varied, but most carried a negative connotation. Above all, I am thinking of the annihilation of the Muslims in Montenegro, and also of the position of our Church which forbids that Orthodox Serbs form alliances with Muslims, that is, Turks. All this, together with other things, primarily illustrates that our interpersonal relations in newer history were poor. Since, according to some, “patriarchal simplicity and primitive brutality” have always been at the heart of our Balkan nature, it does not surprise us that our inter-ethnic Balkan conflicts throughout history have been so brutal and terrible. Because here mutual depreciating has been deeper than elsewhere in Europe, making progress with the processes of reconciliation and forgiveness slower, too. In order for the Church and the ulama to open these processes, it would be necessary first to be theologically aware. In connection with this I first thought of Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, in which he states, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”, and then of certain passages in the venerable Qur’an. However, as there will be no sincere reconciliation without repentance and asking for forgiveness for all we have done to each other in the past, remembering all these things opens up the most painful corners in our religious, though not other forms of “conscience”. Our maturity in making use of reconciliation can only grow in our repentant consciousness. At the end, making peace with others always requires repentance and leads both parties to the cleansing of our historical memory.

From Pax Christi to International Reconciliation between the Germans and French after World War II

When we talk about international reconciliation, a few examples come to mind in which people from church institutions have played a crucial part. Above all, I think of the Catholic peace movement “Pax Christi”, which was founded in 1945, and which contributed overwhelmingly to the process of national reconciliation between the Germans and the

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1 A phrase referring to this can be found in the 19th-century epic tale “The Mountain Wreath” written by Montenegrin bishop-prince, Petar Petrović Njegoš.
5 11 Corinthians 5: 18, NIV.
6 The Qur’an 3: 133, 134; 4: 149.
French after World War II. The role that Quaker organizations played in the reconciliation process between members of the Biafran uprisings and the military government of Nigeria is another example. At the same time, it is clear that it will never come to interpersonal reconciliation anywhere, and especially not in the Balkans (in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia), without a change in our individual and collective consciousness, which in Christian theological discourse we refer to as our conversion, which churches are now called to work towards.

We Need to Use the Experiences of Others so that We Can Ennoble and Humanize Our Own

We are firstly reminded of what Jews had been for Catholics up until the Second Vatican Council. By calling Jews “faithless,” a great chasm was created between Peter’s church and the rabbinical synagogue. Until Pope Paul VI introduced new content to the Good Friday prayer in his new liturgical book, everything had been going the same old way and contempt for Jews lived primarily in the consciousness of the Church. The new prayer content exhibited love and respect toward Jews for the first time, so things moved out of the deadlock. Similarly, in regard to relations with Muslims, the same solution has been applied. Everything that offended the religious pride of Muslims has been erased. The Roman Curia has taken out the following sentence from one of its prayers: “May He also be king to all those who are still involved in the darkness of idol worship and Islam.”10 Since that time we can observe the improvement in Islamic-Catholic relations. Until the “Arabic multitude” in Algeria became “the sons of the Promise, the sons of Israel” for the Catholic Church,11 nothing crucial took place at the official level in Islamic-Catholic relations. Actually, inasmuch as St. Sava in his “Krmāja” (collection of ecclesiastical law) introduced an act “that is practiced upon those who turn to the pure Christian faith” from among the Saracens (Muslims), because prior to this they had been “heretics,” while Islam is “perceived as Turkish (Islamic) sacrilegious ungodliness”,12 nothing significant will happen along the lines of Christian-Islamic relations, since that first breakthrough means erasing the equation

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11 Ibid., 24, 25.
between Muhammed and the Qur'an, then getting rid of other mentions in which a curse has been pronounced over "Muhammedanism."\(^3\)

Therefore, we need to rely upon the experience of others in order to make our [Orthodox] experience of an encounter with Islam more humane and Christian. Thereby we will remember Christ in everything within public life, who was, and remains, the head of the Church and whom no one excommunicated or accursed. Ever since the greatest man of our Serbian Church adopted the Byzantine position on Islam (based on reasoning that what the mother church thought of it, the daughter churches had to do also), whereby the oldest Orthodox, the Byzantine Church – thanks to the Great Book of Needs (Veliki Trebnik) and the Patriarchal Prayer Book,\(^4\) – was able to always know what this Church officially thinks of Islam.

Consequently, our, actually St. Sava’s, and the current Church-wide cognition of Islam remains significantly medieval and Byzantine in nature. Which means that being an Orthodox believer in a current, modern and not a traditional medieval way first of all means dealing critically with a part of our theological heritage. Having an Ecumenical (Pan-Orthodox) council would be of the greatest importance, as changes of this magnitude must all begin from there and we should be well-prepared for it. This is why today we need a "good" and "clairvoyant" Eastern Orthodox John XXIII. Also, how objectively correct is the claim that "Islam" is one of a hundred and one heresies. Can one become a heretic by believing in the God of Abraham? Accordingly, what is objectively true among all the things we attribute to Islam and what gives us the right to make our own standpoints absolute and to regard those of others as relative and theologically devalue them? Where is our Christian humility in all of this and where the objective evidence that we are right? At the end, we will not know who is right among us now and who is wrong until we meet Him in heaven, so those that the Church regards as heretics today may not have the same status up there. This is why our love should be older than our knowledge which on this earth always remains powerless to fathom God’s secret.

**What does it Mean to be an Eastern Orthodox, or a Christian, After Srebrenica?**

The least we can do is to say something about that. Being an Orthodox Christian after Srebrenica above all means praying for forgiveness and peace in our Balkans. In the shadow

\(^3\) Petrović, *op. cit.*, 51.
\(^4\) Ibid., 51.

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of remembering Srebrenica there are only two real criteria for measuring our belonging to God, and everything is in discrepancy in relation to our traditional measures, which, thanks to a formality, have always been in a crisis. In the early Middle Ages belonging to God was measured mostly according to an abstract theologizing, so the importance of dogma was placed in the foreground. Today it is mostly measured by how many hours one spends attending liturgy, at which our presence is more formal than anything else. Otherwise, in order for it not to happen again and to avoid having another Srebrenica, today we first of all need to hold the Church as a “stronghold of peace” that does not allow itself to be used by the state and the militant hierarchy or for governmental or national purposes, by which international peace is most often disturbed. So being an Orthodox Christian in a new way means not turning our devotion to God into a formality but by being a Christian in our conduct and not just with our lips.

This is exactly why we grapple with the question of what believers can do in that context today. If for a Muslim it is most important that Islam is not viewed as a “Christian aberration,” then the following fact needs to become the most important for us Christians. Firstly, due to existential and moral reasons, we must take Islam seriously because it is part of our everyday surroundings. Secondly, since in it we recognize, like among some of the Enlightenment personalities, a “synthesis of reason and faith,” Islam due to its very nature does not carry in itself the power of fanaticism, destruction, and hatred. However, if this has not been the case throughout history it was due only to the unfortunate synthesis of religion and state, i.e. through an abuse of Islam. It was a result of faulty hermeneutics, from which evil, inhumane and un-Islamic politics were born throughout history.

What Has Come Between Us? From Faulty Hermeneutics to Evil and Inhumane Politics

The answer to the question, “What do you think about the Christ?,”15 has always separated the Christian world from the Islamic. But the following is also true now: if we do the will of God unconditionally, as Abraham of the Bible and the Qur’an did,16 we are Christians and Muslims in the proper sense because it is only by doing God’s will that we can come closer to each other and feel like Abraham’s spiritual descendants. While faith for us Orthodox is firstly a state of certainty,17 which brings us security in our life, for the Muslims

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15 Matthew 22: 42, NIV.
16 The Qur’an 43: 26-28; 3: 95; and Genesis 11: 25, 27.
17 Hebrews 11: 1.
it is the full submission of life to God and becoming a slave to the Master.\textsuperscript{18} It has been shown and is evident that every adjustment to the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Bible in order to fit current politics, state or religious structures, is the worst thing. This is what the well-known Catholic theologian and dogmatist from Tübingen, Karl Adam, wrote: “Nationalism and Catholicism are not significantly contradictory” and it was “the right and the duty of the state to protect the purity of the blood of its people.”\textsuperscript{19} Although, for example, the Church is non-national,\textsuperscript{20} Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology has made the national element a key category for itself, whereby we are theologically aware of this fact and are familiar with the ecclesiology of Nikolaj Velimirović, with the historical role of our Church in the liberation from the Turks, and also with our most current experience. In this recent one, our Church was unaware that the Milošević regime wanted to use it for its own purposes and when it finally realized it, the Synod in 1992 demanded Milošević’s resignation. However, if there were no ties to Milošević, there were definitely ties to the Bosnian Serb leadership and in connection with that we are reminded of that characteristic interview by Radovan Karadžić from 1995, in which he talks about the good relationships he had with the Bosnian political elite and the church hierarchy. All this led us to experience the Church more as a political rather than a moral institution. As a result of its national politics the Church has lost its role as the salt and light of the earth.

Actually, nothing has played into the hands of mixing imperial regimes with ecclesiastical politics as much as caesaropapism has, which was born in the famous sentence, “Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High.”\textsuperscript{21} The episcopal power of the Byzantine emperor was built upon this passage. Emperor Constans II from the 7th century referred to this argument in his polemics with Maximus the Confessor. So, the dependence of hermeneutical methods on politics, or according to the will of an authority, proved to be the worst possible thing for our religious institutions throughout the centuries. The basic question is how to interpret certain passages in our holy scriptures, whereby in our eyes they are first of all divinely inspired and therefore have God’s power behind them, which the rationalists have always denied. It is worth remembering in connection with this the case of Spinoza, who angered and revolted the rabbis. Therefore, it is very important who holds the holy texts of the Bible and the Qur’an in their hands, who interprets them and what kinds of understanding

\textsuperscript{18} The Qur’an 37: 99.
\textsuperscript{20} Matthew 22: 21; John 18: 36.
\textsuperscript{21} Genesis 14: 18, NIV.
they have of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. It is no less important knowing what mutually obligates us and "forces" us to behave a certain way. Who is the norm of authority for us? What are we ruled by? These are all values, not just minor interests, the meanings of which we can only fathom through faith in eternal values, which Kant considered the postulates of a practical mind. Faith and not ideology, justice or interest, are necessary for us today because they first lead to peace — real peace. Unjust peace always provides later an alibi for unjust war. And precisely because of values, namely love, justice, and peace, must we fight for such a reception of Christianity and Islam that will rationalize our struggle for righteousness and that will plant theological and intellectual tolerance between us. Even though the Church essentially remains the "body of Christ", in an empirical sense the Church is also a community of people and within the human community it is always guided to other human communities. Since Christ is the "head" of the Church, we always expect more from it then from others, and that is why our disappointments in the Church are deeper than all our other disappointments. As the Church's word is the last and final one regarding interpretation, the Church she takes on a great responsibility before the Church's "head" and history.

In Order to Encounter One Another We Need to Work on our Theologies Which will Propel Us in that Direction; We Need to Find and Draw Norms for Our Behavior from Them

Even though we Serbs are not able to remove Byzantium from our theological memory, we need to know that the Byzantine Orthodox Church built its theology by paying attention to the signs of the medieval times. One Church and one theology fit the idea of a singular world system that existed in normative Byzantine society. And that was the idea of a "state church" (Theodosius) and the Nicene theology that became the only normative theology during the time of emperors Theodosius and Justinian. After all, a church was necessary which would say loud and clear that the authority of the state comes from God and depends on God. Then, there was also need for a church that would "theologically legitimate that authority" in her liturgy through her prayers for the emperor. In connection with this we should never forget to mention that rebellion against the emperor also meant rebellion against the Church, within which the emperor had episcopal authority. And since much is connected in the Church to one time and one paradigm, the Orthodox Church today must reconsider a lot of its official positions toward others, beginning with issues such as our own Christian
conscience, "the signs of the times" and God's will. Actually, while the Muslims attempted to avoid a lot of conflict with Christians by developing the concept of relationship on the basis of the sura "Al Imran", it is certain that the Christian can also prevent a lot of tension if he/she builds his/her concept of relationship with the Muslim on the Golden Rule. "It was by God's grace that thou [O Prophet] didst deal gently with thy followers," and "pardon them, then, and pray that they be forgiven," we read in the venerable Qur'an. After the recent horrific war experiences this concept of interpersonal relationships seems the most acceptable to us.

It is not only the venerable Qur'an that points to our dependence on God but also the apostle Paul when addressing the Philippians. He wrote, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." In order for us to approach each other today we by all means first need a theology of ecumenical inspiration. To form an atmosphere of goodwill these days and to take the first step toward coming out of the numerous crises, we must always remember the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. Therefore, to encounter one another we should not wish for others that which we do not want to wish for ourselves. This is the cornerstone upon which we need to build our interpersonal relationships. However, all of this should be preceded not by a theoretical but the kind of practical knowledge of God that John wrote about. "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands," wrote John in his first epistle. So, for a more human future we need to formulate a theology which states that "knowing God means knowing Him and confessing it" a priority. We know God if we previously know God's will and follow it. In other words, we need to begin with John's theology because knowing God in this theology above all means acting in accordance with God's will. If we make this our starting point we will come to an awareness of our cooperation about which Aristotle writes in one place. However, our cooperation, as well as our common historical successes will not exist without our mutual connectedness. Now the main question is how we can be free of mutual disconnection and lack of cooperation so that in our connectedness and cooperation we will be able to do great deeds that will benefit both sides. Since we [Christians] and Muslims are

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22 The Qur'an 3: 159.
23 Matthew 7: 12.
25 Philippians 2: 13, NIV.
26 Matthew 7: 12.
27 1 John 2: 3, NIV.
led towards that liberation only by God’s grace, we should be making an effort to gain and then keep this grace, without losing it. May our conversations today be dedicated also to these questions because being kept by God’s grace is a true blessing which ensures mutual peace as well as individual and collective well-being.

We Have to Seek Not Just Any Belief but a Critical Belief in God

Today we should testify to our religious identity in two ways: first by caring for our neighbor; then good deeds will not be lacking among us. Secondly, we need to believe in the revealed God in an orthodox, critical manner. Because if we do not seek this, our faith will always be threatened, because of a crisis of relevant knowledge, it will be endangered by degenerating into heterodoxy and heresy. As a result, we always need to have a clear reason for why we believe in Him and why we believe His every word. Because today many things do not come to us from His hands, but the church. The ulema or rabbinate stand between us with their normative theology, so now because of all this we know each other interpersonally as Christians, Muslims and Jews, and then as Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox.

Abraham as Our Common Example in Faith and Conduct

Being a Christian or Muslim in the proper sense even today means being one big Someone and Something, and thus becoming an example for everyone. However, in order for us to become an example we need to know how to live out our religious experience in the manner of Abraham and to testify about Him and for Him, for our Savior God, as Abraham of the Old Testament and of the Qur’an has testified. Because he testified about Him and for Him as it should be done, Allah takes him as His friend and the Lord makes a covenant with him and not with anyone else. Believing in the correct way and through it becoming a chosen Someone and Something means believing and behaving like our forefather Abraham did. Therefore, “to set out and to go” to God following Abraham’s way means choosing the right way and thus remaining free for Him. By placing God’s reasoning above his own human reasoning, Abraham was rethinking everything in God’s context and not in the context of his own human will. When God called him he was ready to go to unknown places and

\[10\] The Qur’an 30: 12-17; Galatians 2: 21.
\[11\] The Qur’an 60: 4.
\[13\] The Qur’an 4: 125.
\[14\] Genesis 15: 7-12.
wherever his Lord commanded. As Abraham was called to obedience through faith for us he became a big Someone. Likewise today all roads lead to the same place only through faith and nothing else.

**Be Ready to Do What is Necessary for Tomorrow**

In order for a new day to dawn upon our Orthodox-Muslim relations it is necessary that we reach an agreement concerning some crucial issues. However, first we must agree on what will be the function of our official theological thought because if the function will not consist of searching for shared, ecumenical truths, our conversation will turn into polemics and end up in a quarrel. Today we have shared truths and interests that bind us together rather than separate us, so firstly our conversation concerning these issues would prove to be useful and constructive. Although we have differing economies of salvation, our eschatology and morals intersect at several different points, so discussion about them would prove most promising. Although in Islam the closest thing to the fear of God is justice and in Christianity it is love, there are firm ontological connections between them, since love cannot live at the expense and to the detriment of justice. We cannot honestly love someone and be unjust to them. Even if our church cannot eliminate Byzantium from its theological memory, it should relativize a lot of things from its theological and other corpus and others it should completely marginalize. Everything should be submitted to revision and recalibration, other than His word. The roads toward making our Orthodoxy more contemporary require new knowledge and different evaluations and it is only through them that Orthodoxy may find itself playing the role of a good and relevant teacher.

The lack of theological studies on Islam testifies to the fact that a lot of things move slowly for us here. Because of this laziness we are content with a "cheap" criticism of Islam. As a result of the new signs of the times, the spirit of modern things, we ask ourselves ever more often whether we can use the works of St. John of Damascus and our St. Sava as blueprints for profiling the answers to the question, What could Islam be for today's Orthodox society, for the Church? Invoking medieval knowledge about Islam today would above all be unpopular and secondly, it would not accomplish the things that one expects today from the knowledge of world religions. Of course, Islam with its knowledge first of all can work on the deepening of conscience about the responsibility for the world in which

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33 The Qur'an 37: 99.
34 Hebrews 11: 6-10.
people live. Secondly, for modern Orthodox society and for the modern paradigm of Orthodox Christianity Islam cannot not have the same meaning as it had for the closed medieval society. Today we are much more knowledgeable about each other so must not construct beliefs that will alienate us from each other. Thirdly, today it is much more important to be seeking that which we have in common instead of leading sterile theological polemics that empirically do not lead anywhere. Islam, just as any other religion, as history has shown us, can be a threat to the world today only because of its own misuse, as historical Christianity did in the Middle Ages. Certainly what the Crusaders did in Constantinople could not have been further from the wishes of the Supreme Pontiff of Rome. Actually, it is absurd to think about that context, for all that is human cannot avoid the snares of sin, so it is present everywhere where human freedom is present. Although, for example, the demands of the times cannot force the truth of the Gospels and the Qur'an to look different from the way they look now, present times can demand that we interpret those truths differently from our former interpretations. That is why we need to be careful today not to turn relative and marginal things into absolutes through our interpretation and that we do not ascribe universal value and importance to the particular. Because today's world needs, above all, universal justice, peace, and tolerance, the main question now is what our faiths mean to that effect and how they can motivate us to act. How is it that in some people's eyes the basic “paradigm” of our interpersonal relationships leads more and more towards “applying force and violence”? What can our faiths do to change this?

In order for us today to overcome various exclusivities, of which, historically, there have been too many between Christianity and Islam, the theology of the church and the ulama should focus on theological constructions that will bring us closer together. Being an Orthodox Christian in a new way, consequently, today means creating a new theology that would respond to the signs of the times in the spirit of the Gospel and would be less polemical and less focused on apologetics in relation to Islam. However, no outside force will be able to destroy the internal truth about Islam and Christianity that is in us. This truth lives in us thanks to Jesus' love; in the Muslims it lasts because of their obedience to their Lord.

Actually, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam, because of their bond with the state, often had a similar function, so both often acted as a guarantor of unity and community. Wherever the Serbian nation was, there were the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian state as well. Because of this bond religion often protected itself by political means and by politically
justified theological terms. But this union that became explicit togetherness often existed at the expense of others. We may remember the position of other religious identities in Orthodox tsarist Russia. According to Article 42 of the 1906 Russian Constitution the Russian tsar was the preserver of Christian dogmas, the guardian of orthodoxy and order in the holy Church. Eastern Orthodoxy had a privileged status and those who left it were stripped of some of their civil rights. Unity, therefore, most often affected the rights of others. As Dostoevsky ("Diary of a Writer...") and our Nikolaj Velimirović of Ohrid have pointed out regarding the connection between their nations and Eastern Orthodoxy, the national element was not only expressed in ideology but also in theology (ecclesiology). However, when we talk about the connection between Islam and the state and about Orthodoxy and the state, the differences are great. In the first case we experience this connection as normal, while in the second one we see it as something that is in conflict with the Gospel. Regarding this, if the Church today only did what Jesus was asking from her, she would not hold on to any union with the state that is not in accordance with her calling and her mission in the world. It is more important to have the right kind of unity than to just have any unity.

Actually, as we may not be able to understand certain things about Islam, the same way Muslims may not be able to comprehend certain things about Christianity. Still, we should not allow that inability to be the reason for using various types of labels. Even though we cannot expect the Muslim to understand and accept the sacramental experience of the world which began with the incarnation and ended with the sacrament of the Eucharist, this does not mean that we should respect him or her any less. On the other hand, if we objectively interpret specific passages in the venerable Qur'an, we will see that Islam is always on our side when it comes to the struggle for a just and humane society. By teaching that the human being is God's regent on earth, Islam sees each person as a value and goal and that is why Islamic humanism is not partial but integral and absolute.

Who does it Resemble the Most?

If we try to shed light on Islam from a New Testament perspective, we will be convinced of the following: it is the closest to the theology of James when he talks about the relationship between faith and works. The ethical, moral moment is therefore significant for

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35 The Qur'an 2: 30.
36 An-Nahl 30; Az-zumar 10.
37 James 2: 14-16.
salvation, in which James is the furthest away from Paul. Otherwise, the fact that Islam has said much more about justice than about love, means that good deeds were primarily a matter of justice, not love. In order for our belief to be creative and through it bear fruit for our eternity in both cases, it cannot amount only to knowledge or to deeds. Mature faith therefore requires both, because without one of these there is no subjective salvation. Therefore, as James' theology explicitly speaks about believing in one God, this explicitness leads us closer to Islam.

However, just as this passage, with its claim that God is one God, brings us closer to Islamic monotheism about which the sura "Ihlas" spoke most powerfully, John's theology on the other hand moves us away from Islam. In order for us to come to a shared position — beginning from the signs of the times, dialogical tolerance and other things — that will bring us closer together, Islamic orthodoxy wants us to admit in spite of our differences that a relationship bringing salvation can exist between God and man apart from Jesus. But as John of Damascus sees Islam as “one of 101 heresies” and the Church has not distanced herself from these stances to this day, such an admission will probably remain for the future — whether near or far, only time will tell. But who hasn't been classified as a heretic by our Eastern Orthodox world, by which I primarily mean that clerical and monastic world? Although these are today mostly private positions, they reflect a certain era and mentality. We remember St. John of Kronstadt, who considered the Western Church to be renegades of Christ's church, and St. Maximus the Confessor, who “will not go to Church tomorrow, on Sunday, to take Communion with his patriarch because [the patriarch] had previously visited Rome and talked to the Pope.”

Secondly, when we talk about relations with Muslims, the Church most often has remembered the rules of the Council of Laodicea and the Apostolic Canons and built her politics toward Islam on these things. As a result, even today some high-ranking clergymen in the Eastern Church do not pray together with non-orthodox Christians, remembering the above mentioned restrictions. Canon 33 of the Council of Laodicea states, “No one shall join in prayers with heretics or schismatics,” while canon 64 of the Holy Apostles orders, “If any clergyman or layman shall enter into a synagogue of Jews or heretics to pray, let the former

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39 The Qur'an 30: 21, 4: 58.
40 James 2: 19.
41 The Qur'an 112: 1-4.

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be deposed and let the latter be excommunicated." We are where we are today because Christians in the East and their hierarchy experienced the Church mainly within dogmatic and canonical boundaries, measuring their submission to God by the canons.

**Moral Actions and Faith in God Bring Us Meaning**

If we read a few passages in the Gospel of Matthew and in the suras "Hud" and "Al-Anbiya" we will see how terrifying the descriptions of the Muslim Jahannam and the Christian Hell are. The fate of the unbeliever in both instances excludes the possibility of what is called "eternal life." Therefore, moral actions and faith in God bring us absolute and relative meaning. In order to show that our good works have their absolute meaning, Kant rooted our faith in God and immortality morally and rationally, since morality is older than religion but cannot be upheld without it ("Critique of Pure Reason"). Then, in another one of his works ("Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone") he talks about the compatibility and unity of reason and Scripture. Our belief in God and immortality thence can be defended primarily by our dependency upon absolute morality. Since we will be proven "better people" only as a result of our moral actions, which is why will we now become even more precious to God, we are now facing the following: from the starting point of morals Kant establishes our need for religiosity, whether Christian or Muslim, upon morals, that are considered just as necessary as believing. Driven by rational arguments, Kant came to his own "religion of pure reason" which does not stand in opposition to revealed religion. His religion and the Apostle Paul's religion are not different as they are supported by the same knowledge. Paul had to know whom and in what he believed. He knew whom he trusted and was therefore not ashamed of his faith and suffering. He believed and because of Christ endured everything and his knowledge made his faith creative. On the other hand, when Kant spoke of the compatibility and unity of reason and Scripture, he implicitly claimed that people cannot believe "blindly" and in "someone's word." He needed to create both an objective and a rational foundation for his faith. Kant's person believes in God not as a result

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45 "[...] reason can be found to be not only compatible with Scripture but also at one with it," Immanuel Kant, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/bbr/toc.html (visited on January 15, 2007), 11.
46 2 Timothy 1:12.

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of revelation, to which both Muslims and Christians attach great importance. However, while in Christianity faith is maintained thanks to a paradox which is primarily composed of irrationality of which we are most aware in Paul's and Tertullian's writings, Islamic orthodoxy knows of no such thing. That is why it is correct to state that Islam is compatible with reason.

**Believing Means “Existing in God”**

Dedication and trust in God create the same situation in both Islam and Christianity. Believing in the Qur'anic or gospel-like way always means the same thing: "existing in God" and constantly being with God. We are constrained to this because of ourselves and that is why Isaiah’s words relate to both of these situations. Isaiah says, “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

In other words, God is our “sustainer” and that is also why we offer God our love and full trust. Because these days many things do not come to us directly from God but through the interpretation of the Church, it is very important to know which theology and authority we will believe in. Actually, by believing in God we are always able to escape many situations which someone who does not believe is unable to do. Believing therefore does not only mean “existing in God” but it means “existing” in a certain virtue and not losing hope. This is why we always explain a values crisis with a crisis of our faith, in the absence of which everything becomes fragile and unstable. As soon as something is not in order with our knowledge of God, something is also missing in our behavior and then we cannot escape that worst condition. Therefore, everything begins with knowledge and ends without it.

**Islam from My (Our) Perspective**

Today Islam is the only religious reality for millions of people. Moreover, precisely because of this, Islam is the correct road on which they need to remain. This is why we read the following admonition in the Qur’an: “Do not follow other paths.” Normally, Muslims follow this correct path when they fulfill all the six articles (pillars) of faith. Since for Muslims this represents the highest revelation it is therefore their most precious knowledge. However, since knowledge is one, it also elicits one testimony from the Muslims, solely for

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4 Fritz.
5 Isaiah 7:9, NIV.
6 The Qur’an 6:153.
7 The Qur’an 4:135.

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the sake of truth. Since Islam insists on obedience as the most important quality\textsuperscript{53} to the Muslim that is what is closest to the fear and respect of God. Through our complete obedience God also receives our complete trust. Trust is a testimony of our dependence upon God. Through trust we can gain favor from Allah.

**Islam As a Voice About the God of Israel**

If we read certain rabbinical texts, we will see that contemporary Judaism places an equation between itself and Christianity, but this symbol of equation has a very narrow meaning and refers only to specific situations. “Jews had the luck of bringing to the world two ‘daughters’ (religions) that have spread the word about the God of Israel to all parts of the world.”\textsuperscript{54} Islam is, therefore, a true testimony of the Qur’anic, Hadithic voice about the “God of Israel”. That is precisely why it is both the oldest and youngest faith. Islam is therefore legitimized by its claim about the “God of Israel” as an authentic knowledge that removes, in our mind and theirs, any possible doubt about itself. Since we, Christians and Muslims, both take some (but not all) truths from the Old Testament, we are aware of many New Testament and Qur’anic truths from their Old Testament roots. Our shared understanding of orthodoxy primarily refers to this understanding. That is why our theological key to understanding Islam is tied to our interpretation of Abraham’s oldest son, Ishmael, who together with Abraham is an unavoidable character in our approach to the youngest religion.\textsuperscript{55}

**Islam from the Perspective of the Ecclesiastical Law of St. Sava**

Although the knowledge of truth in the Church does not depend on authority, the fastest way to reach it is by means of authority. That is why we always need to know the reason for believing or not believing someone or something. The question we are now facing is whether we are able to enrich our understanding about Islam through the knowledge of our authorities. In order for us to respond to this issue, we need to know what the structure of our knowledge is like, because religious and philosophical truths differ from each other and we also arrive at them by different means. Subsequently, what is true for Christianity is also true for Islam, because both religions are above all “relationships of confession” and relationships

\textsuperscript{53}The Qur’an 26: 150, 151.

\textsuperscript{54}Pinchas Lapide, Jüden und Christen, translation from the Croatian edition (Zagreb: Držba katoličke apostolike, 1982), 10.

\textsuperscript{55}Genesis 21: 13.
of human “faith” in God. Secondly, when someone calls Islam and Christianity heresies, this cannot be logically proven at all. All religions may be labeled like that, depending on how we define orthodoxy and through what kinds of “glasses” we read and interpret the Holy Bible and the glorious Qur’an. In other words, we only believe that it is so.

However, orthodoxy is always on our side when we say with strong conviction that our God, God is one, God still asks from us today the same that God asked from Abraham. Walk in my paths, says God to Abraham, and be without sin. While a Christian needs a certain anti-intellectualism in order to believe in God in a Christian way (Tertullian), a Muslim does not have this problem. Therefore, we always need to know that various truths require different things from us. Aristotle’s truth is not the same truth as the Gospels’ and the Qur’an’s. However, in regard to Islam, we must make something clear already at the beginning: the Muslim believes in Abraham’s God, the One and Only God. Thus such understanding does not separate or alienate us from each other. Therefore, we cannot explain Islam and New Testament Christianity to ourselves without Judaism (i.e. the Old Testament). Actually, the judgments of both the councils and the bishops in the Orthodox East have always testified about one authority. The teaching of the bishops has thereby been the norm for ecclesiastical truth and the criterion for ecclesiastical tradition, so claimed the well-known Russian theologian Bulgakov. Then, because the Orthodox Church “preserves the apostolic succession through the bishop and without a bishop a local church cannot be recognized as a church,” the believing Orthodox people have always called on the opinions of their bishop in matters of faith.

In the same way, since St. Sava as the bishop and founder of our autocephalous Serbian ecclesiastical entity enjoys the greatest authority in our church, his views on Islam have become part of the normative theology of the Serbian Orthodox Church. As a result, all Muslims will be asking the question today whether it is possible to paint a positive picture about Islam against the backdrop of his ecclesiastical laws. Therefore, it is worth pointing out a few things regarding this topic. First of all, Sava does not present anything new that had not already existed in the theological discourse of his time. That is why all of his positions follow in the footsteps of the theology or apologetics of St. John of Damascus, who viewed Islam as one of the “101 heresies” since the founding of the Church up until his time. Consequently,

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56Sergei Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1948).
58Ioannes Damascenus, *De Haeresibus*, 101.
everything he brings up regarding Islam and Muhammed comes from Byzantine ecclesiastical law, including the writing about the Ismaili faith. Since St. Sava incorporated more than one hundred canonical writings in his "Zakonopravilo" (Collection of Laws), under Nr. 21 in Chapter 61 he included the apologetical writing of St. John of Damascus about the Ismaili faith. Parts of a treatise by George [Hamartolus], the Monk from the 9th century "About the leader of the Saracenes - Muhammed who is Muhamet" have been added to the end of that text. In those writings Islam is maximally muddied and, from a theological perspective, criticized in a cheap way. They begin with the position that Islam will be defeated and theologically disqualified if, for example, some suras and ayats will be literally ridiculed (John of Damascus).

Even today we [Orthodox] still do not have any mature apologetic works about Islam. Since the Arabic and later the Turkish Muslims were the biggest political enemies of Byzantium, this fact played a decisive role upon a negative assessment of Islam. If, for example, Photius I inaugurated the polemics against Rome, then John of Damascus is the one who had laid its foundation against Islam. At the same time, our church has up to today not produced any mature apologetic criticism of Islam, which means that Islam has simply been ignored. Therefore, that which we have received from John of Damascus is based mainly on unreal and unfounded claims. He alleges that "there is an Ismaelite engagement that... deceives people. It is the faith of the Saracenes who are the forerunners of the Antichrist and descend from Ishmael, who was born of Abraham and Hagar, which is why they are called Hagarites and Ismailites." Nicetas Choniates goes further, calling Muhammed a "false prophet" and stating that the "Islamic heresy" came to exist in the year 6145 after the creation of the world. It is simply not admitted that Islam is man's new accomplishment of a relationship with God, wherefore it is the complete opposite from the Apostolic and Nicene symbols of faith, which are confessed by the Church today.

The Most Important Thing is that We Finally Learn to Respect One Another Just Because of Who We Are and Learn that We Are All Different

Because the spirit of the times today is different from the spirit of the times in which St. Sava, John of Damascus, Nicetas Choniates and George the Monk lived, nowadays...
differences are not as much emphasized as are similarities. Yet, the spirit of medieval ecclesiastical mentality characterized by apologetics and polemics still lives in the mentality of Eastern Christianity. That is why nothing creative has been happening in our Islamic-Orthodox relations and we are therefore acutely aware of the crisis of interreligious dialogue. Although we are faced with it here and there, all of these piece-meal dialogues amount just to putting a bandage on it and signify only a beginning. Contrary to this, St. Thomas Aquinas—still in the Middle Ages—worked on preparing a serious encounter with Muslims, which was not supposed to be devoid of respect. Consequently, he did not experience Islam as a "Christian heresy." If we are to believe Maurice Bourmans, Aquinas primarily wanted to secure certain respect for Islam with his position, to be followed by the opening of dialogue, approaching all this with clearly rational reasons. So it is not a surprise that the Western (Roman) Church kept an incomparably more tolerant attitude toward Islam, which did not characterize traditional and contemporary Orthodox Christianity, and about which the Second Vatican Council testifies with its official documents. Accordingly, we will not be able to begin anything constructive without mutual respect for one another. Although current theological dialogue has not produced outstanding results, the other dialogue about non-theological topics would undoubtedly be more successful. However, at this point neither of them exists. This is why it is important that we learn beforehand to respect the other and their otherness, as Gadamer has said. This is something we are still lacking.

Khomeinism as a Sign of Our Time

The current Khomeinian reception of Islam opens the possibilities for many of our thoughts. Although it does not offer us anything new on the theological level, it rebuts a lot of prejudice and erroneous understandings. Among these I think first of all was the Marxist error which always questioned the primacy of the religious principle and saw it as a result of social and historical circumstances. Undervaluing the importance of religious moments in the developments of human society, it explained everything with a rise and fall, in other words the dynamics and growth of capacities for production. Objectively speaking, the Islamic revolution that was carried out under Khomeini's leadership gave power to the religious factor which Marx had assigned to production capacities, which, according to Marx, determine the entire structure that is built upon them. We cannot explain anything with the

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62 Svetozar Akvinski, Razgovor s pravoslavnima i muslimanim [Contains translations of Contraversus Graecorum and De rationibus fidei] (Zagreb: Globus, 1992), 135.

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Iranian revolution by means of Marx’s doctrine but from the perspective of religious principles we can discover all the strategies of change in a certain part of the world. Consequently, social changes can be set off not only by class struggle or by settling situations through bloodshed but also by a religious “fuse”. Violent revolution and the fall of a regime were carried out in the name of religious principles and Islam proved that it could be used in overthrowing a reigning power. With Khomeini Islam was primarily “married” to a change which caused many deaths and took away many lives. The coming of the new era was paid for dearly.

What Should our Theological Mirroring Show Us?

Islamic orthodoxy, as a result of always placing Jesus’ relationship with God in the context of his human and not divine nature, was heterodoxy for the Church in light of its Nicene and other theology. However, as the ecumenical consciousness of the present time aspires to reaching theological consensus above all, we need to consider which theology could we put forth first in our dialogue.

A Western theologian from the last century immediately comes to mind. Why shouldn’t we talk about his topic of interest in our interreligious dialogue? In divine proclamation, writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, “the issue is not primarily about truth but about God who lives in His glory.” That is why we can talk about this today even though in the Qur’an no important category is mentioned or presented that is contrary to the Old and New Testaments. But was not God’s glory exhibited first with the appearance of the three great religions? Did not our troubles contribute to achieving it? Do not God’s accomplishments in our history speak about it? Of course they do. That is why we Christians must remember the great Fathers of the Church who, because of God’s concerns and for the Church’s success in the world, wholly sacrificed themselves. Not looking too much at what our theological reflection should show us, God today, after Srebrenica, Vukovar, Sarajevo, and Kosovo surely presses upon us repentance, which returns us to the Acts of the Apostles, where we read, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” This means that we must give priority to repentance after all this and then clearly say the following: firstly, when we speak to Muslims, I will talk about my

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60 Rosina Gibellini, Teologija dvadeceina stoljeća (Zagreb: Erzėunska sadanjast, 1999), 244.
61 2 Corinthians 4:17.
62 Acts 17:30, NIV.
religious identity in a way that is agreeable to Muslim cars.' Therefore, we must leave behind the controversies and polemics we have been entangled in. Secondly, we should say that our "Muslim population showed more respect to St. Sava’s grave and greater adoration to the Mileševa Monastery than did Christians themselves. Another place of veneration by the Muslims was the Mother of God of Čajnić,66 to which not only Muslim but also other sources testify. I would say that such knowledge is very important to us and can contribute to a different assessment of historical Islam in our region today.

From Devshirmec to a “People of the Book”

Even though we remember the time of the Turkish rule with the blood tax on our mind, which was the taking away of Christian children, Shari'a lawyers have not been able to justify this inhumane practice on the basis of Shari'a law. Many researchers, or experts in Turkology, also register clear “differences in the position of Christians during the first two centuries of Ottoman governance and the position of Christians when the decline of the Ottoman Empire began...”. Due to the fact that for Islamic orthodoxy Christians were "people of the book", their position in the Islamic world which was observing Shari'a law was undoubtedly better than that of the Christians who lived under Communist rule and witnessed bloody revolutions. Although they were not allowed to exercise some of the civil rights on the same level as the Muslims did, the fact that they were considered “dhimmi,”, or the people who have the book,68 means that they still enjoyed those rights. As everything in normative Ottoman society was governed by Shari'a law, so was their social status in the Islamic world determined by their religious position according to the venerable Qur'an.

Islam as Our Challenge

We can ask ourselves the following question: What will Islam be for a Christian society today? Will it be a threat or an honorable colleague working on constructing a city on earth? My answer would be, as a colleague working on the building of a common city. Otherwise, traditional Islam in its Sh'iite reception is a big challenge for us today. Mystical

67 The Turkish term devshirmec refers to the “blood tax” paid by the conquered nations under Ottoman rule in the form of young boys who were forcibly taken away from their families at a very young age to be trained in order to become Janissaries or administrators in the empire.
experience is very highly valued on both sides, so regardless of our different understandings of the mystical, we still encounter that "psychological definition of God" (Jung) in every mystic because they all experience him in more or less the same way. This is exactly why mystics of all world religions will reach a consensus about certain things sooner than our orthodox theologians and religious leaders will.

Conclusion

It is certain that the Church and the ulama must create theologies that will enable them toward a greater breakthrough in the world. We need to pursue the universalization of our basic Christian and Islamic messages, so that the voice about the God of Abraham, the Father of our Lord, would reach all four corners of the earth. Considering the signs of the times, the role of our religions should be different from their roles in the past. It is still clear that God's will is expressed in God's word but now the question is how much of it is expressed in the interpretation of God's words by what we do and what we stand for. We need to get busy finding answers to these questions. Because it is now clear that we will gain God's mercy by living according to the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an, we need to dedicate ourselves to their content and live by it. In order for our faith to come alive, in order for us to feel its presence in our interpersonal encounters again, we should always follow Abraham's path. By faith, "Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went." Therefore, it is necessary that we trust in God and so the importance of faith in God comes to the forefront.

_Translated from Serbian by Angela Ilić_

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^ Hebrews 11: 8. NIV.