


4-2018

Serbian Orthodoxy Between Two Worlds

Marko P. Djurić

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Djurić, Marko P. (2018) "Serbian Orthodoxy Between Two Worlds," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss2/6>

This Exploration or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

SERBIAN ORTHODOXY BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

By Marko P. Djurić

Marko P. Djurić is an Orthodox lay theologian. He was born in 1942 and received his diploma at the Law School of Belgrade University. He published two books and numerous texts in various journals in the former Yugoslavia, as well as in English translation in OPREE.

Abstract

Orthodoxy has, by the Providence of God, been placed between Western Christianity, and Sunni Islam. Church nationalism (*phyletism*) has always been present in political and linguistic nationalism in the former Yugoslavia. The relationship between Serbian Orthodoxy, with Islam and Western Christianity is not satisfactory. In order to become satisfactory, it would be important for the Orthodox Church to create a new theology which would, primarily, be a theological (Orthodox) response to the signs of the times. However, this has not become the reality as of yet.

Key words: Orthodoxy, Islam, Qur'an, Bible, Catholicism, Svetosavlje¹

Introduction

The Providence of God has positioned us Serbs on the edge of the western parts of Turkish Islam and on the eastern parts of Western Catholic Christianity. Thus, our ecclesiastical and political history has been structured differently than the history of other nations. Therefore, we can speak about the impact of different religions, ideologies, and cultures on our historical being. However, less has been written about

¹ *Svetosavlje* is an idea that appeared in the 1930s in the Serbian Orthodox Church. It has led to equalization of religious confession (Orthodoxy) and ethnicity (Serbian nation). This idea has had a large number of followers among the clergy and high church hierarchy who do not support ecumenism or any type of rapprochement with Catholicism or Protestantism. The word *svetosavlje* is derived as a reference to Saint Sava (1174-1236), the first Serbian archbishop of the autocephalous Orthodox Church and son of King Stevan Nemanja, the founder of the medieval Serbian state of Raška.

the impact of the Catholic Church. In regards to this matter, our famous historian, Stanoje Stanojević, wrote:

The impact of Catholicism and the Catholic Church on the Serbs in the Middle Ages has, in general, been little appreciated in our Serbian historiography and has been totally overlooked. But the importance and influence are much greater than it could be expected. It may be said, without exaggeration, and proved by the facts, that the entire political, religious, and cultural life of the Serbs in western regions throughout the Middle Ages was interwoven by various influences of the Catholic Church.²

However, the historical fact is that after the death of Patriarch Dimitrije in 1930, the relations between the two churches became tense, and the rise of *Svetosavlje* ideology only deepened this tension. For this reason, the era of Patriarch Varnava (1930-1937) had a distinctly anti-Catholic position.³ Tense relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church of Croats have been influenced by the memory of the famous Croatian Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, to whom our historians, without any ground or material evidence, attribute some negative aspects to the influence of the Second World War. Having no positive relationship to the Western culture, and towards Western (Catholic) Christianity,⁴ the ideologists of *Svetosavlje* only deepened the existing tensions between these two churches. By using another type of argumentation, which is fundamentally different from the hesychastic argumentation and the argumentation of Mark of Ephesus, *Svetosavlje*, by criticizing the West, remained a type of Russian *Slavophilia*, which means that it is an ideology rather than a theology. The efforts to identify religion and nation have typically led to polarization of existing tensions. Although the Council of Constantinople in 1872 condemned *phyletism*, a theology of ecclesial nationalism, it has remained a part of the theological consciousness of the Orthodox East even today. Given the fact that the concept of "state

² Stanoje Stanojević, *Borba za samostalnost katoličke crkve u nemanjičkoj državi* ["The Struggle for Independence of the Catholic Church in the State of the Nemanjić"], (1912), 18-36, 116-150.

³ Dimitrije Najdanović, *Golijat i David*, (Goliath and David), *Vesnik* 26. 10. 1930; Patrijarh Varnava, "Poslanica na Vaskrs," [Easter Message] *Glasnik* 12/1931.

⁴ Reflected in Justin Popović's *Svetosavlje as a Philosophy of Life*.

church" and the theology of nation enabled instrumentalization of church and state, it became impossible to avoid the emergence of state and political Orthodoxy.

Contrary to modern and past Catholic ecclesiology, which rarely emphasized the relationship between Catholicism and the nation, the Orthodox (Eastern) ecclesiology has always accomplished this since the Great Schism in the eleventh century. That is why we name local Orthodox churches as the Russian, Greek, Romanian, Serbian, etc., Orthodox Church. The connection between Orthodoxy and nation and other theological traditions was particularly evident at the end of the nineteenth century⁵ and in the middle of the twentieth century.⁶ This connection is emphasized today as it took place at the time of St. Sava, who was the creator of the independent Serbian Church in the Middle Ages.

Belonging to the Serbian nation was equated to belonging to the Orthodox Church and this is still done nowadays: one cannot be a true Serb without accepting the Orthodox faith, according to Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović who lived in the twentieth century. This attitude is still present in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The ideology of *Svetosavlje*, which brings us back to St. Sava, has led to a closure of the Serbian Church towards Western Christianity. Even today, the official Serbian Orthodoxy does not have a positive attitude towards the Catholic Church, nor towards Islam. Both of these monotheistic religions have been devalued. In reference to Catholicism, let us recall the latest edition of "*Enciklopedija pravoslavlja*" ("Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy") published by our church with the blessing of the Patriarch (2010), and in reference to Islam, let us remember "*Krmčija*", i.e., "Nomocanon of St. Sava" on Mohammed's teachings.⁷ The service books "*Veliki*

⁵ Representative thinkers are Nicodim Milaš, 1881; Khomiakov (Russia); and V. Jagić.

⁶ Nikolai Velimirović and others.

⁷ Miodrag M. Petrović: "Zakonopravilo sv. Save o Muhamedovom učenju" [Legal Rules of St. Sava on Muhammad's Teachings], (Belgrade. 1997), 51-65.

Trebnik” (“Breviary”), used for liturgical purposes in the Serbian church, has essentially a negative attitude towards the faith of the Prophet.⁸

It is well-known that the Serbian medieval kings, up to King Dušan (fourteenth century), maintained good relations with the Roman popes. Subsequent bad relations were influenced by Greek theology of *hesychasm*, as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. It has not always been this way however. In the past, “three Serbian patriarchs from Peć: Jovan Kanataul (sixteenth century), Pajsije (seventeenth century), and Gavriilo Rajić (seventeenth century) maintained close relations with Rome during the seventeenth century.”⁹

By understanding Catholicism and Islam in how St. Sava understood them, which was only with negative connotations, the official Serbian Orthodox theology today does not have any positive attitudes towards Islam or Western Christianity. Therefore, any type of dialogue, be it theological or of another kind, is in a constant crisis and there are no possibilities for establishing real ecumenism between these religions. It should be mentioned that negative attitudes towards Islam and Western Christianity in today's Serbian Orthodoxy reflect the attitudes of St. Sava. Therefore, it would be good to recall the writings, *Žitija o Sv. Savi* [Life of St. Sava], by the monk Teodosije and *Zakonopravila* [Nomocanon] by St. Sava.

The Orthodox Church has always been confident in its own cognition of the truth, but it has never questioned the cognition of other people's "delusions." The problems with those who "went astray" were solved by the state. Intellectual tolerance and coexistence of different theological doctrines has never been provided in normative Orthodox society. With this as a starting point, Mark of Ephesus said that Orthodoxy has no shortcomings and according to Alexei Khomiakov, genuine and saving church,

⁸ Archimandrite dr. Justin Popović, “*Trebnik*” [“Breviary”], (Diocese of Raška and Prizren, 1993), 399-401.

⁹ Juraj Kolarić. *Orthodox*, (Zagreb, 1985), 168.

theologically and existentially, exists only in "Greek dioceses."¹⁰ Nowadays, there is no official, canonical, and theological opinion about Western Christianity and Islam in the Orthodox Church, but it is clear that the basic connotation towards them is negative. Therefore, apologetics and theological exclusivism have always been at the core of Orthodox theology that excluded a dialogue with the Catholic West and Turkish Islam. Such a context gave rise to theological tensions.

There Have Always Been Various Tensions

Our Yugoslav political history has always been marked by various tensions that have sometimes ended in the worst possible ways. Thus, here, more than anywhere else in the southeastern parts of Europe, many dramatic events have occurred, and peace has been less present than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The latest events in the former Yugoslav region indicate the following: when human events reflect the logics of various nationalisms, where political logics is the most aggressive, while ecclesiastical and theological is the most cunning, then, as a rule, a lot of things cannot be avoided and theological devaluation becomes reality. Various nationalisms, like nowhere else in the Balkans, have taken their toll and expressed their inhuman face. In trying to destroy Yugoslavia and its unity, the outcome became obvious. Guided by the logics of their thoughts and listening to the "voices of their blood," they delivered all the destabilizing and disturbing factors. Since their leaders allowed all possible things to "come up to the surface," they should be held responsible for all the consequences which resulted in chaos and uncontrolled evil. Nationalism of one group may have been stronger, nevertheless, it did not exclude the nationalism in the other group. Henceforth, we are

¹⁰ Justin Popović, *Dogmatika pravoslavne crkve*, [The Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church], 543; A. S. Khomjakov, *O crkvi*, [On the Church], (Sremski Karlovci, 1926), 21.

aware about the horrors of Srebrenica, Vukovar, Kosovo, and other evil deeds. Pascal Bruckner called it the process of victimization and infantilism.¹¹

Today, *phyletism* and the so-called “state Orthodoxy” can still be found in the Christian East. Therefore, the Church must find a different manner of how to become an integrated part of society. We must go back to the apostolic ideals, in order to experience the Orthodox Church as a moral rather than a national paradigm. Identification of the Christian religion with a culture has proven to be harmful. We should remember that Christ himself did not accept some of the moral standards of his time. Muslims can affirm the same about the Prophet. Christians are primarily invited to serve “the world at this time,” so they have to be critical towards everything and not offend Christ himself. What is not acceptable by the standards of the Gospel must not be approved by the Church. Every type of nationalism, when not controlled by faith, can easily turn into chauvinism and racism.

Our present memories are marked by terrible happenings. However, this condition in our history has been enabled not only by the secular, but also by the religious elite. Much has been written about it, and there is a lot of knowledge on this topic, so I wish not to dwell on these issues in this article.

First, Our Eyes of Faith Should Be Opened

Here, on the territory of former Yugoslavia, everything has been different than elsewhere; what we need most is the “faith that moves mountains.” Only faith, and nothing else, can transform political questions into ethical questions and exclude conflicts, however this is possible only when our eyes are opened by faith (Lk 24:31). The signs of faith, and not of ideology, lead us to “the signs of encounter” and dialogue.

¹¹ Pascal Bruckner, *La Tentation de l'innocence*, (Paris 1995).

We have to show "unlimited willingness to forgive" (Mt 18:15; Lk 17:3-4), and this is in agreement with the ethics of the honorable Qur'an as well as with Christ's demands, expressed in the gospels. The Gospel of Jesus Christ should be primarily concentrated on the word "reconciliation" as expressed in the words of Apostle Paul (II Cor 5:19). If the New Testament says that through Christ, God reconciled the world with himself (2 Cor 5:19), then our reconciliation with Him is impossible without reconciliation with our Muslim and Catholic brothers and sisters. Therefore, without remembering the horrors (the horrors in Vukovar and Bosnia are, in many ways, unique), without compassion with those who still suffer, without a tender handshake with those who need it, there is no reconciliation with Christ. Yet, we are still in dispute. Overcoming the present alienation and establishing mutual trust on the territory of the former Yugoslavia is not possible without mutual reconciliation. Although in the last few years, we have been listening to different theological platitudes on brotherhood and love, the relationship between the believers has gone even further in their "holy hypocrisy" and "ethics of disagreement."

Our knowledge of the truth in the Qur'an and of the New Testament has always been mediated by the *Ulema* and the Church with their normative theologies. Therefore, we either know or do not know each other as Orthodox Christians, Sunnis, Catholics, and Shiites. However, without knowing each other in a critical and objective way, we have often been unable to avoid many inconveniences and misunderstandings in our relationships. We, as believers, have logical reasoning that is different from the one in the secular world, by which we may obtain many benefits, but also have greater responsibilities. When it comes to modern knowledge about Islam, which is encouraged by ecumenical awareness, we only have one choice. Our modern perception of Islam should be different from the medieval understanding. In order to reject the resemblance

to the traditional and medieval view, which has always harmed us and disqualified Islam by naming it "a Christian heresy" (e.g., by John of Damascus), there are many things that should be changed in academic Orthodoxy today. The directions we should take should be a position between Orthodox apologetics and a flat-rate negative analysis of Islam as well as the Catholic openness and its positive evaluation of Islam. But before that, it would be necessary to have an Orthodox version of Juraj Križanić, a Jesuit from the seventeenth century, who strived for different relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Church. We need someone who would, like Ibn Taymiyyah, open "new horizons" in Orthodox-Islamic relations. "Pointing to the dependence between Islam, the teachings of Torah and the Gospel," he facilitated a new approach to Christianity that differed from the traditional, which encourages our thinking about creating Abrahamic ecumenism in the Balkans. Being theologically and canonically rooted in medieval traditionalism (John of Damascus, seventh century), modern Serbian Orthodoxy has no positive relations with Islam. However, the opinion of genuine Islam towards Christianity is theologically different: Islamic orthodoxy has always declared a "parallelism of Torah, the Gospel and Qur'an" according to the German Catholic theologian, Karl-Josef Kuschel. The desire to "enrich our mutual differences" can only bring us closer, but until the time when this becomes possible, nothing crucial will happen.

Think Differently

All that we must do, both in open-minded Islam and creative Orthodoxy, is to reflect on both religions (Islam and Orthodoxy) according to the "signs of the times." The question that demands the right answer is: which theology will help us start, and where to begin? But before we go on, it is important to know that what is

theologically important for us will not necessarily be important for the Muslims. In order to avoid the way some philosophers have reacted to the speech of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:18), we need to have mutual respect and appreciation. Next, we have to strive for fellowship and companionship despite our theological differences. The most important thing is to agree on which signs we will recognize as the signs of God's will, by paying attention to recent events. Only recognition and our response to His will may bring us the mercy of lasting grace. We should also know that Islamic orthodoxy does not bring our salvation into question (Qur'an 45:28). Islam is for pluralism and a dialogue (Qur'an 5:51; 3:64), therefore we all should strive for "religious tolerance, social justice, peace and freedom for all people."¹² However, all these elements have been rarely present in this area. There has been injustice and a lack of peace. Successful and constructive conversation can be primarily conducted in regards to some moral issues. Religious institutions in Islam and Christianity have been invited to bring more ethical awareness in our mutual relations and in "present day ideology." Since this has not been achieved by any political party, the religious institutions are on the move today. Although we know that no correlation between Islam and Christianity can be based on John's theology (Jn 8:58), it is certain that some connections can be built on the basis of the Old Testament. The common forefather Abraham (Qur'an 22:28; Gal 3:29; Neh 9:7) is the basis for many things which will bring mutual benefits. But prior to any encounter and dialogue, we have to be aware (more spontaneously and reflexively, less theologically and scholastically) of the values of brotherhood and friendship, because we can build "an earthly city to live together" only if we are united. Although normative Islamic theology will not accept the above-mentioned statement of John, nor will the Orthodox normative society accept Medina's and Mecca's Christology (Qur'an

¹² Drugi vatikanski koncil [The Second Vatican Council]: *Dokumenti*, [Documents], (Zagreb), 385.

19:35, 5:19) by rejecting original sin and the Trinity. Both religions believe in one God (Revelation 15:4) and that is sufficient to make a start. Therefore, there is a need for a new theology in which we would recognize others as sons and daughters of one God, the God of Abraham (Romans 4:3). In the Orthodox East, “infamy heresy” is still charged against Islam, which causes many tensions. Therefore, we have to remember the words of Paul addressed to the Thessalonians: all that was inherited and remembered has to be re-evaluated, and “test all things, hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil” (I Thess 5:21). However, in order to achieve this, we need a new spirit, and also a new theology that would be in accordance with the requirements and needs of our time, a type of thinking that would distance itself from traditional and apologetic theology. A successful dialogue in all areas and at all levels is possible only if the modern perception of Islam is less interested in doctrinal and theoretical matters, but more in ethical and social issues. Both traditional and medieval Islam, but also Orthodoxy mainly focused on theoretical and doctrinal issues, therefore their theologies were apologetic and have not led to dialogue and mutual conversation.

Although Islamic and Orthodox societies have many differences, some similarities may be noted here and there: faith is a foundation of a society, and therefore it serves ideology. In the medieval Byzantine paradigm, we see the idea of a unique world order, so we have one ideology, one faith, one church and one king to protect and defend orthodoxy from heterodoxy. In Islam, there was a Caliph and one faith. The principle of coexistence and balance isn’t fully expressed in these societies, and everything is within the realm of monism that permeates all structures of the society. The questions about dialogue, tolerance, and human rights are not being raised, nor stressed. In contrast, Roman Catholicism has been known for its "papal internationalism," but after the collapse of the Byzantine state and weakening of the

Patriarchate of Constantinople, Orthodoxy became a national and state religion. This all leads us to a conclusion that the relationship between the Church and the *Ulema* were tense mostly due to theological, but also other issues.

We are All Invited to Build a Community of Values

Since we have yet to have our own Orthodox William of Ockham, the English Franciscan friar from the thirteenth century, who shook the "building" of medieval scholasticism, there are many things that still run according to the established "timetable." The Church still remembers traditional perceptions of Islam and Western Christianity, and this enhances the growth of tensions and alienation. Some questions consequently arise: why is it possible that traditional Orthodox views of Islam still persists in this postmodern time? Would a future dialogue between academic institutions in the Church and the *Ulema* indicate the lack of validity of one type of cognition, or would it strengthen our current theological belief? Should we initiate a dialogue that will reveal the partiality of our knowledge, or should we strive to reach confidence, knowing that we have claimed one way only because we knew there was no trust in views that were different?

More important than a clear answer to these questions is the fact that the Orthodox and Muslims have been invited to build a community of values, and not to enter into sterile theological controversies. John Lock, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emanuel Kant gave rational justifications for the existence of religion and the church (Kant) due to the "community of values." Therefore, the most important is the well-being of our brothers (Mt 25: 40), and what will benefit us (Mt 26:26). Having in mind some *suras* of the Holy Qur'an (Qur'an 10:99), it could be concluded that Islam should

be least accused of fanaticism and exclusivism. However, this was not an obstacle for misuse and to make it as an instrument for political goals.

A modern era happens whenever there is an encounter of “an old system and a new vision” and when habitual and regular activities frequently crash. However, this era has not yet happened in our Orthodox ecumenism. Although some theological and other assumptions have been fulfilled, it has not started yet. The resistance to a new spirit and to a somewhat different cognition, comes again from the Orthodox summit. The spirit of the modern time would certainly not demand from the Orthodox establishment to change the orthodox understanding of tradition, but would certainly ask for a new understanding and entirely different theological evaluation of other religious entities and historical churches. Since many are not ready for this change, present Orthodox thought bears the most minimal characteristic of the current time, and therefore, we lack a modern paradigm of Orthodoxy. The result of this is our traditional lack of skillfulness in the face of new challenges. All this was enhanced by the fact that the current structure of Orthodox knowledge is static and traditional, which is indicated in the following: there is no striving for critical study of a subject that could be explored, but instead an attempt is made to solve the problems by using the views of the “fathers” and medieval authorities. The spirit of the modern time should certainly not question the loyalty of the Church towards the apostolic and orthodox heritage. However, many things in the Orthodox tradition should be reviewed and brought into an exclusive relationship to the word of God. Given that traditional Orthodoxy has always been directed towards the structures of the state, which means there has always been only a formal difference between the opinion of the Church and the opinion of the state, nowadays the Orthodox Church must be bound more to the word of God. If this

does not happen, the Church will be drawn into the mainstream of secular problems and will be too closely identified with this world.

The match of knowledge and behavior has been most accurate in the relationship between the Orthodox Church and Islam, as well as the relationship between the Orthodox and Catholic Church. Such a structure of Orthodox knowledge that exists even today testifies two things: first, the Orthodox Church has not found its *aggiornamento*, and secondly, the process of "holy self-criticism" has not started yet, while this process did affect the Catholic Church by decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Orthodox theological understanding of Islam from the Qur'an is essentially medieval and traditional, and vague and imprecise when speaking about historic Islam. Therefore, for Orthodox normative society, Islam has a primarily negative connotation. If we define Orthodox theology, like Anselm, as "faith that seeks understanding" (*Proslogion 1*), then the following may be noted in the case of Islam: Orthodox perception of Islam nowadays is different from the rabbinic (Maimonides, Lapide) and Roman-Catholic (*Nostra Aetate*). As it has always been identified with the understanding of St. John of Damascus and Niketas Choniates, the following is true that John of Damascus speaks of "Ismaelite superstition" referring to Islam. This is explained in his work, "The Fountain of Knowledge," where in the second part, he wrote about heresy.¹³ Here, John of Damascus describes "103 heresies" from the beginning of the Church until his time, where Islam is "the 101st heresy." Niketas Choniates, an Orthodox theologian from the twelfth century, in his book, "The Treasure of the Orthodox Religion," coherently follows John of Damascus. He says that Muhammad, whom he calls the false prophet, drew his teaching from the Jews.¹⁴ Also,

¹³ *De haeribus: Patrologija Greca*, book 94, 765-774.

¹⁴ *Božje jedinstvo*, [God's Unity], 140, 105-122.

in the rules of John the Faster¹⁵ (St. John IV of Constantinople), Islam is said to be a heresy. Given that in the sixth rule of the Council in Laodicea, it is said that the heretics should not be permitted to enter the house of God, then it is understandable why the relations between Islam and Orthodoxy were tense.

In order to introduce changes into our relationship, two things are necessary: a belief in the events from the Qur'an, and a lot of intellectual insight, i.e., wisdom. Wisdom is the highest stage of knowledge and relying on it we will help us receive a true impression about the others. When speaking about wisdom as a way that allows us to discover the most precious things, Aristotle in *Ethics* understands it as a synthesis of discursive knowledge and intuitive mind.¹⁶ So if we want to have different relations with the intention to "build a common city," many things should be changed. We must have another hermeneutics of the Qur'an and biblical text. Evangelical understanding of Orthodoxy will be protected from heterodoxy in the word of the author of the Gospel According to John (Jn 1:7; Jn 4:2). Islamic orthodoxy has never questioned our salvation.

We Should Create a New Theology

Islam and Catholicism are our theological environment, and Muslims and Catholics are our neighbors, so first, we have to develop such a theology that will allow us to socialize with each other and approach each other.

To refer to Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians 3:16 and to the theology of John Damascene would be highly dysfunctional. Although Paul's theology in the Epistle to the Galatians refers neither to Muslims nor Islam, but to Judaism and Jewishness, it would be the least in agreement with some current conditions and would

¹⁵ *Zbornik kanona Pravoslavne crkve*, [Proceedings of the Orthodox Church Canons], (Sremski Karlovci, 1997), p. 238.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nikomahova etika*, [Nicomachean Ethics], (Beograd), 1139 b, 1140 a.

not contribute to our striving to build a closer relationship in the theological and existential sense. These texts have an extremely anti-Semitic, but also anti-Islamic tone. If we speak of Christ as the only descendant of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), this leads the Church into an argument not only with the synagogue, i.e., with the Rabbinate, but also with the *Ulema*. We have to know that God's promises did not pass only on Abraham's younger son, Isaac, but also on the much older son, Ishmael, so we all have the same status in front of God; the same rights, but different obligations.

It is a historical fact that Islam entered our national history through tragic events of conquest and that, therefore, we perceived it as a kind of religious occupation. No matter how incredible this may seem, it is a historic fact that after the death of Despot Djuradj Branković (fifteenth century) "we would rather agree to live with the Turks than to accept the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church."¹⁷ So, for example, Djuradj Branković was the only ruler on the Christian East who did not want to participate at the Council of uniting with the Roman Church (at Florence and Ferrara), nor did he allow the church dignitaries to attend the Florentine Congress which was held in the first half of the fifteenth century. However, by not recognizing each other as the spiritual descendants of Abraham, we did not feel a need for mutual dialogue and encounter. Thus, we have not been raised in the spirit of humility and modesty (Qur'an 25:63; 31:16), we did not acknowledge that some truth can be reached only through the exchange of arguments and opinions, and we did not realize that dialogue is part of our common destiny.

Even today, Muslims are a large and influential people, so through the descendants of Ishmael, the dialectic of God's action is still expressed in one part of the world. In Genesis, we read that God will make "a nation of the son of the bondwoman"

¹⁷ R. Grujić, *Pravoslavna crkva* [The Orthodox Church], (1921), p. 36.

(Genesis 21:13). Not only does God have plans with Jesus Christ, but he has it with Ishmael as well. All these plans indicate the following: what God blessed and decided to do must not be questioned.

Ecumenical awareness today seems to be very demanding. Ecumenical understanding between the Church and the *Ulema* will not be reached until some necessary assumptions are fulfilled. First, there is a need for love, truth, and justice. Regarding the first, we cannot neglect the importance of dialogue; regarding the second, without justice, we cannot attain a constructive and tolerant society in the Balkans and especially in Bosnia. Without these presumptions, Abrahamic ecumenism, as a form of our fellowship today, cannot be achieved.

Although we know that God's will is clearly expressed in the Word of God, our interpretations have always been different. For example, there is a difference between a Christian, Islamic, and rabbinic understanding of the Book of Genesis and the text about Ishmael who, according to Islamic orthodoxy, is considered the father of all Arabs, i.e., the Muslims. Even today, it is obvious that these different interpretations of revealed truth were an alibi to the religious institutions for the wrong policies and inhumane approach towards people with different religious identities. Intolerance and many other things have entered the life of the religious community as a result of the wrong interpretations of Luke's words which "compel them to come in" (Lk 14:23). A lack of moral engagement with a person of a different religious identity has been related to different hermeneutics. None of this can be explained without a closer look into something we call ideologization or theologization of truth, similar to the Greek sophists. It has been shown that hermeneutical principles largely depend on the historical context, and they do not have unconditional importance for all times.

For example, the Roman Catholic Church held one opinion about Islam between two Vatican councils and another after the Second Vatican Council. Second, partial truth was frequently considered the whole truth for the purpose of achieving some interests, which meant that ideologization, i.e., theologization of truth could not be avoided. This was the reason for the rise of theological exclusivism which led into apologetics and tension in the life of the Church and the *Ulema*. Absolutization of partial truth, which has always been reached through theologization of truth, always requires appropriate hermeneutics of the word of God. Orthodox theology reveals its “creativity” both in its polemical heat, but also in exclusive apologetics. Antisemitism of John Chrysostom¹⁸ and anti-Islamism of John of Damascus present a clear testimony even today. In the contemporary dynamics of Orthodox-Islamic relations, there is a clash of attitudes, and the Orthodox perception of Islam is, in essence, negative. Since the words of the apostle of John (Jn 1:7) sound “scandalous” to the Muslim establishment even today, we have to find a point where an agreement is possible, in order to open a chance for a successful dialogue. Religious tolerance requires different hermeneutics of *Genesis* (Gen 21:18). Therefore, a theological key for understanding Islam is primarily related to our understanding of Ishmael. Negative understanding of Islam has been based on Paul’s opinion about Ishmael (Gal 4:22-25). We will be able to change our attitude towards Islam only if we accept another interpretation of this person (Gal 4:22-25). Islam will cease to be one of modern “heresies” if we realize that the lineage of God’s promises does not concern only Christians and Jews, but also Muslims (Gen 16:10). Multiple offspring and promised fertility do not refer only to Isaac, but also to Ishmael (Gen 16:10, 21:13-18).

¹⁸ *Patrologia Latina*, 48, 904-916.

What is Authentic and Orthodox for Some, is Not the Case for the Other

Patriarch Photius, the Hesychasts, Mark of Ephesus, John of Damascus, and other people were authentic in their opposition to Sunni Islam and Roman Christianity. What was authentic in the Orthodox East was at the same time orthodox for the Orthodox Church, so the following can be concluded: authentic and thus orthodox knowledge of God was, first of all, filled with medieval theological understanding that can be related to some holy fathers whose theology was prevalent at the early councils, and it became the official theology of the Church. Speaking about Islam, the Eastern Church has not distanced itself from the views of John of Damascus. Our current Orthodox Church has not distanced itself from the views of St. Sava outlined in his “*Krmčija*” [Nomocanon], which brings tensions and polarizations even today. All this resulted in a crisis of the dialogue. Most often it was discussed with Muslims who were always ready for a constructive discussion. In order to get rid of issues that prevent dialogue, we need to be aware that the theology of first Councils, i.e., their narrow-minded dogmatism (Qur’an 4:171), separates us Christians from the Jews and Muslims. We Christians accept these dogmas without appealing to our common sense and logics (1 Cor 1:23)¹⁹, but on the “firm belief of our own heart.” Rabbi Pinchas Lapide wrote: “Nobody can provide logical proofs for a foundation of own religion.”²⁰ In every conversation, we primarily have to be aware of this fact, and therefore we need humility which does not exclude critical and objective thinking. The signs of time place the Orthodox Church into a new historical context. Islam cannot be seen from the medieval theological perspective. New perspectives could break many blockades. Therefore, we stress the following statement: we all have a share in the blessing of

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, (SB Makarska, 1988), 100.

²⁰ Pinchas Lapide, *Jews and Christians*, (Society of the Catholic Apostolate, 1982), 36.

Abraham (Gen 1: 22, 13, 12, 7; Hebr 11:8; Qur'an 43:26-28; 3:65-68), and therefore, we can feel being “stakeholders of Abraham's blessing” together with the Muslims and Jews. We are all children of Abraham. We cannot regard ourselves as Abraham's only son as in Gal 3: 16, because this does not bring us together. On the contrary, it only separates us.

Conclusion

If we don't want our faith to turn into “naiveté,” and be seen as immature, it must be accompanied by a corresponding critical knowledge. We always have to know why we believe something in this rather than another way. “For this reason, I also suffer these things, nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed” is an attribution to Apostle Paul (II Tim 1:12). That is why we should be extremely careful in our approaches, possess reasoned opinion, and speak carefully chosen words, in order to win many people for the truth.

Translated from Serbian by Lidiya Orčić