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Christianity and Islam. A History from Confrontation to Cooperation – A Common Way to the Future

Your Eminences, your Excellencies, dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear guests, I welcome you and wish you a lot of peace and happiness in your lives. Our salute is es-selamu alejkum. In our prayers, we pronounce every day: “Our Lord, you are peace and it is from you that peace comes, be praised, Exalted and Noble Lord!”

When Dr. Bsteh called me and asked me whether I would participate in the conference in Vienna and talk about this important topic, I immediately accepted the invitation, since Dr. Bsteh emanated that he liked people and longed for existence of understanding among them. Therefore I was unable to reject him, just as nobody who endeavours to establish interreligious dialogue and common concerns for life on this Earth could have rejected him! It was only when I received the relevant e-mail and instructions that my concerns became more tangible, since I realized that the topic was far more difficult than I had expected. Well, I gave my promise and I had to reply in affirmative, since our messenger Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: “A promise is a debt.” It is for that reason that today I want to present my views on this significant topic and to try to answer certain questions which are more difficult to answer in practice than they are in theory.

There have been thousands of books written about Christianity and Islam. Somewhat more than one half of humanity consists of adherents of these two religions. Naturally, today there are numberless views and interpretations of both Christianity and Islam. There are, nevertheless, also common characteristics specific for each of the two faiths. In the continuation of this paper I wish to accentuate some facts that will contribute towards better understanding of this issue: theological, ethical, political, societal and organizational aspects that affect the relations between these two religions.

Most discussions concerning Islam in the contemporary context are conducted by way of comparison with Europe, the West, America etc. On one hand there are clearly articulated subjects, and on the other there is Islam as a religion, an often imaginary “subject”. It is clear that these discussions possess their own dynamics, its recipients and consumers and are going to be continued in future too. In all these disputes we should be careful not to

neglect the key relationship between Christianity and Islam, since that serves as a basis out of which other discussions arise. Christianity is a monotheistic religion based, in its fundamentals, on messages and teachings of Jesus and his Apostles as well as on firm Jewish tradition. Islam developed and confirmed the same tradition of religious spirit, both in Judaism and Christianity. The most powerful message of the three monotheistic religions is that there is a single God, that HE created the world, that God is the Creator and the Judge. Depending upon interpretation, one or another of God's attributes and His influence on the life of people is enhanced. Each theological interpretation is sovereign in its own environment. The position of each of the monotheistic religions is that its own interpretation is proper, correct and the only one valid. That is why sociologists also call them monopolistic, since they each insist on their own truth. The problem of theology and interpretation of monotheism was one of the first challenges directly faced by Jewish and Christian theologians, and later on by Christian and Muslim ones. It is necessary to distinguish between the teachings of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad concerning these issues and messages in the way that their followers understood them at the time as well as in the way that we, their present followers, understand them. In particular after certain issues, having been canonized and institutionalized, often failed to reflect the words of the messengers of God. Theological messages of monotheism were likewise messages directed against the social environments in which people lived in the Roman provinces or in the pre-Islamic Mecca. These societies were not merely polytheistic in the sense of faith, they were grounded on class distinctions and subjugation of people. The faith in a Single, Rightful God appeared as hope and consolation to all the subjugated, both men and women. This noble idea based on the Revelation and recorded in the Holy Scriptures, was going to be misused and throughout the centuries people would suffer under the rulers of the world and interminably argue whose teachings are right and whose are wrong.

The instruction to apply a courtly dialogue has been frequently forgotten. Let me remind you of the Qur'an sentence, inviting us to debate with the adherents of the Book in a courtly manner: In the Holy Qur'an, God Most High tells Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews – the *People of the Scripture*):

“Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for

lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).” (Alu ‘Imran 3:64)

With the passage of time, in particular after the renaissance, theology found its way into scientific books, educational institutions and the so-called houses of God, but it continued to be the means used to mobilize a large number of people for the protection of state and national interests, to enhance their emotions and to raise their awareness of the grandeur of their own faith or nation, while being directed against the real or imaginary foe. This is clearly evident from education, film industry, arts and other forms of human expression. We are presently in particular witnessing the role of mass communication media, especially the electronic ones, in creating the image of the “Other one”. One of the problems of the contemporary European and American secular education in this segment is the attitude of the leading intellectuals. In the official educational system, Islam is spoken about and taught in the context of the “Others”. In the European public and political discourse, the term Judeo-Christian civilization came to life in its fullness after the Second World War. Islam remained the “Other one”. Next year will see the hundredth anniversary of the official acknowledgement of Islam in Austria. This proves the entrenchment of Islam in Europe. When speaking of theology and relationship between Christianity and Islam, it should be stressed that Islamic teaching contributed strong criticism of the Christian views of interpretation of monotheism and consequently theology as such. On the other hand, Christian authors depicted Islam as a Christian heresy, a national religion of Arabs and similar. In particular, a great number of works have been written about Mohammed, may God bless Him and grant Him peace, and his – according to Christian authors – “contorted religion”. It is the medieval books that attest to the severity of this intellectual dispute and the extensive nature of discussions. Recently, however, a much higher number of high-quality scientific studies and critical overviews have appeared. Considering the fact that the Qur’an was revealed after the Gospels, it is clear that Christians are frequently spoken of in the Quran. The reader should understand all the relevant lines within the context and be well acquainted with the entire hermeneutics of the text. I believe it is important for me to point out that the Qur’an reads as follows:

“Those who believe, and those who follow the Jewish, and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (Al-Baqarah, 2:62)

These issues have been discussed by great names such as John Damascus, Abu Hasan Al-Ashari, Abu Hamid Al-Gazali, Ibn Rushd, Thomas Aquinas and others. Nowadays, these topics are addressed at universities all over the world.

After the Second Vatican Council, the attitudes toward Muslims in the theological sense have begun to change. Well, the problem continues to exist. It would be interesting to research what is actually taught to Muslims and Christians at traditional Christian and Islamic universities about Islam and, respectively, about Christianity. There is still a lot of mistrust, many stereotypes are still present and very much alive, and regardless of the substantial technical-technological development of the entire present civilization, the process of change is slow. Even among religious representatives, exclusion and refusal to cooperate are often present. The Exalted God nevertheless bestowed great hopes upon all of us, which enables us to rely on His grace in achieving peace in this world and salvation in the world to follow. Thanks God it is not ourselves who will have to make the decision who is to be punished and who is to be rewarded by Jennet or Paradise. This will be decided according to God's grace and righteousness. Anyway, theology has been a source of intellectual discourse, but very often also violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims. It is our obligation to raise the awareness of people concerning these significant issues and to teach a faith that will grant people hope and grace, but never lead them to fear and difficulties. This also means that we should accept plurality as God has ordained it, as we should also accept diversity of paths leading to God.

The following segment is the ethical aspect which is of utter importance for both our religions. In his book *Intellectual History of Europe*, the author Pery Marvin points out how the idea based on ethical monotheism is embedded in the very fundamentals of Europe. This is most certainly the realm where Christianity and Islam are closest to each other. Both religions speak of the sanctity of human life:

"On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – It would be as if He slew the whole people. And if one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people." (Al-Ma'ida 5:32)

The source of ethics is in God. God is the giver of life. That is likewise the cause of our attitude toward man, and that is why the love of God is one of the common issues, about which Christians and Muslims are in full agreement.

Globalization and Politics



Mezquita in Cordoba, Photo: Wolfgang Lettko

For two thousand years, the world relationships have been considerably conditioned by the role and position of religion and religious communities. In modern Europe, religious freedom is guaranteed. However, the position of a religious community, and in particular an Islamic religious community, remains undefined. In the East, Christianity has been present for two millenniums. Adherers of both faiths have used a variety of means to spread Christianity and Islam. The message and religious inspiration of both Jesus and Muhammad, May God bless them and grant them peace, have often been neglected. We saw the great mosque in Cordova in Spain converted to a cathedral in 12th century, and it has served as a cathedral to this very day. The Aya Sophia church in Istanbul was converted into a mosque and is presently a museum. There are many examples like that. During the period of aggression in BiH, hundreds of mosques have been demolished, while even after the end of the war, an Orthodox church was built on a private land of Mrs. Fata Orlović and is still standing there. Is this the way and the manner how to approach God? Politics is a framework that has the power to develop either mutual understanding or deepening or stereotypes. The modern world

is full of challenges. For the first time in human civilization, the same building may house people of different ethnic, racial, language, religious and cultural backgrounds. That is exactly why our role is of such significance. Are we qualified to do it? Are we capable of meeting the challenges posed?

After the fall of the Berlin wall and breakup of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the nineties, the bipolar division of the world crumbled as well. For this reason the political analysts, following Huntington's idea of the conflict of civilizations, began to talk of a conflict with Islam. This is actually not an old idea. Naturally, there have been centuries-long political battles for sovereignty in a certain area between the adherents of Christianity and Islam. The history has recorded a fast expansion of Islam, the Crusades, the Othoman conquest of Europe, the attack on Vienna, inquisition in Spain etc. These conflicts have often been manipulated and interpreted as being due to religious causes. Since we speak about the above events as historical facts, we can say that they form a part of a difficult past. Well, obviously at the end of the twentieth century, due to increased population of the Earth and with a view to gain control of resources, power centres wanted that geopolitical questions should prevail and wished to reopen old issues and problems based on conflict and not on alliance and understanding between religions. If the GDP of the developed countries and that of the developing ones are just superficially considered, we can see what disproportions are in question. The same applies to technical, technological and military power of the developed countries as compared to that of the developing ones. This leads to a sort of gluttony, arrogance and the like. We should be concerned about this phenomenon and look out for ways how to reduce this type of tension in mutual relations and how to impose the awareness that this is not a problem which would be primarily based on conflict between the leading religions of the world. In particular since the states based on the rule of law frequently employ extra-legal means to achieve political goals. The end of twentieth century is marked by the Srebrenica genocide, the beginning of twenty-first century by the terrorist attack on New York. All well-meaning people should be concerned about the recent war zones and loss of human lives. War against terrorism cannot be won by military means only. Numerous authors and analysts keep expressing their concern that islamophobia in the Western world is on the rise. The events in the Arab world in the beginning of this year opened a new uncertainty. Naturally, nobody has a clear insight yet in which direction this is going to develop. Altogether, this leaves enough space that extremists, both among Christians and among Muslims, may publicly promote ideas which are basically negative in terms of civilization; it seems

that all the moderate streams are being pushed into the background. Justice, truth, forgiveness are values close to all people, therefore it is necessary to open dialogue between all the segments of society, if we want to influence the future of the world.



Neu ausgehobene Gräber für Opfer des Völkermordes in Srebrenica 1995. Foto: Paul Katzenberger

It is of course also necessary to influence the responsible power-holders that they should take care of legal and ethical values in functioning of authorities and develop political pluralism in the direction where all citizens would be provided with equal opportunities for success in the society. It is education that is the particularly important segment in which these issues should be spoken of more often and more objectively.

The great problem in dialogue has occurred after the speech of Benedict the Sixteenth in Regensburg in 2006. On October 13th 2006, one month to the day after Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address of September 13th 2006, 38 Islamic authorities and scholars from around the world, representing all denominations and schools of thought, joined together to deliver an answer to the Pope in the spirit of open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding. In their *Open Letter to the Pope* for the first time in recent history, Muslim scholars from every branch of Islam spoke with one voice about the true teachings of Islam.

Exactly one year after that letter, on October 13th 2007 Muslims expanded their message. In *A Common Word between Us and You*, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals have unanimously come together for the first time since the days of the Prophet to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam. Like the *Open Letter*, the signatories to this message come from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Every major Islamic country or region in the world is represented in this message, which is addressed to the leaders of all the world's churches, and indeed to all Christians everywhere.

The final form of the letter was presented at a conference in September 2007 held under the theme of "Love in the Quran" by the *Royal Academy of The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, under the Patronage of H.M. King Abdullah II. Indeed, the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, and the best basis for future dialogue and understanding, is the love of God and the love of the neighbour.

Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.

It is hoped that this document will provide a common constitution for the many worthy organizations and individuals who are carrying out interfaith dialogue all over the world. Often these groups are unaware of each other, and duplicate each other's efforts. Not only can *A Common Word between Us and You* give them a starting point for cooperation and worldwide coordination, but it does so on the *most solid theological ground possible*: the teachings of the Qu'ran and the Prophet, and the commandments described by Jesus Christ in the Bible. Thus despite their differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two *greatest commandments*.

"The appearance of the A Common Word [Open Letter] of 2007 was a landmark in Muslim-Christian relations and it has a unique role in stimulating a discussion at the deepest level across the world." (His Grace Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, 2010)

"[T]he more recent A Common Word letter echoed a theme consonant with my first encyclical: the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour, and the fundamental contradiction of resorting to

violence or exclusion in the name of God (cf. Deus Caritas Est, 16)."
(His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, May 9th 2009, at the King Hussein Mosque in Amman, Jordan)

What are the problems in relations between Christianity and Islam?

Christianity is a religion dominant in Europe, America, Australia and certain parts of Asia and Africa. Most Christians live in countries with democratic and secular systems where religion and state are separated. Maybe it would be better to talk about separation of state from religious communities or the Church, since many statesmen are also believers. Muslims, on the other hand, live in states with a variety of systems, from monarchy to republic and specific models of "controlled" democracy. As long as until the seventh decade of 20th century, historical development of states with Muslim majority is marked by the period of colonialism. For that reason we can maintain that the processes of social development took a different direction as compared to Western-European civilization. After liberation from colonialism, a considerable number of states experimented with the Arabic variant of socialism. This part of the world was divided between the capitalistic West and the communist East. For the most part it belonged to the block of non-aligned countries. When this failed, it was followed by the period of searching for Islamic roots which reversed into a reduced variant of interpretation of history. It remains open in what manner this situation is to develop. Well, it is a fact that throughout centuries the Muslim societies included autochthonous groups of Christians – in Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Turkey etc. On the other hand, a great number of immigrants settled in European countries as late as after the Second World War, among them a significant number of Muslims. Until the end of 20th century, they were the so-called "invisible" communities. But position of a religious community, especially an Islamic community, has not been identified yet. In the East, Christianity has been present for two thousand years. It is recognized as a religion and, in terms of organization, as the Church, while most Islamic organizations in Europe are registered as associations of citizens. A clear legal and statutory framework regulating this issue has not been introduced yet. This should urgently be done.

The advent of globalization has opened up numerous questions regarding identity, which is why the relationship between Christianity and Islam is the subject of such transparent discussions. For the first time in history, a practical and not merely theoretical religious pluralism is emerging in the centres of European cities. The world is turning interdependent, therefore it is necessary to understand differences and seek new forms of cooperation to retain

observance of order and lawfulness in the society. And that is why the inter-religious dialogue is so important.

Is there hope for cooperation and understanding between Muslims and Christians? Of course there is, but it's a long term activity. We all must be committed to work to develop trust and respect between Islam and Christianity. Results will not come overnight. That is a long-term process.

Understanding differences

The idea of intercultural dialogue begins with the position of recognition and understanding differences and multi-faceted nature of the world we live in. These differences in reasoning, views and values do not merely exist between cultures, but within each separate culture too. Over the past fifty years, many meetings and conferences addressing this topic have been organized. Almost in every corner of the world, oral discussions and written exchanges of ideas concerning relationship between cultures and creation of identity of modern man take place. This period saw the emergence of new literature that produced numerous titles in this domain. Cynics would say that this is a new branch "of publishing industry" where huge funds are changing hands.

In the globalized and interdependent world where it is not possible to simply ignore differences, the capacity to start a tolerant and respectful dialogue is of vital importance for nations, communities and individuals. A significant role in understanding and promoting intercultural dialogue is played by all educational institutions, in particular universities, religious communities and churches, non-governmental organizations, civil initiatives, mass media and, last but not least, each and every individual.

Most often globalization is understood as a term denoting increased mobility and movement of goods, service activities and exchange of knowledge throughout the world for economic reasons. However, internationalization means higher mobility of ideas and people, not as homogenized power, but as an incentive to cooperate and to study the qualities required for common life in communities that are to a large extent defined by a cultural complex. The concept of internationalization allows for space for different opinions, respects diversity and encourages mutual understanding. That is why differences in cultural and religious expressions in modern context contributed toward the creation of a significantly different view of the world.

A dialog among cultures and religions tries to bring multi-layered views of the world closer together with the wish to understand and learn from those who do not see the world as we ourselves or as I myself do. A successful dialogue is a rich interaction that encourages and stimulates respectful division of ideas and application of a variety of views and thinking processes to observe and understand world. This interaction emphasizes the possibilities of broader and deeper knowledge of oneself as well as insight into different views of the world. An intercultural dialogue is a process that helps to identify the limits set by individuals with the purpose to face such frameworks and possibly to pose a question regarding the justification of the existence of such limits.

The basis for peace, dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians is founded upon the basic holy scriptures of Islam. This is love of One God and love of one's neighbour. The messenger Muhammad said: *"None of you will be a true believer, until you wish for the other man whatever you wish for yourself."* In the Qur'an, the Exalted God encourages Muslims to communicate with Christians and Jews.

Every Muslim who believes in God is thus obliged to converse with Christians and Jews in a graceful manner.

"Invite (all) to the Way of the Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. For thy Lord knoweth best, Who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance." (Al-Nahl 16:125)

Naturally, it did not turn out that way throughout the history. Although in the past theological dialogue was most intense, it failed to produce any outstanding results, as already told. Both Muslim and Christian theologians were excellently acquainted with issues of greatest importance for both religions. But the underlying aim was to find antinomies and to prove in what ways the faith and argumentation of the other were erroneous. It is regrettable that in even today we can find a multitude of stereotypes and misunderstandings. There is much more said about deficiencies of interpretation of the other religion than about lack of understanding one's own. There are many reasons for such state of affairs. Nevertheless, both Christians and Muslims can find enough reasons in their holy scriptures and their interpretations to believe that the only proper teachings are their own. Regardless of differences, nowadays there are meetings of substance where the respective positions of the two religions are thoroughly considered and where differences are studied and similarities affirmed.

The exalted God says:

“On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if He slew the whole people. And if one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.” (Al-Ma’ida 5:32)

The belief in responsibility before God and the eschatological dimension of both religions encourage the believers to care about their actions and words. Further on there are issues of morality and ethics. Everything that is good and leads toward good is valuable.

I will take the liberty to tell you that ordinary people, believers who maintain to be Christians or Muslims, avail of very poor knowledge of each other. This is understandable, since a person who has inadequate knowledge of his own religion is unsure when faced with another one. The real problem arises when we realize that even educated theologians often lack the basic knowledge of other religions.

Dialogue between institutions

Theological dialogue may be held between academics or between institutions, i.e. representatives of the Church and the ulema. Over the few past decades, this type of dialogue has been ongoing both at international and local level. One of the problems faced by Muslims in interreligious dialogue is lack of qualified personnel capable of communicating and articulating modern Islamic view of certain issues in an adequate manner. Very frequently, this is a source of conflicting situations in the West. This gives rise to conflict between universal Islamic principles and local, nationally and ethnically tinged understandings of Islam. There is another phenomenon here. Namely, in Islam there is no clearly defined role of imam and no hierarchized religious leadership. Therefore the existing leaders in a traditional Muslim environment with strong authority and tradition may enforce their positions. Things are completely different in environments where Muslims represent minority communities. In these communities, persons who command the language of their living environment have forced themselves as leaders, although they are actually engineers, economists or lawyers. Regretfully, the value of the ulema is thus diminished, since communities in Europe are usually divided according to ethnic and national principles. On the other hand, in the most important religious ceremonies in America a mostly bilingual approach prevailed. This enables non-Muslims to get acquainted with

their Muslim neighbours. Institutional dialogue provides for periodic or regular meetings and seminars for “official” representatives of churches or religious communities, dealing with issues important for functioning of day-to-day religious activities in multi-religion environments.

Dialogue between members of the Church and members of religious communities

This type of dialogue is possible and especially welcome at the time of religious holidays. We have to learn how to congratulate each other. Human hearts are particularly open in festive times. Do we know at all how to congratulate our neighbours at the time of their feast and how to share their joy? I keep contemplating this since I have been living in Slovenia together with my family.

All our religions teach us that we have been created by God to live side by side! Are we capable of listening to these messages?

In the end, I think it is of invaluable importance to point out a few priorities which could serve as guidelines for joint actions between Christians and Muslims in future:

1. To avoid offensive language when speaking of others;
2. To speak of a different faith and culture with respect;
3. To seek common values that link people;
4. To speak about drawbacks critically and analytically, not with the purpose of propaganda;
5. To insist upon legal and statutory regulation of issues of general interest for the society;
6. To get acquainted with the basic ideas of religion as well as differences in local and universal views of those questions;
7. To ask God for His help. Sadly, we often forget to do that.

Thank you for your attention!