10-2013

The Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire and its Perspectives for Theological Dialogue

Svetoslav Ribolov
University of Sofia

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND ITS PERSPECTIVES FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

By Svetoslav Ribolov

Svetoslav Ribolov, Ph.D. is a professor at the University of Sofia "St Clement of Ohrid", Faculty of Theology, Section of Patristic and Byzantine Sources. He is member of the Hellenistic society in Bulgaria and coordinator of the Center for Advanced Studies of Patristic and Byzantine Legacy at the Sofia University. The present text is a part of his project: *The Conception of God's Grace and the Dialog between the Protestant Theologians and the Ecumenical Patriarchate during the Ottoman Epoch*, carried out in the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (2012) with the kind help of the American Research Center in Sofia and the financial help of the Gipson Fellowship.

The Ottoman Empire was a natural continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire in South-East Europe and the Middle East[1]. The current generation of Turkish and Greek scholars of Ottoman history is trying step by step to abandon the narrow framework of national ideology from the 19th and the 20th centuries. They have started regarding the Ottoman Empire as a rich joint past of the peoples of the region. The Turkish historian, Iber Ortayli, has made a courageous statement, "the Ottoman Empire was the last Roman Empire in history."[2]

At the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the main political reversal was the change of the governing dynasty and the top state administrative staff. The formerly Christian government was converted to a Muslim one. In the place of the family of Paleologians came Mehmed II.[3] In the course of absorbing the former Byzantine territories and the territories of the small Balkan countries which existed in them, the Ottomans preserved a lot of the former system. This system was still valued, especially during the reign of Mehmed II, conqueror of the city. In several regions even the administrative staff did not suffer considerable changes. In the

---

[1] About the important role of the local Greek speaking population (which adopted the Islam in 13th-14th century) around the Sea of Marmara in the formation of the Ottoman Empire see: H.A. Gibbon, *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire*, (Oxford, 1916); N. Iorga, "L'interpénétration de l'Orient et de l'Occident au Moyen Âge", *Bulletin de la Section historique de l'Académie Roumaine*, t. 13 (Bucureşti, 1927).

[2] И. Ортайлъ, *Преоткриване на Османската империя*. Превод Х. Мефсин (Пловдив, 2007), p. 187.

[3] See Dimitris Katsikis, *L'Empire ottoman,* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

beginning the Ottomans preserved in a reduced form the statute of the local aristocrats, as long as they obeyed the new governors. In a lot of regions they even preserved the local military bodies of the Christians. The Christian families who preserved this statute were in the juridical system of the Empire called *timariotes*. According to some historical reports, military formations of *timariotes* existed until the early 16th century.[4] They even appeared as a very important element of the Ottoman conquest in Europe as well as in the East, in Asia. As an illustration we can just mention the armies sent by the Serbian king Lazar and the Byzantine Emperor John V Paleologus to help the campaign of Sultan Murat against the sultanate of Karaman in Eastern Asia Minor in 1387. Thus they destroyed the most powerful rival rulers in Anatolia who opposed the Ottomans.

The Orthodox Christians in Asia Minor and the Middle East

A considerable difference with the Byzantine system was with the practice of the earlier Ottoman Empire to stimulate proselytism from Christianity to Islam. On other hand, it is a fact that the state did not have any financial interest in proselytism because non-Muslims were obliged to pay extra taxes and thus they provided for the financial stability of the state. Until the unification of the Muslim kingdoms in Asia Minor by the Ottomans, the local Muslim leaders often put serious obstacles in the paths of Bishops elected in Constantinople in order for them to obtain their dioceses. The Holy Synod of the Patriarchate in the capital was not able in this early period to exercise spiritual care over a big part of the Christian population in Asia Minor for about one or two centuries.[5]

Here the Orthodox Christians and every non-Muslim monotheist were second class citizens and the Church faced serious restrictions. The pagans, usually Gypsies, were outside

---

[4] See H. Inalcik, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", *Studia Islamica 2* (1954), pp. 103-129.
[5] Steven Runciman, «Ρούμ μιλέτι»: Οἱ Ὀρθόδοξες Κοινότητες ὑπὸ τοὺς Ὀθωμανοὺς Σουλτάνους». In: John J. Yiannias (ed.), *Ἡ Βυζαντινὴ Παράδοση μετὰ τὴν Ἅλώση τῆς Κωνσταντινούπολης* (Ἀθῆναι: ΜΙΕΤ, 2008), p. 18.

of the law since paganism was considered to be a crime. The mission of the Orthodox Church was under serious pressure in Asia Minor and the Middle East where the number of the Christians had been reduced in the 13th-14th centuries and even earlier and suffered additional depopulation in the 15th century as a result the continuous wars in the region.[6]

Thus during the Ottoman Epoch the Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem had serious restrictions placed on their activities for two main reasons:

a) The number of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East was reduced as a large number of them adopted Islam.

b) Because of the aggressive policy of the Roman Catholic Church, which began to stimulate the local Christian communities to join the Roman hierarchy through missions in the 16th century and very actively through missions in the first half of the 17th century.[7]

The Balkan Peninsula

On the Balkan Peninsula the situation was very different. Here the Orthodox Christians were the majority during the whole history of the Ottoman Empire. Their activities and cultural institutions were much more visible. From the correspondence of the German Hellenist Martinus Crusius (about 1574) we can learn that he and his colleagues, professors of theology in Wittenberg, were surprised, probably as well as a lot of Europeans that a very well organized Christian Church existed in the Ottoman territory. He says that it was even quite populous and its members were the majority of the population in Thrace, Asia, and Hellas[8]. The information about the Orthodox Church in the Balkans probably traveled at that

---

[6] See in this respect objective and detailed research: Sp. Vryonis, *The Decline of the Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamisation from the 11th through the 15th Century* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1971).

[7] Joëlle Dalègre, *Grecs et Ottomans 1453-1923 de la chute de Constantinople à la disparition de l'empire ottoman* (Collection Etudes grecques, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), pp. 95 sq.

[8] Martinus Crusius, *Turcograecia*, Basileae, per Leonardum Ostenium, Sebastiani Henricperti impensa, 1584, pp. 410, 557. We quote here two short letters of Crusius to Patriarch Hieremias II in ancient Greek and one letter

time through the German Embassy in Constantinople or Constantinie, as the Ottomans called it, to the German kingdoms in Central Europe.[9]

Legal Status of the Orthodox Church

Actually after the conquest of the city of Constantinople by Mehmed II, the Orthodox Church held a special status in the Ottoman Empire. Its leader accepted a special position amongst the Ottoman high administrators. He was a *paša* holding three horse-tails. Since that time the Patriarchate in Constantinople has been charged with gathering taxes from the Orthodox Christians. A little bit later it was charged with the legal proceedings of the Orthodox Christians in the empire. The majority of them were not satisfied with the Ottoman court because it gave privileges to the Muslims. The non-Muslims could not be witnesses in the court according the *Shariah,* i.e. the law of the Quran[10]. Unrest amongst the Christians appeared because of this juridical practice. It allowed to a lot of Muslims after the fall of the city to occupy the property of rich Christian citizens. Their pretensions were based on false witness provided by other Muslims. Thus, the state administration permitted the Church to exercise clear juridical practice. From doctrinal and canonical subjects the Church courts shifted their activity to everyday causes: property quarrels, marriages and divorces, guardianships and testaments. This influenced the thinking of the simple Christians about the Church. They started to comprehend the Church as being much more like an institution and less like a God-man mystical and liturgical body. Even the idea of salvation started being

---

of his secretary Theodoros Zygomalas to Crusius in Everyday Greek (vulgar Greek), *ibid.* p. 93. For Crusius Thrace is the modern teritory of Bulgaria to Naisos in Eastern Serbia and to Skopie and Ochrid in modern Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Hellas goes far northern to the half of modern Macedonia and Albania. Asia is actually Asia Minor or Anatolia.

[9] G. Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople. The Correspondence between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession.* Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1982, pp. 12-13.

[10] Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity: A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 170-172. See also: Κ. Ἄμαντος, «Οἱ προνομιακοὶ ὁρισμοὶ τοῦ Μουσουλμανισμοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν Χριστιανῶν». *Ἑλληνικά 9* (1936), pp. 103-166.

perceived as based on the opposition between offences against God's justice and punishment. These understandings were already much closer to the Scholastic understanding of Redemption than to the traditional Byzantine patristic understanding of Redemption based on the opposition between sin as a disease of human nature and Salvation as healing this diseased nature.[11]

As we said, taxes paid by Christians were collected by the clergy of the Orthodox Church which had been decided by the Ottoman authorities. On the other hand, the same clergy were set free of taxes. This fact created a precondition for tensions inside the Christian community. With the progress of time it will provoke serious social problems.

The position of the Patriarch in Constantinople, the leader of the Orthodox Church, was different in the Ottoman system. In the East Roman Empire, in Byzantium, he was just the chairman of the council of bishops (ἱερὰ σύνοδος, Holy Synod) of the Church. He had been elected by the bishops and they could remove him from this position. His election was usually approved by the Byzantine Emperor as far as the Patriarch functioned as a connection and coordinator between the state administration and structures of the Church. Thus he adapted and conformed the decisions and activities of the bishops' synod to the state government.[12]

In the new Ottoman system however, after the fall of Constantinople, the Patriarch was a high state Ottoman servant and his power was much more dependent on the Sultan than the earlier Byzantine Emperor. In this situation a new tax was introduced for every candidate for Patriarch, a so called *peškes.* Actually it was a practice which bordered on corruption. During the course of the 16th century from a one-time tax it became a regular tax, which made the ecclesiastical hierarchy a hostage of non-spiritual interests. This tax gradually rose

---

[11] See the observation of Β. Καλλιακμάνης, *Θεολογικὰ Ῥεύματα στὴν Τουρκοκρατία*, pp. 47-106.
[12] Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity*, pp. 167-169.

and by the end of the 18th century it was a huge non-refundable loan owed by the Patriarchate to the Ottoman state.[13]

Achievements – The *Milliets*

Nevertheless, for six centuries the Ottoman Empire succeeded in securing stability and economic prosperity on a huge territory of three continents: from Iran to Algeria, and from Yemen to Central Europe. In the framework of this enormous territory dwelt very different groups of people. In order to secure a balance among them, the elite of the state found one of the most interesting mechanisms of religious tolerance in human history. It was the so called "*milliet*-system". The word *milliet* is Arabic and means "nation" and "religious group" at one and the same time. In the Ottoman Empire *milliet* par excellence is the "nation of the faithful", i.e. the Muslims. The other big groups, i.e. *milliets*, were the Orthodox Christians, the Non-Chalcedonian Christians (Assyrians, Copts, and Armenians) and the Jews. Those communities were acknowledged as *milliets* because of the special and positive role they played in the state. They had gained the respect of the conquerors since their first contact with them in the Middle East. Their leaders were charged with a lot of administrative and economical duties and held indisputable rights. For instance, one duty of the *milliet* elite was the gathering of the taxes of the milliet on behalf of the Sultan. This practice allowed every *milliet* to secure some independence from the central power[14].

For the Orthodox Christians, so called *Rummilliet,* i.e. "the nation of the Romans" the most important figure was the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinie. According to the Ottoman law he carried the title *Milliet baši* (the Father of the nation, ἐθνάρχης).

---

[13] See Th. Papadopoulos, *Studies and Documents Relating to the History of the Greek Church and People under Turkish Domination* (Brussels, 1952), p. 132.

[14] See В. Каравълчев, "Справедлива ли е системата *милиет* в Османската империя?" *Богословска мисъл*, 1-4 (2006), pp. 65 sq.

The non-Muslim population paid extra taxes which allowed them to freely confess their religion. Practically those taxes were self-redemption of the Christians from military service, as far as the Muslim law did not allow them to bring weapons and to serve in the regular army.

The Law of the Quran and Restrictions

In 1517 Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt and was proclaimed caliph of Mecca and Medina. Afterward he applied the *Shari'ah* as being the basic and irrefutable law of the state. For this reason Christians from this moment on were obliged to preserve the sacred rights of the Muslims. It was and is the Muslims' right for their religious feelings not to be disturbed by the manifest presence of other religions in the public life. It led to introduction of the practice of the Christian church buildings to be undersized and almost invisible from a distance, without domes and belfries. There are exceptions from this practice only in regions where the Muslims are a very small minority. During this period almost absurd prohibitions for building and preserving non-Muslim temples were imposed.[15] In some periods the Patriarchate in Constantinople had at its disposal not more than four ecclesiastical buildings. Even in times when the non-Muslims achieved the right to build bigger churches, they remained somehow hidden in the town's landscape. We can observe this in the church-architecture from the 19th century.[16] Moreover every initiative for development of religious activity by the Church had a surtax put on it. As a whole, a large amount of the financial income of the Ottoman Empire was supplied by the Christians and mostly by the Orthodox Christians on the Balkan Peninsula. The territory populated by them was very dense.

---

[15] See V. Laurent, "Les chrétiens sous les sultans (1553-1592). Un recueil de documents turcs." *Echos d'orient, 28* (1929), pp. 308-406.
[16] See Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity,* pp. 186-191.

A large percent of the Muslim population in the Ottoman period was engaged by the army, paramilitary activity, state and local administration. Basically the duties of the Muslims since the times of the Arab caliphates and later of the Persian Empire were to secure peace in the state and in the world as a whole. In the Ottoman Empire this principle was adopted as an ideological basis of society.[17] Maybe with this was the reason why the Muslim population in the late 19th century remained considerably behind in social and economic fields. Actually it will be found as a crucial factor of the growing tension among the different social groups in the state which later led to its final destruction in the early 20th century. Other foreign political factors were of secondary importance.

Since the 16th century and afterwards the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire actually had no right to take part in the army and to be engaged with administrative services. A step back was made in the 19th century under the pressure of the European powers and Russia. On the other hand, there was relatively good religious freedom in the Ottoman Empire. The economic opportunities for the region were remarkable. It had not known such opportunities before and it has never known better times than those afterward. Both the Christian and the Jewish population profited well from them.

The religious rights of the population of the Empire were confined to the borders of the religious community (*milliet*).[18] Naturally the towns and the big villages were separated into religious groups and their members met each other only in the market place. This is the reason why the controversies among the religious communities were often concentrated around and about the market-day during the week. For the Jews Saturday was not appropriate, for the Christians it was Sunday and for the Muslims it was Friday – the day for prayer. At the same time, the majority of the small villages had just one religion and a clear monoethnic character. In the provinces however one could meet several ethnic and religious

---

[17] Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity,* pp. 167-168.
[18] В. Каравълчев, *op. cit.,* p. 67.

groups living together. Thus the fundamental aim of this state system seemed to be to secure the economic and administrative balance. The Ottomans achieved it for at least five centuries. In the big and small towns the relationships between the *milliets* were determined by the social framework and had a more personal character and never an official one. The local leaders of the *milliets* were responsible to the local administration and beyond that to the central government in Constantinie. Laws were applied at the local level.

Tolerance and Institutional Tradition

This quite original system was borrowed from the Arab caliphates, but had undergone a considerable development under the Persians and especially under the Ottomans. Different from the Arabs, the Ottomans since the very beginning included the Orthodox Church in their juridical system and did not ignore it at all. Actually it was one of the most important institutions of the Empire. If we adopt the opinion that this state somehow continued the ancient tradition of the East Roman Empire, the Ottoman elite preserved in a specific form the Byzantine social and religious heritage. Christian Church leaders were practically part of the Ottoman elite. Thus this specific Ottoman approach could be defined as a form of pragmatism containing good will.[19] Actually in a state with a majority Christian population, the idea of a Muslim-Christian social elite was a wise policy, which looked forward to the future.

Indeed, in the history of its long term existence the Ottoman Empire did not organize persecution against any religion by the state. On the contrary, all the *milliets* were stimulated by the juridical system to secure their religious identity. In the folklore of the Balkan peoples the Ottoman period remains filled with difficult memories mainly because of the outrages of local Muslims provoked by social problems and corruption. Always these outrageous actions

---

[19] *Ibid*.

were without sanction from the central government. Especially in the 19th century those episodes of outrage were most often caused by the considerable financial gap between the Muslim population, which was growing poor, and the Christian and Jewish populations which were achieving wealth. We have pointed out that the huge Ottoman Empire and its tax-system gave a lot of economic opportunities for the non-Muslims, but for the Muslims the problems began with the gradual ending of victorious wars. The result of this process in the 19th century was reinforced by the disintegration of the *milliet*-system. It was undermined by wars with Russia and the growing Russian and Western interventions in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. In this atmosphere corruption grew in the state administration as did the feeling that there were deficits in the laws of the country.

However, we should not pass by the fact that the *milliet*-system, as a solution to the problems of co-existence with different religious groups, was much more open and able to compromise than the contemporary system in Western Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries. It is not surprising that the European Jews found refuge from persecutions in Constantinople, Thessalonica, Phillipopolis, Sofia, Skopje, and Smyrna. This model of tolerance was based on enclosing the identities and preserving clear borders of the different religious groups. Avoiding change was a guarantee for peace and economic prosperity of the communities and of the state as a whole.

This political system was guided by the specific spirit of the Ottoman ideology, which was based on a view that social dynamism and changes were obvious features of decline and corruption. At least on paper, no one movement in any direction was possible; the separate groups in this society had the duty to preserve their initial identity. Despite all this, sometimes local leaders organized severe waves of proselytism. Those were the campaigns in the 13th and 14th centuries in Asia Minor, and in the middle of the 15th century in the Balkans and the last one took place in the second half of the 17th century. In the late 18th century there

were some cases of local pressure on Christians to change their faith. However, they were not prompted by the central government. At the same time the local administration, in spite of the difficult procedures, did not refuse to accept newly converted Muslims from the classes of those who were pressured by economic problems and who preferred to adopt Islam in order not to pay surtaxes. The people who wanted to convert were not a small number during the whole history of the Ottoman Empire.[20] Otherwise, according to the Ottoman law it was impossible for one just to transgress the borders of his religious group. Even to become Muslim was not an easy task. It was a special privilege which set the subject free from a whole group of surtaxes. Such a change of religion was not in the economic interest of the central government.[21]

Regions under Latin Domination

Unfortunately in the regions where the Orthodox Christians remained for about two more centuries living under the dominance of Venice, Genova, and the Frankish Kingdom, the situation was even worse. Specifically, these were the islands in the Aegean Sea, Crete, Cyprus, parts of Peloponnesus, parts of Western Greece and for a much longer time the islands in the Ionian Sea. The Latin clerics often exercised rough pressure on the Orthodox Christians to join the Roman Catholic hierarchy. On these islands a great number of the bishoprics and churches were closed and converted to serve the Latin tradition. The population was pressured in various ways.[22]

Christian Education

---

[20] Joëlle Dalègre, *op. cit.* pp. 47 ff.

[21] See *Ibid.*

[22] See M. Manussacas, "Structure sociale de l'hellénisme post-byzantin." *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft, 31, 2* (1981), pp. 793-808.

As we know, in Byzantine society the sciences were traditionally supported reasonably well thanks to the preservation of the Ancient Classical tradition in education. Thus in Byzantium ecclesiastical education remained somehow "secular." It was concerned with the importance of research of the Scripture and the Canons of the Church, and the problems of their exegesis. Nevertheless it was very often devoted to rhetoric and clearly philosophically speculative problems. The educated cleric had to know not only the Scripture but also the works of the ancient philosophers, mostly Aristotle, and the Classical literary models. In the Ottoman Empire from the very beginning, however, Christian education was not well accepted. In the capital, the first Patriarch after the fall of the city, Gennadius Scholarius, reopend the Patriarchal School. It functioned from then until the late 20th century. This was quite different in the provincial regions where the educational initiatives of the Christians found it very difficult to find support and usually were tackled by the local Muslim leaders. Nevertheless, one could find ecclesiastical schools sustained by monasteries and the local Church hierarchy. During the 17th and 18th centuries schools were founded in Thessalonica, Arta, Joannina, on some islands, and at the Holy Mountain of Athos.

Howsoever, the most educated Christians in the Empire got their education in the West: Italy, France, Switzerland, England and later in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and far away in the north in Russia.[23] Good education in the West provided good chances for success in the Ottoman Empire. The most respected persons amongst the rich and influential Ottomans were the Christian physicians. This profession afforded an opportunity to many Christians to become fantastically rich citizens of the capital. Thanks to the same good education there appeared a new class of rich merchants. The protagonists were once again the old Byzantine aristocratic families.[24] However, theological education gradually enclosed itself in learning of rigid models from the western scholastic methodology and mechanical

---

[23] See Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity,* pp. 208-225.
[24] *Ibid*., pp. 363-376.

sustaining of the ancient liturgical tradition. It was less and less concerned with speculative philosophy and patristic exegesis. This tendency deprived it of the fresh spirit of the Byzantine thinkers.[25]

Mission Activities

In this situation the Orthodox Church did not exercise its mission; theological dialogue was impossible. It had no social and ideological framework in which these were to be carried out; at any rate not in the meaning perceived nowadays, after the epoch of Enlightenment which was the fruit of the European cultural development. The mission in the *milliet*-system became only a witness of the Christians for their faith. We see it in the deeds of the neo-martyrs but not as a theological discourse. Usually the witness of the neo-martyrs was a result of the arrogance of the Muslim religious local authorities.[26] In the previous history the theological dialogue of the Jewish-Christian tradition was a dynamic process of searching for exact expression and interpretation of events of the Divine Revelation. But it somehow did not fit the framework of the *milliet*-system. In the late Ottoman Empire, when corruption and debts started to remove the fence of the *milliet*-system, many Christians became witnesses of their faith in Christ. It was always a result of the increasing incapacity of the central government to control the local administration.

Theological Dialogue

Nowadays the Orthodox Church comprehends its mission mostly as a witness of the simple Christian and priest on the level of the local parish. The lack of opportunity in the Ottoman system for active mission made theological dialogue unnecessary. In Late Antiquity

---

[25] See Г. Каприев, "Съществува ли византийска философия? Предварителни размишления". In eiusdem, *Byzantica minora*, (София: Лик, 2000, pp. 9-38).

[26] See Nomikos Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ: Orthodox Christian Neomartyrs of the Ottoman Period, 1437-1860* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2000); also Константинос Нихоритис, *Свето Гора–Атон и българското новомъченичество* (София: БАН 2001); and N. Russel, "Neomartyrs of the Greek Calendar." *Sobornost 5* (1981), pp. 36-62.

and the middle Ages in the Eastern Mediterranean base, the Orthodox Church sustained theological dialogue with other Christians and even non-Christians. Actually the same theology of the Church is based and determined by discursive dialogue on different theological questions. The whole history of Orthodox theology is closely related to the results of the Ecumenical councils (*Concilia oecumenica, Οἰκουμενικαὶ Σύνοδοι*) that acknowledged certain decisions as basic principles of the faith. We call them doctrines (δόγματα). Mission and interreligious dialog were practically impossible in the Ottoman Empire and could not be carried out on an official level. On this topic the Ottoman system found itself in collision with the heritage of the Antiquity of the Greco-Roman culture of dialogue, enriched by the Jewish appreciation for dialogue on religious questions. We can find this religious heritage in Byzantium. After the insight of a Bulgarian philosopher:

> According to the Christian understanding, inter-religious dialog verifies abilities of the opponent to formulate in a non-contradictory way doctrines of his religion. Such criterion of verification is restrictive, as far as it excludes from the discussion field dimensions coming from the personal experience. They actually constitute the palpability of the religious faith. The theological discourses does not have as purpose a conversion of the opponent. They demonstrate that his arguments do not endure the verification of reason.[27]

We encounter the same in Late Antiquity and in Byzantium. For instance the dialogue with the non-Chalcedonian Christians after 451 and the new perspectives for theological dialogue with western Christians after 1054 are illustrations for this cultural approach. With Muslims theological dialogue has taken place since the beginning of Islam in the 7th century. Sometimes it has been fervent, sometimes it has been friendly.[28] But in Ottoman history one can find just a few cases of interreligious dialog between Orthodox and Muslim theologians. They are from the period of the fall of Constantinople. None of them had official character and look like deviations from the rule.

---

[27] Смилен Марков, „Срещата на Византия с исляма – конфликтни позиции и нива на взаимно разбиране". *Християнство и култура 68* (2012), p. 97.
[28] See the tremendous work devoted to the whole history of the dialogue between Orthodoxy and Islam: Ἀ. Ζιάκα, *Μεταξύ πολεμικῆς και διαλόγου, Το Ισλάμ στη βυζαντινή, μεταβυζαντινή και νεότερη ελληνική γραμματεία,* Θεσσαλονίκη: Π. Πουρναρά, 2010.

In the time of Sultan Mehmed II who was a man with vivid interest in Christianity and the Byzantine culture, at least three texts were written. Their purpose was to provoke serious theological dialogue with Islam. In July 1453, only one month after the fall of Constantinople, the bishop of Trapezunt, called Georgius, sent a letter to Mehmed with a theological treatise. In this text Georgius not only found common topics in both religions, but also called for unification of Christianity and Islam in one Church[29]. A little bit later the Byzantine philosopher Georgius Amiroutzis wrote a similar treatise calling for unification or at least mutual acknowledgment of the both religions, as he calls them "the both brothers' teachings."[30] From the same period come a few doctrinal texts of the Patriarch Gennadius Scholarius, a close friend of Sultan Mehemed II.[31] After Mehmed those kinds of discussions concluded in two ways. a) The Christian changed his faith; b) he remained inflexible but lost his life.

In the "*milliet*-system" interreligious dialogue was practically impossible. The reason was that it was not useful for the stability of the common society. Following the ideas of the ideological authorities of the Ottoman state, it would threaten the state's condition of a constant static character of social relationships and balances. It would threaten also the leading role of Islam whose religious ethic considered itself as the universal solution of all the conflicts in this world – spiritual, political, social and private. As a universalistic religion Islam perceives all other monotheistic religions as approaches to itself or as stages of development which inevitably will lead to itself. Thus the culture of the people of the East Mediterranean base developed a reflex of non-commenting on the deep religious feelings of

---

[29] See a critical edition: Γ. Θ. Ζώρας, *Γεώργιος ὁ Τραπεζούντος καὶ αἱ πρὸς ἑλληνοτουρκικὴν συνενόησιν προσπάθειαι αὐτοῦ (Ἡ «περὶ τῆς τῶν χριστιανῶν πίστεως» ἀνέκδοτος πραγματεία),* Ἀθῆναι, 1954. Also: A.Th. Khoury, *Georges de Trébizonde et l'union islamo-chrérienne*, Jerusalem, 1971; G. Podskalsky, "Ein Reich, ein Kaiser, ein Glaube unter dem Halbmond?" *Philotheos* 1 (2001), pp. 255-260.

[30] See a critical edition with commentaries and transl.: A. Argyriou-G. Lagarrigue, "George Amiroutzes et son "Dialogue sur la Foi au Christ tenu avec le sultan des Turcs". *Byzantinische Forschungen 11* (1987), pp. 29-221. Also: Ν.Β. Τωμαδάκης, «Ἐτούρκευσεν ὁ Γεώργιος Ἀμιρούτζης;» *Ἐπετερὶς τῆς Ἑταιρείας τῶν Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν 18* (1948), pp. 99-143.

[31] Edition of the texts: L. Petit, X. Sideridès, M. Jugie, *Oeuvres complètes de Gennade Scholarios,* t. III, Paris 1930, pp. 434-476.

the other, of the different, in order not to provoke a conflict situation[32]. So, the possible directions for religious dialogue remained outside the Ottoman Empire. The contacts with the Roman Catholics were something usual. They had held the former Byzantine territories between the 13th and 17th centuries and somewhere until the end of the Ottoman Empire in the 20th century (in Southern Italy even till nowadays). They were then a difficult partner in the dialogue, because they carried on the pretensions in connection with the agreements for union signed by the Byzantine Emperor at the council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445). It remained a ground on which those Orthodox Christians who did not acknowledge the union were to be persecuted as schismatics. Notwithstanding rising tides and outgoing tides, the relationships between the Western Patriarchate in Rome and the Eastern Christians have remained permanent.

Since the 16th century, rising Protestantism became a possible partner in the theological dialogue. In distinction from the relationships with the Roman Catholics, upon which the history of the Crusades and other misunderstandings weighed heavily, contacts with the Protestants could move in a framework of good will and mutual respect. Here the Orthodox Christians had no historical accumulation of disagreement and the Protestant theologians looked with hope at their Orthodox partners for finding a clearer identity while trying to fortify distance from the Roman Catholic Church. They knew Greek very well and observed it as a carrier of an Ancient Christian tradition, leading back to the New Testament Ancient Church.

We should not underestimate the political dimensions of the situation in the late 16th century with of dialogue with the German Protestants. Sultan Süleyman desired to give foreign support to the newly emergent Protestants in Central Europe. His purpose was to strengthen an already existing split in the Western union between France and the Habsburg

---

[32] See Г. Каприев, „Диалогът между религиите и стойността на мълчанието". *Християнство и култура 68* (2012), pp. 105-113.

Empire. This wise policy contributed to the approval and strengthening of the Protestant German kingdoms. Between 1521 and 1555 the Protestants in turn realized that the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Catholic League gave them chances to survive as a political movement. They also observed the tangible protections of the Sultan Süleyman over the local Calvinists in Hungary in the middle of the century. So it gave hope to the second generation Protestant thinkers that they could find a correct and useful partner in the face of the Orthodox Church and in the face of its leading bishop – the Ecumenical Patriarch in the capital of the Ottoman Empire.[33] It is sure that in that period the Ottoman government regarded those contacts positively, especially after the defeat of the Ottoman fleet by the Catholic League near Lepanto in Greece.

On the other hand, the *milliet*-system presumed that the theological dialogue of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire would be one hundred percent interested in a direction leading outside of the borders of the Empire. In this case this was Western Europe. The Armenian and Nestorian (Assyrian) Christians were also *milliet* in the Empire; being a *milliet* was also valuable for the Jews; the Muslims remained for a long time not inclined to enter such a dialogue.

In a process of passively keeping a watch on or actively intervening in the constant competition between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe up to the late 18th century, the Orthodox Church created a lot of doctrinal documents,[34] which have not been deeply researched during the last century. They predominantly take into consideration theological developments in the West. Many aspects of this dialogue remain unknown in modern theological and historical education not only in Bulgaria, but in the other countries in the region. Advanced research on these doctrinal documents could open new perspectives for

---

[33] See K.M. Sutton, "Lutheranism and the Turkish Peril." *BS* 3.1 (1962), pp. 136-165; as well as S.A. Fisher-Galati, *Ottoman Imperialism and German Protestantism, 1521-1555,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959).
[34] See part of the official conciliar documents in: Ἰ. Καρμίρη, *Δογματικὰ καὶ Συμβολικὰ Μνημεῖα τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας,* τ. Β΄, Graz, 1968.

understanding the complicated processes in the Orthodox Church during the 19th and 20th centuries. It should help us to give a new meaning to the process of particularization of the Orthodox Church in this period and the creation of so called "National Churches". Also it could make brighter the process of devolving of modern Orthodox theology, which is inevitably a function of ecclesiastical reality and carries forth its heritage from the previous centuries.

<div align="right">Editorial assistance by Neil Kennedy-Lyons</div>