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# CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM MUTUAL RELATEDNESS AND DIRECTEDNESS AS OUR COMMON DESTINY IN THE BALKANS

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## Abstract

The author gives his own religious perspective about mutual relatedness and directedness between Christians and Muslims in the Balkans. According to him, the relatedness and directedness between Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims in the Balkans were never at the level of which one could be proud. The contemporary historical moment it is important to improve contacts not only between Christians and Muslims, but also between their religious institutions. This relation would not harm their identity, but would only enrich and help building religious peace among believers on the Balkans. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to know the truth about the other religion from theological and other perspectives.

**Key words:** peace, Christianity, Islam, theology, church, Bible, the Quran, God, Jesus, Muhammad, verse, directedness, relatedness

## Introduction

There is a great need for a revision of contemporary knowledge on Islam among the Orthodox Christians. Today different stories are told based on different sources by different “authorities,” and for this reason we cannot have our own critical and objective view. At the same time, some people have negative attitude towards this younger religion and they create their own knowledge and truth about it. Most frequently it is a partial truth or semi-truth, not the whole truth. Having in mind a modern view of Islam, where the criteria or obtaining knowledge are inverted, it is certain that we will not gain needed knowledge. For this reason we Orthodox Christians will not be able to open a new era in our relations until we cleanse our “historical memory” and remove all the misconceptions regarding the Prophet’s faith in God.

In conversations with Muslims we will conclude that there is deep inner link between our believers. If we are spontaneously and reflexively aware of it, we will surely be able to start a new era in Orthodox-Islamic relationship, and we all need this. We are tired of confrontations and sterile theological discussions. Modern Orthodox epistemology of Islam is still mostly the same as it was in the Middle Ages, which is not the case with the Catholic epistemology. This means we cannot go forward, but only backward, or remain at the level of *status quo* as it is at the moment. Even today it is said that Islam is a “heresy,” but there are no clear and sound explanations why. Since traditional Orthodox worship always stresses the importance of Church councils, we cannot avoid the following question: Was Islam pronounced a heresy at a local council of the Orthodox Church? If this is not the case, what are the grounds for the claim of church hierarchy and clergy that Islam is one of many heresies? This can be heard in everyday private conversations but also in public. However, if Islam had once been pronounced a heresy at a local Council of the Orthodox Church, isn't it time to remove the anathema from the Muslim belief in God? At the same it is important to know the answer to the following question: Was there any dialogue or polemics at Orthodox conferences regarding this matter? Positive information would certainly help. Many people would like to know the answer to the following question: Can the teaching of some holy fathers (here we refer to the teachings of St. John of Damascus during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, whose teachings were accepted in St. Sava's [the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church] “Krmčija”(“Krmčija” or “Zakonopravilo”—the first constitution of medieval Serbia),<sup>1</sup> be regarded as the official attitude of the Church? Actually, what is the official teaching of the Orthodox Church regarding Islam today? If the teaching of St. John of Damascus regarding Islam is the official attitude of the Church, aren't we in a position to identify one side of knowledge with the whole truth, but at the same time disregard the truth itself?

Surely, when we want to discuss the matter of authority, the Church has always been regarded the highest authority. But this leads us to another question: Which authority in the Christian East stands behind the claim that Islam is a heresy, which is being emphasized in different ways even today?

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<sup>1</sup> Miodrag M. Petrović, *Zakonopravilo svetog Save o Muhamedovom učenju [Legal Rules of St. Sava about Muhammad's Teachings]*, (Beograd, 1887), p. 51.

When speaking about the method which will be used in revising our theological opinions on Islam (i.e. which method and knowledge) the answer is always the same, by an ecumenical method and cognition that presupposes a flexible exegesis of the holy text. Discussing we will conclude what is common for both religions, and what is not, i.e. what are truths and what is knowledge. Looking into the Quran and remembering the Prophet's experience we will come to a clear conclusion what we are for Islamic orthodoxy. It is obvious that only equal parties may participate in a successful discussion and may pay attention to mutual relatedness and directedness between two Abraham's religions. But when human relations with the Muslims are at stake, the Christian of the East have to learn something from our brethren Catholics and some Protestants. Pope John XXIII expressed his love towards the Muslims by changing the prayer where the religious feelings of Islamic people were hurt, and the verse was the following: "Be Thou King of all those who are still involved in the darkness of idolatry or of Islam."<sup>2</sup>

### **Ideology Has Always Divided and Separated**

Nowhere in the world have the ideologies expressed their inhuman and immoral features as on the Balkans. Some ideologies were characterized by racism and chauvinism. They spread hatred between the nations and were a destabilizing factor on the Balkans. Since they were "infected with a disease" of exclusivism, they survived in the consciousness of a Balkan person due to his or her naivety and immaturity. Thanks to them, but also to our flaws, and today when the destiny of another person is at stake (and the person is of different faith, different nationality, or different culture) we know nothing about solidarity and altruism.

Our belief, which did not prove to be the true one, only absorbs our being. However, it has not succeeded to make us more human and has not helped us to forgive and repent, and this is our fundamental sin. For this reason it is very difficult to answer the following question: Is it possible to talk about mutual relatedness after Srebrenica, Vukovar and Kosovo? Although some are Christians and the other Muslims, they cannot but speak and think of how to build Abrahamic ecumenism in our Balkans. Simultaneously, those who are Christians have to work on the Kingdom of God, which I consider "a fact of history, and not a fact of psychology", as it

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<sup>2</sup> Luigi Accattoli, *Kada papa traži oproštenje* [When the Pope Seeks Forgiveness], (Split: Franjevački institut za kulturu mira, 2000), p. 24.

was understood in old exegesis. Since according to Orthodox understanding Islam was identified as “Turkish godlessness”,<sup>3</sup> this is the first reason why an Orthodox Christian does not think about establishing any relationship between Christianity and Islam. He or she does not enter into dialogue with a Muslim. Since the whole matter takes place in a liturgical book,<sup>4</sup> Islam will be perceived in a negative light. After all, the fact that at the moment when a Muslim accepts Orthodoxy, a Muslim must “curse”<sup>5</sup> all the beliefs he had held, we can guess how is Islam viewed by contemporary Orthodox clergy and hierarchy. Since the Christians of the East know nothing about neutrality of the Church towards the state and nation, neutrality of the state towards the Church (which reminds us of state church and the known Orthodox concept of the relationship between the Church and state creating a “symphony”), Orthodoxy of the East has experienced the following situation in history: it was a Byzantine king, M. Paleolog who wrote “the biggest Byzantine apologia against Islam.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time there was another king who made the Byzantine church remove the anathema from the Islamic God<sup>7</sup>, but this was regarded a heresy, according to the same author. We are talking about the Byzantine emperor Manoilo Komnen. Taking this into account, and having in mind our religious relatedness, the above mentioned question, when posed in the Orthodox society in the Middle Ages, addressed not only the Church but also the state. However, the contemporary democratic state has a neutral relationship to the Church, so this question is of importance only for the Church, its Councils and its academic institutions.

Bearing in mind all that has been said, it is easy to conclude what is to be done. Certainly, we have to recognize our neighbor and talk with Muslims about the above mentioned issues. The Muslims does not need this, because we, Christians, as “the people of the Book”, are close to them. Considering all this, we can conclude the following: The Orthodox Church should make a “Copernican turn” in her understanding of Islam in order to be able to discuss mutual relationships. However, the academic Orthodox Church structure is neither willing nor ready for this. There is no will to work together on establishing the Kingdom of God with the Western Christians, nor the will to work on Abrahamic ecumenism with the Muslims on the Balkans.

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<sup>3</sup> Petrović, *op.cit.*, p. 61, Archimandrite Dr Justin Popović, *Veliki trebnik*..with the introduction of Dr. Artemija, bishop of Raška-Prizren (Eparhija Raško-prizrenska, 1993) pp. 399-401.

<sup>4</sup> Popović, pp. 399-401.

<sup>5</sup> Petrović: *op.cit.*, pp. 52, 55- 59.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Bakšić, *Presveto Trojstvo* [Holy Trinity], (Zagreb, 1941), p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (Belgrade: Minerva), p. 128.

Although it is known what Islam took from Christ (what was first given by the Gospels, Paul and the Church), it still deserves our respect, due to the basic Islamic attitude towards him. The Quran says about Jesus and his mother that “they were made the signs of world” (Sura 21, 91), and this assertion gives a chance for approximation. Another quotation will enhance our mutual relatedness, and it is expressed in the words: “Muslim population respected the grave of St. Sava and bestowed mercy to the church in Miloševo more than the Christians. Another place respected by the Muslims was the church of Our Lady in Čajnice”.<sup>8</sup> If mutual respect and the awareness of relatedness is the attitude of our “mature ecumenical experience”, it should go together with our ecumenical cognition. We will show respect towards each other in the reading and interpretation of the sacred texts, but if we do not live our religious truth, this will not be experienced in our lives.

Don't we have one “Father”? Only through correct understanding and interpretation of the Bible and the Quran will we ensure mutual respect. Islam deserves respect from Christians. Although many people in the West expressed this in an official way, it is not the case with the Christians of the East. If we read the prophet Malachi, we would surely think differently. Prophet Malachi asked: “Don't we all have one Father? Are we not created by one God?” (Mal. 2:10). Since we are God's creatures we are brothers and sister whose Father is the God of the Bible and the Quran. We are aware of mutual relatedness through interpretation of one biblical text. In our interpretation of the texts from the Bible and the Quran sometimes we will find reasons for respect, but sometimes respect will be withdrawn. Now we come to the most important question: How do you understand and interpret the secret text? Your understanding must never withdraw your love and goodness, because this is more important than our understanding of the Bible or the Quran. However, when the sacred texts were interpreted in different ways that brought discrepancies in beliefs, the consequences were the events of which neither Christians nor Muslims can be proud of. For example, Anti-Judaism can be found in some Church Fathers of the Early Church, which, according to some authors, escalated later into Anti-Semitism. Some of Jesus' statements regarding the Jews (Mt 24:1-3; Mt 11:12-14; Mt 21:19; Mt 11:22; Jn 8:23; 8:44) were misunderstood and gave a legitimacy for intolerant behavior towards the Jews.

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<sup>8</sup> Boris Nivelčić: “Prilog unutrašnjem sagledavanju islama,” [Contribution to the Internal Understanding of Islam] *Islamska misao*, No. 137/1990.p. 17.

Although in the Quran we find some verses that have an anti-Christian tone, we Christians, “the followers of the book” (Sura 3, 64) have to take into account what was the historical context of the written verses. We have to analyze the situation. In order to understand the basic spirit of the Quran, but also of the Gospel, we have to pay attention to this. Therefore, some verses in the Quran regarding us Christians have lost their importance. Islam deserves our respect also because it writes about Jesus from Nazareth. Although all this is important for the Muslims (Quran 91, 6), and not for the Christians, we should not withdraw our respect toward the Muslim. Disagreement should not lead us into irreverence. Although this paper does not deal with Christology, but with Jesusology, Jesus is in the Qur’an the most important person after Muhammad, and this tells us a lot. It is clear that what is believed regarding Jesus Christ by Christians and the church, will not be believed by a Muslim, but both Christians and Muslims believe that Jesus is the Prophet of God. Considering the basic structure of our beliefs, disagreements are inevitable, however, we should be tolerant. Church history unfolded in the spirit of religious intolerance, so I often think of Paul’s sentence to the Galatians where he writes: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:15).

When interpreting the Gospel and the Qur’an today, we conclude that the most important thing is the following: We should meet as brothers, because only brothers will work on the coming of the Kingdom of God, and will work on Abrahamic ecumenism. By reading the Qur’an we will conclude that all the believers are brothers (Quran, 49:10), and interpreting Jesus’ statement (Luke 10: 27) we will learn the other person is always our neighbor.

Since many Christians determine their love towards the neighbor not according to an ethical, but according to a theological key, the number of real Christians is small - they are almost an invisible “flock”. We consider our neighbors only those people with whom we get in touch at our liturgies, with those who celebrate the same Eucharist, but not the ones that need our help. Contemporary Christians remind us of those Jews from the Old Testament who decided to love according to theological, but not other criteria, so their neighbors were those who were faithful to the Law. Jesus clearly rejected this criterion in his statement (Mt 5:43; Lk 10:25-37).

Since Jürgen Habermas considered the question of truth as the most important question in the sphere of communication, the root of our conflict and tense situations I see is the insufficient knowledge of the truth. Our partial truths, and semi-truths, estranged us from the Western

Christians and from Muslims. At the same time, this has not been happening accidentally, but with a certain purpose. More or less, partial truth has been held for the whole truth and total truth, but with certain advantages. Therefore we could not avoid ideologization of truth in the state and theologization of truth in the Church.

Our whole knowledge about Islam is not characterized by ignorance, but by partial knowledge, that is absolutized and taken as total knowledge. However, all this is done for a certain advantage and reason, where the interest and the reason become more important than the truth itself. In order to get “cured” of it, we have to enter an interreligious dialogue where we can hold as truth that we discern through the dialogue.

In order to start a new era in our relationships, we have to defend our relatedness with theological arguments. As citizens of one state we always have to remember what is the most important: the pursuit of the common good and not the particular good. However, a need for mutual relatedness will not arise in our religious cognition unless we clearly define our religious identity. One thing is sure, if we reduce our mutual relationship to a relationship of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the need for a mutual relatedness will certainly not arise.

The Orthodox Church has always considered herself “the pillar and the tower of truth,” and not other churches or other religious identities. Orthodox Church has almost never shown a desire for dialogue. If we look into the *Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy*, where it is written that the Catholics “went into heresy due to filioque,”<sup>9</sup> we can easily conclude what is Islam for contemporary Orthodox epistemology.

In his book *The Ottoman Empire*, Halil Inalcik writes that Sultan Suleiman I (16<sup>th</sup> century) represented the head of the Muhammad’s community (p. 59). It may be concluded that the Byzantine emperors and Ottoman sultans were viewed as the guardians of orthodoxy. But that was a worse time for the heterodoxy. Since Christian understanding of orthodoxy has always differed from the Islamic understanding, this means that even today there would be no consent regarding this most important question. In the Epistle to Hebrews it is written that in many different ways God has spoken to our fathers through the prophets (Hebrews 1:1). That means that these differences were given by God himself. We have to accept this, and not claim

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<sup>9</sup> *Enciklopedija pravoslavlja*, [Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy] Vol. III (Belgrade: Savremena administracija, 2002), p. 1631.

monopoly on truth or salvation. We all are part of God's plan of salvation that has been offered to us in different ways. It is up to us how we are going to respond to this offer.

### **The Most Important Question: What Are We To Each Other?**

Reading the Constitution of Medina and the Book of Acts (Acts 4:32) we will easily learn two things about the relations in the earliest Islamic and Christian societies: what were the interpersonal relations between the Christians on one side, and the Muslims on the other side. The relations between the Christians in the Early Church were harmonious. They were directed towards each others. We read that they were "one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32). At the same time in the earliest Islamic society Christians, Jews and Muslims were part of the Islamic community. We can talk not only about Christian but also about Islamic ecumenism. When within the church differentiation began between the laymen and the clergy, the Christians were no longer one in heart and soul. For example, Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, protested and asked Origen to come back to Alexandria "because it is not appropriate for a layman to hold homilia in front of the bishops."<sup>10</sup>

It is not difficult to answer the question what we are to each other. According to the Qur'an (Qur'an 49:10), but also to the Gospels, the believers are brothers (Mark 3:55). In both cases the concept of brotherhood is defined on ethical and not other bases. The Prophet of Islam says: "Nobody believes truly unless he wishes his brother what he wishes himself."<sup>11</sup> In the Qur'an it is clearly written: "The believers are brothers" (Qur'an 49:10). This verse is of utmost importance because it is not written that "only Muslims are brothers." Real believers can foster only brotherly and friendly relations, and the idea of mutual relatedness and directedness is always alive. Jesus clearly says that those who do the will of God are his brothers, sisters or mothers (Mk 3:55). This means that a Muslim, who does the will of God, is also our brother. By doing the will of God (Mk 3:55) we become brothers.

It is not easy to do the will of God, because we have to give up many things, and to fulfill God's will and not ours. Although it is now clear that our neighbor is a person, including the Muslim, who does the will of God, we have to ask another question: What is a Christian to a

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<sup>10</sup>Alexandre Faire, *Laici o počecima crkve*, [Laypeople about the Beginning of the Church] (KS, 1998), p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Adnan Silajdžić, *40 hadisa sa komentarom* [Forty Hadiths with Commentary], (Sarajevo 1993), p. 125..

Muslim? There is a clear answer in the chapter “Table” where we can read: “We are Christians” (Sura, Table:82). In our Orthodox context it has usually not been considered that the other person is our brother or neighbor. Nowadays this assertion primarily relates to the monastic communities. For example our *hesychasts* experienced the Turks as “God’s punishment”, and never accepted the Roman Catholic Church as a church that brings salvation. It is obvious that this was influenced by many circumstances ... But when we want to answer the question regarding our mutual relatedness, we have to say something else: we need another person to express our religious, moral and political being. Our mutual relatedness will lead us to “care about each other in a wise and thoughtful manner.”

After September 11, 2001, we face a “devastating Islamophobia”, on one side, and suffering of innocent Christians in some Islamic countries, on the other side. So the relationships between the Christians and Muslims in some countries have become weak and fragile. We need mutual relationships in order to build a more human and moral world, and this is not questioned from either sides. However, we cannot live without the others, so the solidarity has to be experienced in relationships. If innocent Muslims are tortured by so called Christians, we have to show our solidarity, and vice versa: the Muslims must express solidarity with the innocent Christians who are tortured by the Muslims. The person next to me is my friend or relative, he/she is my neighbor, and we share a common political and historical destiny. Closeness directs us towards the others and we have to accept this challenge. How can we do this? This can be done only through love, because this is the only way for the Christians.

### **The Relatedness and Directedness – An Extremely Important Issue**

The issue of relatedness and directedness was viewed in the passage about Jesus from Nazareth and Muhammad *Rasulullah* from Mecca. The characteristics of their mission has always been reflected in the relatedness (Lk 4:17; Sura VI:20; 5:19). At the beginning of their mission it had a narrow regional and national character and was used only for religious purposes.

The Prophet of Islam clearly stated: “I was not sent to curse, but to call, to be the mercy of God. My great Allah – direct my people, because they don’t know”. Although in Matthew Jesus clearly said that he was “sent to the lost sheep of Israel,” Paul’s resurrected Lord addressed his disciples (Romans 10:9) and told them: “Baptize all the nations” (Mt 28:19). At the

beginning the mission was directed towards one nation, but later it exceeded religious and national boundaries and becomes universal and worldwide. Talking about the Prophet of Islam Shaheed Morteza Motahari wrote in one of his books: “He wanted to make it easier for everybody.”<sup>12</sup> The same is said of Jesus from Nazareth (Lk 7:36-50; Mk 16:9). Therefore their relatedness to others, beside religious, had also other dimensions. In other words, it was a response to human needs. The Prophet of Islam said: “Thank you Lord. I witness there is no other God and we will all return to you.”<sup>13</sup> This relatedness to the Highest is a testimony. At the same time the Gospel of John was and remained a testimony<sup>14</sup> – testimony of the most important Truth.

It is important to say that Jesus' and Muhammad's relatedness towards the others was not regarding eternal salvation, but was relating temporary, political salvation. How else could we explain Jesus' speech in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30) and in other situations (Lk 7:21-22)? Jesus makes it clear that we need the other person in order to have eternal salvation, and the other person needs us to be saved instantly. In Christianity salvation has eschatological and political dimensions. Therefore Christian soteriology speaks about “the sacrament of brotherhood.” Starting from Muhammad's statement that “none of you can truly be said to believe until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself,”<sup>15</sup> the maturity of a faith is seen in the relationship that a Muslim has with his brother. So in Islam, a Muslim will not be saved, will not enjoy God's mercy, if he does not want to other person what he wants for himself. The best way to live our relatedness is through brotherhood, which cannot be expressed without mutual solidarity. This is something that is indicated by many signs, something we desperately need. Christians have always “studied and interpreted the signs according to the Gospels”, and Muslims have always done it “in the light of the Quran.”

This brings us to the following: in Christianity there is a deep, inner connection between religion, morality, and politics. The same is the case with Islam. Christian and Muslim political views cannot be lived at the expense of morality. The highest and the most important goal of a Christian is not to look at the horizon of immanence, nor of the state, but in establishing the Kingdom of God. A Christian must always think about the deep and inner relationship between

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<sup>12</sup> “Muhamed, s.a.v.s: Uzvišeni moral Božijeg poslanika,” [Muhammad, pbuh, The High Morality of God's Messenger] (Belgrade: Kulturni centar islamske Republike Iran, 2006), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Leksikon temeljnih religijskih pojmova* [Lexicon of Religious Concepts], (Zagreb: Prometej, 2005), p. 478.

<sup>15</sup> Silajdžić, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

the religion, morality and politics. Since we humans are defined as “a social beings” (Aristotle) our relatedness must exist.

This is our destiny and certainty. Our experience teaches us that this issue is in crisis, and we experience the human as an “egoistic being” and not a “social being”. However, when we think about this in a religious context, I would rather say that the crisis is happening because we don’t recognize it in the right way. If we want to have more of it in our relations, it is necessary to express the truth for the sake of truth, but also because of the tasks the Lord gave us - to give Him glory. What is said about Jesus and Christianity in the Quran will direct the Muslims towards the Christians. However, what is said about the Muslims and their Prophet by the Church will not direct the Christians towards the Muslims. Therefore, it is of the greatest importance to open a dialogue and learn the truth regarding us and our faith in God.

## **Conclusion**

The Muslim is my friend, my relative, my neighbor. We share our common political and historical destiny. If we don't foster our directedness, we will experience bad consequences. The closeness directs us towards each other and this is something we cannot avoid. In our tragic political history this relatedness was destroyed by different subjects and political ideologies. There were permanent opponents existing in religious fanaticism, theological exclusiveness, nationalistic movements, calculations of political and religious leaders, and this has not ended yet. There have always been those who carried out their “dirty job” and, since they are without conscience, they easily accomplished their task. Today we will effectively resist if we “do the will of God, and not our will.” This is not easy, but there is no other way for Christians.

First, we will come to an important conclusion that may bring us closer. We Orthodox Christians and Muslims believe in God the Creator (Gen 1:1; Sura 7:29), and second, we believe in Jesus Christ but differently (Col 2:9; Araf:158). Here in the Balkans Christianity has been preached by the clergy and church hierarchy as a religion antagonistic to Islam, and we are still not aware of the inner relatedness of our two religions. The awareness of relatedness did not exist in our Church, nor in the consciousness of an Orthodox believer. For example St. Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, St Gregory of Nyssa, and other Latin and Greek fathers had Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus as their reference, and their understanding became Christian

theology. To be a Christian meant “to lead a fight in spirit, away from the world.” This relatedness brought one theology, and the Church had great advantages. We believe in God in different ways. God does not demand of us to believe the same. We know two life styles and two different cultures. In the Quran it is obvious that all believers, not only Muslims, are brothers to each other (Quran 49:10). Our relatedness is primarily the brotherly and sisterly relationship. This dimension has a function in building sibling relations, and this is its entire meaning.

Translated from Serbian by Lidija Orčić