

What Shall We Talk About Today? Righteousness as an Issue of Christian and Islamic Dialogue

By Marko P. Djuric

“I say unto thee, I am Jehovah your God. There is no other God but me” (Isaiah 45:21-22), and then: “Sayeth: Thy Lord commands righteousness” (Koran, Al-Araf, 29).

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Introduction

A crucial meeting was held November 26-28, 1999 in Novi Pazar (Sand_ak, Serbia) involving Christians (from three confessions) and Muslims. The meeting demonstrated that despite three centuries of disputes and silence, brotherly dialogue was possible. People of differing theological orientations who each identify as “sharers of Abraham’s (Ibrahim’s)¹ blessings” were able to discuss—as true brothers—the moral implications of their beliefs. They discussed tolerance issues within Islam, evangelism, love and repentance, and Koranic and Biblical notions of righteousness. Beginning with Aristotle’s reminiscences², it was concluded that goodness is something people must work to attain, both naturally and rationally.

¹ (Hebrews 11:8; Genesis 12:7; Koran Ez Zuhruf, 26-28; Ali Imran 65-58).

² Cf. Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

Despite injustice, disputes and silence on one hand and dialogue and tolerance on the other hand is more prevalent here than anywhere else in Europe. That is why State policy has often been founded on a bed of conflict. It is no wonder that the Balkans is notorious as a powder keg. Religious communities have discovered that they can contribute to overcoming this problem, however. This is possible in part because of the strong association of ethics with public policy. Both Islamic and Christian institutions should have more freedom than the State to disseminate their beliefs and teachings through the mass media.

Christianity and Islam must leave behind all that hinders the rebuilding of their relations, such as the Church's tendency (on a regional level) to incorporate nationalism into its theology. The revivalism of radical Islam also needs to be curbed. Radical Islam represents a standard for current behavior for Muslims based on the experience of the first caliphs³. This promotes religious intolerance rather than dialogue. Starting from James' theology that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-20) and from the Koranic assertion that "the closest friends are those who say: We are Christians" (El Maide, 82), it seems that we are mutually bound by the commandments and recommendations of our respective revelations and beliefs. Christians and Muslims must fight for the cause of social justice through their respective faiths (En-Nahl 122). Social justice means to give "everyone his due" and it is the first commandment of Christian love (I John 2:11). Allah also demands from each and every true Muslim a religious consciousness (Al-Araf, 29, En Nahl, 90).

From Mission to Dialogue

³ Cf. Ebu Bekar (seventh century), Umer El Faaruka, and others.

There is a close connection between mission and dialogue in both Christianity and Islam. Today's Church cannot be imagined without the latter. Considering the burning issues in Yugoslav society that demand quick answers, dialogue is absolutely necessary. Answers may be forthcoming only if the most important question is focused on: "How then should we live?" We must not ignore that this same question also plagued the bloodiest man of this century: V.I. Lenin. By publishing the work, *What to do?* he explained his theory of the monolithic party⁴. For over fifty years this theory destroyed everything that was Christian or Muslim. Today it is incumbent upon clerical and Islamic institutions to search, by all means, for a method toward establishing inter-religious dialogue as soon as possible. Talks with our Muslims of Sandak who are of the Sunni rite and tradition, and who represent the mainstream and the backbone of Yugoslavian Islam are of utmost importance. However, there has not been any dialogue in regard to theological issues. Official meetings and discussions have taken place between our Church and the Ulema. We must remember that the very first theological dialogue between the Orthodox East and Orthodox Islam took place in the Medina Mosque while the prophet Mohammed was still alive.

Why are there so few "Dialogues?"

Historical circumstances have not been advantageous for dialogue. Tragic events followed the entry of Islam to the Balkans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. People considered Islam to be a sort of religious occupation of our land. Incredibly, after the death of our despot ruler, Djuradj Brankovic (fifteenth century), we would now rather have Turks occupying our land than allow the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Serbia.⁵

⁴ V.I. Lenin: *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 351.

⁵ .R. Grujic *Pravoslavna Crkva*, Belgrad. 1921, p. 36.

The question of the forced Islamization in these parts is still a controversial issue. Yugoslavia discovered the “Turkish version” of Islam, which was more tolerant than that of El- Kanuni, but it is also considered to be more tolerant than Christian Serbs have historically evaluated it. This phenomenon was described in Njegoš’ *Gorski Vjenac (Mountain Wreath)* and in paradigms of the holy fathers such as St. John of Damascus in the seventh century. The more tolerant paradigm of Islam has lived more in the consciousness of the layman, whereas the harsher version exists in official and unofficial views of the Church and its more educated clergy. Because of their uncritical approaches to Islam, both sides disallowed dialogue. Some rejected it on theological bases as they deemed Islam as “the youngest heresy within Christianity.” Others did not make much of it for politically motivated reasons, generally of a nationalistic nature. The theologies of St. John of Damascus (*De haeresibus* and *Disputatio cristiani et saraceni.*) and a literary work of our Bishop Njegoš (*Gorski Vjenac (Mountain Wreath)*, nineteenth century) portray Islam in the darkest of colors. It is little wonder that our reservations and biases toward Islam continued since we never sought dialogue with them. We would rather convert to Turkish Islam for the sake of our careers than to dialogue with the Muslim population. Many of our fine connoisseurs of Islam equated Turkish (Osman) with Islamic (Koranic and Sunnite) while misinterpreting parts of the Koran. Even now Suras referring to the so-called “struggle on the fighting path”, the notion of Jihad, (Koran, 4:94; 9:36; 8:57) is by and large misrepresented. This idealization of Islam⁶ strains relations. We have not succeeded in forming a critically objective approach to Islam and to the Church or even to other institutions for that matter.

Change in Attitude as Precondition to Successful Relations

If we are not to offend the Muslims of Sand_ak, we must take their faith seriously (Al-Bakara, 1135, 136; Galatians, 3:16; 4:21-31). Islam stands for open dialogue, and we must accept its invitation to theological dialogue. Islam must signify for us a theological term, hence all that accompanies the holy act and

⁶M. Jevtic, *Savremeni dzihad kao rat...*

challenge to conversion, everything that is sacred in “the youngest daughter of Judaism” (Lapide) must be evaluated in those terms. We must allow for the influence of the Holy Spirit that “bloweth where it listeth) (John 3:8), as well as for our own free will. Despite the different pneumatologies, we experience God similarly. The notion of holiness in Christianity and Islam does not differ in its effects and results. The Orthodox East, however, is in a different position. Still the prisoner of its paradigms dating to the Middle Ages, she finds it difficult to relate to other confessions. Our alienation from each other is therefore primarily theological. Today we follow a different methodology to evaluate historical events, no longer thinking in terms of “we” and “they,” gradually putting aside the “black” picture of Islam.

We must also rid ourselves of the typical Balkan attitude toward historical truth that has imprisoned us in its ideology. This is only possible through dialogue. A different hermeneutic of the Holy Koran and the Prophet’s Hadiths (S. Buhari, S. Muslim) can help to create mutual trust. We must contextualize concepts and passages from the Koran (El Maide, 51, Allmran, 28). The Koran must be open to many interpretations—something that has not been allowed previously. This is the only way to avoid the ideological trap in Islam and to set the stage for theological and other dialogues. We must not forget that Christians are viewed by the Islamic Orthodox (Al-Imran, 67, An-Nisa, 125) as the people of the Book (Al-Kitab, Al-Imran, 64). Hence we are equal in dialogue; indeed without equality there is no dialogue. We must also keep in mind that Islam does not question our salvation (Al-Bakara, 62). In his epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul talks about Abraham’s (Ibrahim’s) descendants (Gal 3:16). Believing in one and the same God, Abraham’s (Ibrahim’s) (Koran 2:135; 16:120) descendants, whether together or separate, cannot do without the Old Testament.

Do We have Mutual Goals?

Though Christians and Muslims do not have a permanent city here on earth (Hebrews 13:14) our mutual goals will always concern achieving

evangelistic and Koranic ideals that are at the same time rational and humane ideals. Christianity and Islam are not only revelational but also represent the foundations of ethics and humanism. This kind of humanism faced a crisis with the appearance of theologies (hesychasm) where love as a social virtue was less central. It is little wonder that ethical reasoning yielded to the theological, thereby producing a tension between the theology of the Church and the rational and ethical ideals of the Gospels. The New Testament and the Koran know no social barriers, its ideas of justice can only decrease tension. Today we are [meeting in Sand_ak,] in the heart of Yugoslavian Islam, not because of some “tactical opportunism,” but because of our Christian conscientiousness and mutual good will that obligates us to dialogue.

Justice in the Orthodox East does not Effect Relations between Church and State

Nothing in the West has burdened relations between Church and State as much as the notion of Justice.⁷ This enormous burden impacted ecclesiastical and historical Christianity unevenly. For example, the Orthodox East was under the influence of hesychastic theology in the fifteenth century, where peace and justice were understood as internal states of mind. Also, the Church kept the issues of social justice on the periphery so as to avoid conflict with the State (Symphony theory). It is no wonder that the just law on abolishing serfdom was only passed in 1861 in Orthodox Russia⁸. In the Catholic West justice had an external and social dimension, and therefore relations between Church and State were tense from time to time. Reactions to papal encyclicals referring to the social dimension were severely criticized within society (*Rerum Novarum*, etc.). “By opening one’s heart to the Holy Ghost being part of everything that is new,” the bishops of the Catholic Church wondered “what the mission of God’s people in promoting justice in their world was.”⁹

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomedian Ethics*, 1129a, 1130a, Kultura, Belgrade.

⁸ V. Soloviev; *Rusija I opea Crkva*, Sarajevo, page 3.

⁹ *Sto Godina Socijalnog Nauka*, KS, Zagreb, 1991, p. 391.

What should Inter-religious Dialogue Reveal?

I want to mention three things. First, the place of justice in the Word of God and in our theology of ethics should be examined. Only the Church can adjust its moral theology to the teachings of Christ on justice (Mt. 5:22-23; 18:29-35) and to the challenges of modern times. The responsibility of the Church is often much greater for not denouncing injustice, than is the responsibility of those who do not do justice. St. Paul says, “Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). The Orthodox Church, however, by highly esteeming ontological and canonical matters seems to ignore the issue of social justice.

How should the Church Respond?

The Orthodox Church should react primarily to the brutal and primitive capitalism now prevailing in the entire region of the Orthodox East, reminding one of the time of Karl Marx and crude nationalism. Since the Church knew what to deem sacred in these parts of the world, its fight for social and international justice, for justice between nations, should be preceded by the process of desacralization. In the Koran the demand for social righteousness is clearly laid out (Al-Araf, 29), and it is revealed with maturity and consistency in Christian love (I. John 2:7-11).

The Extra-Prophetic Role of the Orthodox Church

An examination of the Gospels (Luke 4:16-21) reveals that Jesus was well aware of its social dimension. However, the Orthodox Church has not interceded for social justice historically. The role of the Church may not be limited merely to social and ethical components, nor is it merely the means to our eternal salvation. Many legitimate goals may be achieved through peace and justice. The Church should stand for justice despite the possible ill effects on itself. For the sake of its prophetic and moral responsibilities, the Church should concentrate on both roles.

Why Biblical and Koranic Justice?

We now live in a time of ethical pluralism. Evolutionism, metaphysicism and other ethical paradigms are still in our intellectual heritage. Yet in my opinion, the ethics of national pride has historically hampered progress. Often on the edge of irrationality, we were the great losers throughout history. Today we must gradually eradicate this way of thinking by being politically aware. Which ethic can speak favorably to social justice on a daily basis? According to Horkheimer, it is not always possible to claim that empirical or rational justice is better than injustice. Biblical (Ex. 24:13; Lev. 19:15, 36) and Koranic experience (En Nisa 58, 59) both 'preceded by a promise' do address the importance of establishing just relations. We cannot always claim that being just is better than being unjust. But through religious cognition that is preceded by God's Revelation to people, we can always claim that justice is better than injustice. As believers, we promote justice even if it brings losses that will turn to our advantage thanks to God's mercy.

There are two things that can imperil Islamic-Christian relations. First, one of the Hadiths prophecies of Mohammed says that a Muslim shall always take the side of another Muslim regardless of whether he is right or not. Second, fundamentalistic Islam has never denied its Pan-Islamism and proselytism, which has always created tension between Muslims and Christians. Fortunately, we are not faced with this phenomenon here [in the Balkans]..

Without Righteousness there is no Future

Unable to define its distance and determine its independence from the nation, the Orthodox Church marginalizes some issues. National consensus has always been placed before issues of human rights; and the Orthodox Church has acted as the guarantor of the former. Ethnic communities could not escape the clutches of blasphemy arising from aggressive nationalism. Because of nationalism, the Yugoslav nations have been traumatized. Only after attaining universal justice, "offering everyone everyone's," can people live in unity.

Why Justice?

Justice is necessary if the “Earthly city” is ever to be built by Muslims and Christians and mutual reconciliation is to be attained. Justice excludes conflict, and is needed for balance and harmony. The doors of justice may open only when every man can gain what is rightfully his. Although suffering the consequences of the terrible war, we should in no way speak of retribution and punishment (Lev. 20, 24, Al Bakara, 178). Such talk leads to disputes, not dialogue. According to Kant the concept of justice contains no notion of forgiveness. It is antithetical. However, the concept of God’s justice does contain the notion of forgiveness. Prophet Jeremiah speaks of this (Chapter 14). Accordingly, God is the forgiving One while man is the vengeful one. True Christians and Muslims should be just and forgiving (Sura 37:40, 41-43; Luke, 23:34; Mt. 18:35).

The Orthodox Church Should Act as Amos the Prophet Did

While the State may act in many ways, the Church may not. The Church must be socially and politically involved where issues of justice are concerned. It must never dictate the policies of the State, but it will provide ethical answers to political issues. Thus the general interest will always be subordinated to the concept of justice. The Church and Ulema should act much more aggressively to put an end to human injustice, which inevitably leads to conflict. Applying the anthropology of the new Testament, the Church and Ulema should always condemn any nationalism that hides within the theology of the Church. To do so the Church will find itself acting as the Prophet Amos did (2:6). As Amos, the Church should stand for social justice and speak out against the injustice of the State.

How Justice is Done

It is only through our vocations (calling) and titles that justice may be done (I. Koran 7:17). When Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the law (Mt. 5:17), He meant that nothing should be added or subtracted from the

justice of law. In the Balkans, there has never been justice, social or otherwise. We have never had the opportunity to become accustomed to balance and co-existence. There was neither peace in relations nor balance in sharing power.

Islam has never limited itself to its religious role and revelation. Rather it tends to become a way of life. It speaks much more about social justice than about evangelism, when compared to historical Christianity (cf. the papal encyclicals). Human freedom and volition have nowhere else been as misused as in Southeast Europe and Western Asia in the name of promises of future gains for today's injustice. The Christian and Muslim way of viewing life demands that policies serve not regional and national, but the cause of all. Only in this way can justice be achieved during our lifetime. Never has the crisis of righteousness, however, been so apparent than in totalitarian societies. Those who were unjustly punished during the era of Communism have never been compensated for the injustice inflicted upon them, nor could they be integrated into the new situation. They have always been written off as second-rate citizens and banished from society.

Justice serves the Common Good

According to Aristotle, the "good" is something people aspire to. It is *our righteousness* that is aspired to. The Church and Ulema, (historical Christianity and Islam) shall always speak for justice if they decide to speak for "conscientiousness and the common good." Still, it is an open question as to who will speak in the name of justice in the Church today? Is it a single person (Pope), a chosen few (Synods) or each of us? Since our tendency toward justice or injustice is more profound than our knowledge or ignorance, so will the one be unjust who knows what is right but fails to do it for without God's mercy it is not possible to act justly. This demonstrates that St. Paul—not Socrates—was right: Paul understood all too well that our habit of being unjust, (i.e., sinful), was more pronounced than the mere evidence of knowledge or ignorance.

Conclusion

Today we have the freedom to support social justice. This possibility will demonstrate the level of seriousness with which we take Christianity and Islam as the Revelation of God. To which areas of life shall we apply the ethics as received from God? Are they the ethics of a Hesychast, a Jesuit (probabilism), Lutheran or

Calvinist? It is of major importance to answer this question. Muslims and Christians cannot experience God's justification, or full salvation by faith, and ignore the question of how to apply ethics. Our faith cannot save and justify us without good and just deeds (James 2:14-24). The issue of justice is inseparable from the issue of justification and salvation by faith.