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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE MAKING OF A WORLD SAFE FOR DIVERSITY – A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Aco Girevski

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Dr. Gjorge Ivanov, President of the Republic of Macedonia

Introduction¹

Whenever I have been asked to talk or write on anthropological issues, I have always tried not to dwell on high politics, because I am much more interested in being an eyewitness than in being an advisor. I am very keen on discussions on religious dialogue and I have participated in several conferences related to building trust among the churches and among the religious communities in Macedonia through dialogue, multi-ethnic coexistence, mutual understanding and tolerance. Ever since 2001 and especially since 2002, when The International Jewish-Christian-Muslim Conference on Dialogue was held in Skopje (10-14 May) under the patronage of the former President of the Republic of Macedonia, Mr Boris Trajkovski, I have partaken in conferences dedicated to dialogue among religions (Ohrid and Skopje, 2010, 2013). The Fourth World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations will take place in October 2016 in Ohrid. The city of Ohrid was the Capital of the Medieval Literary Center (University) founded by St. Clement of Ohrid, the patron saint of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Ohrid Archbishopric and the initiator of the Macedonian and Slavic literacy. St. Clement's role and importance is twofold for us today: this year we celebrate the 1100th anniversary of his pious death and throughout the entire year, we will remind ourselves and be reminiscent of his universal pastoral teachings, and secondly, his homilies and sermons are still alive for the Macedonian Christians because they emphasize brotherly love and hospitality as an

¹ I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this Tribune for inviting me, in my capacity of member of faculty and Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Skopje and representative of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric to participate in this high-level event – Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity – a tribune discussion within the initiative of “Spiritual Dialogues”.

I am honored to participate amongst a group of distinguished representatives of various religious confessions, and I am very grateful for the opportunity to attend Dr. Oz Guinness's constructive lecture, entitled “Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity,” and to be able to hear his insights on respecting religion diversity in a plural society. I found it very stimulating and inspiring, especially the emphasis on the freedom of religion as a fundamental human right, the influence of religion on humanity and the various models of religious freedom that exist in the world today. Your lecture, Professor, reminded me of Paul Mojzes, Leonard Swindler, Miroslav Volf, and Reuven Firestone.

oath taken by Abraham (Genesis 18:1-5). This, in fact, is the Christ's new commandment unto us that we love one another (Mt 22:34-40; Jn 13: 34-35; Rom 13:8-13). St. Clement was well aware of the transformation process from paganism to Christianity, a process in which many habits and customs were being replaced by new ones, so he was very cautious in his approach towards the other. This is why in his homilies, he often addressed the reader with the following words: "But, I beseech you brothers, while we still have time in this life, to speed the time where there would be fulfillment of our promise to God, to love one another as ourselves, to commit our lives to brotherly love, to flourish hospitality" (*Instruction for an Apostle or Martyr*, second version, I, 106). We find similar ideas in other writings of this author such as *Instruction on St. Anthony* (I, 117), *On Evangelist Mark* (I, 137), *on the tenth Sunday after All Saints* (I, 149)².

Foreigners often say that Macedonians are warm and hospitable people. If this is true, then we owe this very much to St. Clement of Ohrid. What is more, Macedonia's natural and cultural heritage is a dwelling place of noble people, a homeland of fruitful soil, rich in natural beauties, so it will come as no surprise for you to learn that the people here are adorned with graciousness, generosity and hospitality. As a crossroad of diverse nationalities, I believe that Macedonia still proves to be faithful to St. Clement's instruction not to overshadow the light of genuine co-existence, unity and understanding among ethnic groups who truly call this land to be their only homeland.

The recent conferences have made a tangible impact on our society which, as any other society, surrounded by globalized social, political, religious and cultural streams, is not immune to the phenomena of social alienation, lack of tolerance, and nationalism. However, I do not agree that this country is fruitful for religious fundamentalism because of the ever present and

² Климент Охридски, *Събрани съчинения*, т. I. София, 1970; т. II, София, 1977.

enduring tradition of inter-religious coexistence. Every conference that I have attended has focused on promotion of religion and culture as factors for peace. Respecting religious rights and cultural diversity is emphasized in the foundations necessary for peace and prosperity. I am an Orthodox Christian and a priest. I have grown old, but I still hold on to the truth. I will stand up now so that you may see not how grand I am, but how tall I am. My mother used to say: “My son, you have grown up to be the tallest one of all your siblings, thanks to the milk that we borrowed from our neighbor, Halide,” the Albanian lady who lived across the street. These are the memories of my childhood years spent in Singilić, or Čento as it is called today, a settlement at the outskirts of Skopje. Afterwards, we moved to Chair where again we had neighbors who were Albanians, Turks, and Macedonians. As a bachelor and later, as a married man, I used to go up to the fields that belonged to my father-in-law in Radišani and there used to be an outdoor tap faucet where the owner, who was a Turk, Uncle Eyrup, would come and chat sitting near the faucet, counting the days of his departure to his homeland. One day I approached him and greeted him, but he did not say a word to me. When I was at the Seminary, I had studied the diversity in religious teachings, but in terms of comparison, prudence, and caution. We were told not to discuss “dogmas” that did not belong to our faith. It was a sin, they said, scholastics... But what child or young man would keep something that they had learned just to themselves and not want to share it with others? I went to the fields again, and there I met Uncle Eyrup, again sitting by the faucet. I approached him and greeted him again, adding “Allah Illallah Muhammad Resulad”! Suddenly, the man gazed up at me, his eyes sparkled, and looked at me very gently, kindly and friendly and reached for a handshake. It was obvious that he recognized his religious creed: “Allah is one, Mohamed is his Messenger”. That sentence opened our hearts and he shared many stories with me about his family, about his plans for returning to his homeland

[Turkey], about his good relations with my father-in-law, whom he had sold the fields, about their coexistence, but also showed interest in my studies in Christian theology and my future calling to the priesthood. On that very spot and at that very moment, I witnessed the power of dialogue. Who would have guessed that years later I would talk, write and preach about dialogue and confession. I still advise my students in my classes to pay attention to and nourish communication with people in their surroundings because this task is the primary goal of the pastor's care and it is an act of salvation.³ Knowledge is, by definition, a venture. To gain the respect of your neighbor, your interlocutor, is not an easy task to do. In order to achieve this, you need to remove at least two obstacles: the lack of knowledge and psychological training and approach—detach from narrow-mindedness and superficial notions about the other, detach from subjectivity in judgment, from aversion or antipathy for the other, detach from your personal or institutional interests or prejudices. The removal of these obstacles is an act of good will.

A Few Words on Actual Duty

Each and every one of us, in accordance to their duties and responsibilities, especially if they are called to teach and educate, should do the same with themselves first. On one occasion, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has said: "Politics accomplishes the possible, but faith can do the impossible." Those words refer to what St. Francis of Assisi had said: "Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; suddenly you are doing the impossible." Those who believe that dialogue is the true approach will have to elucidate and convince the others in their community that dialogue is a better solution than war and destruction. Any open question can be solved by dialogue. In fact, at the end, everything ends with a dialogue—an agreement.

³ Cf. Aco Girevski, *Pastirsko bogoslovie (Pastoral Theology)*, Skopje: UKIM, 2014), 49-59.



Conference attendants from various confessions

We Are All Descendants of Abraham

We: Jews, Christians, and Muslims are just different families, but we originate from the same family tree of Abraham. And what makes us different is the different mentality we have, the different traditions and customs that we have inherited, the individual characteristics each one of us has as a human being.

There are suggestions that the larger world religions are more or less the same (Miroslav Volf⁴). What is essentially important to one specific religion is in fact common to them all. What makes them different is just the cover preconditioned by their different temperament, yet the core is the same. Some contemporary theologians, when interpreting religions also refer to the poetic insight of Jalalu'l-Din Rumi that “the lamps are different, but the Light is the same.” Our task is

⁴Miroslav Volf, “Living with the ‘Other,’” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 1-2 (Winter-Spring, 2002). See “Longsuffering as a Precondition for Peace and Tolerance,” in *Building Trust among Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue*, (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2004), 22.

to melt down the cover and reach the core that unites us all or as Volf puts it: “To speak in a Christian voice from the perspective of such an understanding of religion means to engage in cracking the husk of difference that distinguishes the Christian faith from other religions and displaying the kernel that unites it with them”. And, this task refers to all religions.



Dr. Aco Girevski, Religious Tolerance, Understanding and Coexistence, Çifte Hamam, Skopje, Macedonia (9 March 2015)

At some conferences, it is very often suggested that peace cannot be achieved without achieving justice first: “No Justice, no Peace”.

It is true that justice prevails in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Therefore, as in any other cliché, there is a piece of truth in it. But the wheels of justice sometimes turn very slowly and we as Macedonians have witnessed this throughout our entire history and have

learned to appreciate the reverse formula: “No peace, no Justice”. There is a Macedonian saying that when there is peace one can survive even with a crust of bread. Since we are a poor country and it seems hard to achieve progress, let it be peaceful, justice will eventually come. We, the Christians believe in a righteous God, Who wants peace amongst people, so we often sing to Him: “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth and good will to men”. Consequently, if peace is achieved, and good will is gained—it is the good will that will resolve any dispute.

We recommend that every person should be able to actively partake (and not to be excluded) in the process of dialogue in their own community and with the “other” communities. It is our strong belief that dialogue can benefit the whole society, both the individual and the religious communities.

Globalization, Religion and Dialogue

More often than ever, (during the last fifteen years, since the conflict in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001) we have been raising the question of inter-religious dialogue⁵ in our country. We have been asking ourselves: How can Christians and Muslims communicate with each other? I have reviewed several articles from recent international symposia⁶ on religion and in each one of them there is a call for love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5: 22). As a cleric member of the Christ’s Church, in my daily sermons, I have begun to contemplate and concentrate my thoughts in this direction. And as member of the faculty of the Orthodox Theological Faculty, I have taken part in seminars and

⁵ Over the recent years numerous books on this topic in the Balkans were published. For more details see Archbishop Anastasios, *Глобализам и Православље* (Globalism and Orthodoxy, Belgrade: 2002), 16, 114, 197.

⁶ Cf. Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania, *Globalism and Orthodoxy* (2002). According to the author of this book, the Church began a dialogue with Islam in the 8th century, in the period of St. John of Damascus, and continued during the period of the Saracenes, St. Cyril the Philosopher (9th century) through St. Gregory Palamas in the 14th century (pp. 116-120), whereas globalization took place towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. Cf. L. Nemet., “Globalizacija i Crkva: Teološko vrednovanje jedne pojave,” *Obnovljeni život*, 54 (1999): 23–34.

conferences focusing on long-suffering and patience as preconditions for peace and tolerance⁷, promoting dialogue with other religious institutions in Macedonia, such as the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Skopje, the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, and the Islamic-Christian Study Center of Copenhagen (Denmark).

Pastoral Aspects of Christianity and Islam

As students at the Seminary, we used to emphasize the differences of systematic theology between Christianity and Islam. Today, living in a multi-religious society, this practice of emphasizing differences and focusing on apologetics are being abandoned in the syllabi and curricula as unnecessary. I will not dwell, neither apologetically, nor dogmatically on the essence of these two religions but instead through my pastoral perspective and Christian view on coexistence and love of the other, I will try to present a short answer to the question of how closely related or similar are Christianity and Islam, and what makes them distant from one another, and is there a possibility for a dialogue between these two religious teachings.

Islam is a monotheistic teaching about one, single God (Arabic: Allah); it is about his angels, his messengers and prophets from Adem (Adam) through Nuh (Noah), Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus) to Muhammad, a teaching about the Last Judgment and about life after death. There are natural proofs of this teaching as well as supernatural in the revelation of the Quran and in the Hadith (Muhammad's accounts). God is Spirit, omnipotent,

⁷ Асо Aleksandar Girevski, "Трпението како предуслов за мир и толеранција," in Пол Мојзес & Леонард Свиндлер (ed.), *Градење доверба помеѓу црквите и верските заедници во Македонија преку дијалог* [Longsuffering as a Precondition for Peace and Tolerance], in *Building Trust among Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue*, (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2004), 142-147 (with an additional translation into Albanian: Girevski, "Durimi si parakusht për paqe dhe tolerancë," *Ndërtimi I besimit përmes dialogut ndërmjet kishave dhe bashkësive fetare në Maqedoni*).

eternal, omnipresent and immutable⁸. Muslims maintain the axiom: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger”.

St. Gregory of Palamas, a monk of Mount Athos, later an Archbishop of Thessaloniki, in his dialogues with his Ottoman captors focused on the common values shared by Christians and Muslims. He began with the common theological values and definitions of God, and continued with Quran’s witnessing of Christ: “Only God, Who always was before the ages, is unoriginated, unending, everlasting [Ps. 89:2], unchanging, indivisible, without confusion, and infinite [leaving out the name ‘Father’]. God, the only unoriginated One, is neither without Logos nor is He without Wisdom. The Logos of God is also the Wisdom of God [1 Cor. 1:24], because Wisdom is in the Logos and without the Logos there is no Wisdom [1 Cor. 1:30]. Therefore, to say there was ever a time when God existed without the Logos and without Wisdom, is impious and impossible; for the Logos of God is also unoriginated, and Wisdom is never to be separated from Him [Jn. 1:1]. Now the Logos is never to be found without the Spirit, a point which you Turks also confess.”⁹

Both Christianity and Islam share a similar image of God. It is unquestionable that their prophet Muhammad, being in touch with the Eastern Christianity, absorbed, adopted, and modified Christian concepts in the Quran. These common elements also refer to human nature as the most developed creature on earth. Also, both religions teach similarly about our future. They both share a hope for the future of humankind.

⁸ In Islam, this the image of God: God is bodiless, simple with no parts, invisible, undividable, free; God does not occupy space, neither does space consists of God, nor time embraces Him. He is the first without a beginning and the last without an end. His being is unseen, but his deeds can be seen. He is the creator of all things, yet he is not touched by anything. God is not material and does not have body parts. He knows everything before it happens, and He knows the secrets of the heart before they come to pass. God is omniscient. God is a Living Being. God is the Creator of the world. God can, if He wills, destroy the world he had created. God shall resurrect the dead and shall grant the good an eternal joy, and the evil shall be punished by eternal flame. God is One, the Creator is One. There are no gods before Him, nor after Him, there are no other gods beside Him; God is unoriginated. Cf. R. Brajičić, “Kršćanstvo i islam,” *Obnovljeni život* 56, 4 (2001), 531.

⁹ Cf. Anastasios (2002), 121.

Quran acknowledges Adam, Moses (Musa) and his Torah (Tawrat), David and his Zabur (Psalms), but also Jesus (Isa) born of the Virgin (Maryam), Who was filled with the Holy Spirit and did miracles, and later was accepted among the angels. In Islam, the Holy Spirit refers to Gabriel and Gospel.¹⁰ Acknowledging Jesus as the prophet who brings revelation to humankind is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. At first glance both concepts of Jesus seem quite similar, yet, at a deeper level, they are very different.

Islam teaches that Jesus was only a prophet and messenger created by God. He did not do all his miracles by himself, but with God's help. He was only miraculously born; he was born without a father as Adam was born without a mother. He gave people the Gospels as Moses, a simple man, gave them the Book of Deuteronomy. He is not the Son of God. Islam teaches the rejection of the Holy Trinity and of the mystery of consubstantiality of the Logos. Surah 112 says: "He is Allah, [who is] One. He neither begets nor is born, Nor is there to Him any equivalent".

Directions for Dialogue

Bearing in mind these and many other similarities, as well as the differences between the two religious teachings, we wonder whether it is possible to apply the process of globalization to religion and consequently, is interreligious dialogue a reality? We can certainly say that this kind of dialogue faces misunderstandings and resistance as ecumenism¹¹ itself, but at this moment, the

¹⁰ Cf. R. Brajičić, 531.

¹¹ Although there is a crisis in modern ecumenism, still the efforts of the Orthodox Church play a very important role especially in their dialogue with other churches, religions and denominations. In that sense, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, addressing the issues of Orthodoxy, Liberalism, Tradition, and modern values of the united Europe, said that "The crisis of ecumenism has clearly revealed the aspiration of the Protestant majority on the council to make liberalism the fundamental idea. In many respects, this aspiration defines ecumenical ethics and practice, sidelining the theme of tradition. Thus, despite some success in achieving consensus on matters of dogma, Orthodoxy and Protestantism face new divisions because of Protestant theology's "absolutization" of liberal standards." He adds: "Yet these serious disagreements and contradictions should not be perceived as a reason to break off the dialogue, let alone as grounds for religious confrontation with the West." Cf. *Независна газета*, 26 May 1999.

dialogue among different religious communities is the most proper form of cooperation and co-existence that can bring tolerance and understanding; it is a necessary tool that can provide an assurance for the future of both the Christians and Muslims in a multi-religious society.

The priorities today differ from those from the period of St. John of Damascus, St. Cyril the Philosopher or St. Gregory Palamas. Emphasizing the negative aspects and differences is not the focus of modern day dialogue. Today we concentrate on and promote those values that we have in common. Christian–Islamic dialogue brings hope in laying foundations for a diverse community, such as Macedonia, and for securing the values rooted in our cultural, spiritual and religious traditions.

Both Christians and Muslims face the same problems of today: secularization, human rights, cultural heritage and independence, environmental issues and concerns, the issues of the dignity of women, the care of children, etc. Interreligious meetings and dialogues not only offer opportunities of exchanging ideas and spiritual experiences, but they have proven to bring believers closer to one another. While Muslims believe in one God and Muhammad as his messenger, we Christians believe in the Holy Trinity. People can have different concepts of God, but we both believe in the Oneness of God; “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps 24:1).

A young priest, a former student of mine, has recently asked me for advice on how to behave in his parish that belongs to a multiethnic and multireligious community. Spiritual leadership, I told him, can be learned, but the spirit of the pastoral care can only be earned by great ventures. I insisted that he should try to make an adjustment, to establish cooperation and dialogue with the Muslim community, to be honest and good willed and to set a personal example. Setting the example, we could say, is the most important step for a priest. The

community needs an example to follow, not a teacher, a brother and not a priest, a messenger and not a leader, a witness and not an advisor. A couple of months later, he even learned the native language of his neighbors.

Conclusion

People with a different spiritual creeds ('I believe') do not lose their inherent spiritual and religious nature, neither their spiritual belonging. Thus, it is our duty to share with others our spiritual belief and our deepest spiritual experiences that God had given us.

Those who truly know their own faith and who remain faithful and fervent in following their faith, those who through serenity and true love show fruits of repentance, fruits by which their spiritual life is being constantly renewed, those people could always and already initiate a fertile dialogue.

Let us remind ourselves of the words of the saint, Abba Pimen, who said, "It is useful to observe three things: to fear God [*to have faith in God], to pray often, and to do good for one's neighbor." Are not these three things the very first three out of the five acts in Islam: faith, prayer and charity (fasting and pilgrimage)?