

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON DIALOGUE AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Jovkovska Aneta, PhD¹

Gjorgjevski Gjoko, PhD²

Abstract: *This research is dedicated to the perspectives of dialogue between two major world religions: Christianity and Islam in the context of contributing to the development of the contemporary world. Mutual respect and understanding expressed through initiatives for constructive dialogue and cooperation can contribute to the consolidation of a culture of peace, to the promotion of social interaction and to the strengthening of the creative potential of society.*

The focus on the common heritage of both religious traditions, represented by the multitude of insights and archetypes of Abrahamic origin, is the starting point for progress in the dialogue. Regarding this, the need arises to reform educational programs at all levels in education by introducing more religious-ethical content that will convey the message of fruitful inter-religious dialogue between different social groups, in order to strengthen and promote social cohesion and to create a common dimension of cultural and spiritual progress.

In the proper setting of the teaching process, students can feel that fully belong to the competence of action and change, no matter how beginner it may seem at their age. Thus peace-pedagogical stimuli receive a new emphasis that extends to caring for the created world. Justice is understood as a decisive condition for peace and preservation of the created world.

Keywords: *interreligious dialogue, universal values, religious education.*

¹ Orthodox Faculty of Theology "St. Clement of Ohrid", Skopje Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia e-mail: ajovkovska@yahoo.com

² Orthodox Faculty of Theology "St. Clement of Ohrid", Skopje Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia e-mail: gjoko.gjorgjevski@pbf.edu.mk

Introduction

Today, the globalization process causes different reactions: some consider it a positive development, because it enriches the present culture in a society, and some see the globalization process as a threat to already established values. From a cultural point of view, the process of globalization contributes to the opening of the borders of local cultures, transforming individual experiences into widespread information around the world. In such a way, different cultural achievements are connected, which are put to the inspection of all nations. According to Golubovich, it is no less important that ethnocentrism, nationalism and xenophobia can be overcome with this process, because they are considered to be the products of a closed and isolated culture (Голубовић, 2006, p. 129). Of course, on the condition that a real cultural exchange is achieved in the form of intercultural and interreligious cooperation and avoidance of assimilation by the dominant culture or religion.

Therefore, the challenge of globalization requires a worthy response from modern society, based on the care and preservation of a peaceful and dignified life for all people, combined with the desire for their spiritual improvement. In addition, it is necessary to achieve such a system that will be built on the principles of justice and equality of people, because we are all equally created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28). Our responsibility as image bearers, is not to use and abuse others, but to protect and have compassion towards image bearers.

Hence, the concern is expressed due to the threat of cultural dominance and secularization of society, where globalization is accompanied by attempts to establish the dominance of some cultures and worldviews over others. This is especially unacceptable in the religious sphere. Orthodoxy does not support a unification that destroys the centuries-old traditions and values. They are the basis of personal identification. Therefore, the role of religion in social processes appears as an important issue of contemporary inter-civilizational cooperation. For representatives of different religious communities, the importance of interreligious cooperation lies, first of all, in the fact that it is necessary to unite efforts in supporting a common understanding of the role of religion in a modern society.

Interreligious cooperation is built through interreligious dialogue, which is an essential component of the overall cultural dialogue. The dialogue can be understood in different ways. First, on a purely human level - it means reciprocal communication leading to common goals. Second, dialogue can be taken as an attitude of respect and friendship. Third, in the context of religious pluralism, dialogue consists of "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths. In this regard, dialogue contributes to mutual understanding, obedience to the truth and respect for freedom" (World Council of Churches, 1979). Hence the inter-religious dialogue proves to be extremely relevant not only in the sphere of inter-religious relations, but becomes an important factor affecting the cultural, socio-economic, educational and political life in the society.

It is important to point out that the interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is not a topic associated only with modern society. We must admit that dialogue has always existed. No matter how opposing the attitudes of one religion were to the other, there was constant communication and a basic exchange of values between them. The difference is that today we increasingly understand the dialogue between religions not as a spontaneous, latent process of exchange of cultural information, but as a conscious orientation towards mutual understanding. Contemporary Christian-Islamic dialogue must take into account the current conjuncture of world events and increasing global interdependence.

This complex process involves both theoretical understanding and institutional design. In this sense, the dialogue of religions is just beginning and we can confidently talk about the emergence of a fundamentally new interdisciplinary scientific and theological direction in the humanities. Interdisciplinary - because the study of interreligious dialogue necessarily involves a combination of different methods and skills from several sciences, such as: comparative religions, oriental studies, hermeneutics and theology.³ Within such dialogue, constructive relations between believers of different religions are impossible without recognition of the other's right to be different. The recognition of otherness inevitably entails an interest in it. That is why so much attention is paid to the teaching of Muslims and Christians about each other.

Understanding other religions from an Orthodox-Christian point of view is not only of theological interest. This question has various practical implications regarding the Christian attitude toward spiritual inquiry in our era, as well as more general implications for the future of humanity (Bishop Hilarion, 2006, p. 170). However, a proper analysis of interreligious dialogue should not ignore the past, especially since ideas from the works of the holy fathers remain valid and are used as topics in current interreligious discussions.

Accordingly, Boldisor highlights the message sent from Bethlehem to the heads of the Orthodox Churches on Christmas, 2000. It expresses the need for dialogue with people of other religions and ideologies, as well as the desire for peaceful coexistence with believers of other religions on the territory around the world, without affecting the freedom of conscience of each person and his nationality: "We look to the other great religions, particularly the monotheistic ones of Judaism and Islam, and we are prepared to build up even further the presuppositions for dialogue with them, looking to achieve a peaceful coexistence of all peoples (...). The Orthodox Church rejects religious intolerance and condemns religious fanaticism wherever these phenomena may appear" (Boldisor, 2016, p. 406).

³ The Department of Theology at the "Aristotle" University in Thessaloniki has such a role in promoting and supporting the dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. As part of the Department, the Society for Greek-Arabic Studies was founded, which publishes the magazine "Graeco-Arabica" and which has held several inter-religious meetings between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. There is also an "Orthodoxy and Islam" movement that includes Orthodox Christians and Shia Muslims from Iran. This movement has organized several important meetings in Athens and Tehran.

Hence, the Orthodox attitude can be critical towards other religions as systems and organic units, but towards people who live in the climate of other religions and confessions, the attitude is always the same - with respect and love according to the example of Christ. This is so because man continues to bear within himself the “image” of God and the possibility of “likeness” based on the inherent components of his existence: free will, a mind capable of reason, the disposition and the possibility of love (Archbishop Anastasios, 2010, p. 225).

In the dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies, Orthodox Christians are obliged to emphasize the quality of man as the bearer of an “image” that tends to “likeness” of God, being created and living on earth as a unique and free person. These are the main reasons why dialogue was and continues to be an integral part of the Orthodox tradition.

Dialogue with other religions does not mean relativism or syncretism, nor any weakening of the Christian faith of those who are sincerely concerned with its development and promotion. It is our responsibility as Christians to share with others our spiritual experiences that God has blessed us with. We should do it simply, with humility and understanding, always respecting the personality and freedom of those with whom we are in dialogue. As a reason for this dialogue, we take the fact that the resurrection of Christ covers the whole earth, as well as the event of Pentecost which happens for all people.

In that context, Khodr believes that there is a universal community that can under certain conditions enrich the religious experience, but everything must be seen through the light of the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. “There may be individual gifts in other religions as well that we should see beyond symbols and historical forms, especially starting from religious apophatism. We have a duty to communicate with people of other religions, giving up pride and religious superiority. Our goal is reflected in the identification of Christian values present in other religions, because from here we can present to these people Christ as the One Who unites all,” notes Khodr (1997, p. 406).

In accordance with that, more recently, the dialogue as initiated by the World Council of Churches and Muslim organizations at the international and national level, has seen the beginning of a new understanding, based on a reciprocal willingness to listen and learn. From this perspective, dialogue is not only a conversation (dialogue of ideas), but also a meeting between people (dialogue of life). If this is how we understand dialogue, then it will depend on mutual trust, it will require respect for the identity and integrity of the other, a willingness to question one’s own self-understanding, and an openness to understand others (World Council of Churches, 1992).

So, it can be seen why inter-religious dialogue is an important principle of activity for the Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well. As Orthodox Christians, raised in a multi-religious environment, we believe in maintaining peaceful relations between the communities of traditional religions in North Macedonia. The Apostle Paul in his

Epistle to the Romans says: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom. 12:18). Lack of communication leads to false perceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings and misinterpretation of the intentions and actions of a particular religious community. Therefore, constructive dialogue, based on respect for all people as God’s creations, is a condition for breaking such prejudices and stereotypes. If there is no room for dialogue, then the free space is immediately taken by the confrontation generated by a distorted view of each other.

The Orthodox Church respects traditional religions, the religious choice of people, but also the choice of people who build their lives on the concepts of secular ethics. The moral measure of a person is the conscience, in which the Church sees the imprint of God’s image in every person. Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ in the parable of the Good Samaritan pointed out that a person with a different faith can be closer to us than our fellow believers.

Dialogue is a reasonable tool for communication between different religious communities living in one country. As Orthodox Christians, we understand dialogue as a means of communicating with believers in other religious communities. Living nearby, we must not ignore each other, because our contacts with believers from other religious communities is one way of witnessing to the world about Christ. The purpose of our dialogue should be to seek answers to the challenges of our time, to ensure a peaceful life and to cooperate with believers of different religions, nationalities and cultures.

Thereby, the need arises to state the basic principles that the Orthodox Church adheres to in inter-religious dialogue. One of the most important principles for us is fidelity to the truth of Christ. In interfaith dialogue, we are guided by this principle. The main goal of interfaith dialogue for us is not to convert the other into our faith, but to find a common ground and respond to the common challenges of our time.

In interfaith dialogue, the Orthodox Church prefers a sincere conversation about common problems in the world and how to make it a better place to live for every creation of God, further to religious practice and history, focusing on everything that brings us closer to believers of other religions. However, it is important to lead the dialogue in the direction of understanding the differences. Ignoring the principles of different religions leads to the illusory nature of dialogue. As we build a dialogue of mutual respect, it is necessary to properly distinguish between areas where an agreement can be reached and where such an agreement is impossible.

For example, we know from history that many holy fathers engaged in dialogue with representatives of different religions in order to eliminate misconceptions and misunderstandings. However, the Orthodox Church believes that dialogue should not take place in the direction of negotiating the rejection of any of the doctrinal provisions of the Church or the introduction of new ideas in teaching that have been adopted or harmonized with other religions. Such a dialogue that requires changes in the foundations of Orthodoxy is unacceptable to us. The Orthodox Church strongly distances itself from religious syncretism, from interreligious prayer experiments,

and refuses to try to reduce all religions to the ideology of secular humanism, which ignores those foundations of dogmas that do not fit into the framework of secularism. It is obvious that the attempt for artificial unification of religions is against the will and beliefs of the believers and only leads to greater division, because it does not take into account the worldview principles of the believers.

Interreligious dialogue in the context of doctrinal differences between religions has been and will continue through doctrinal discussions, interfaith workshops for theological students from the Orthodox Theological Faculty and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences as the only higher education theological institutions in Macedonia; through the writing of scholarly papers and direct interviews with religious leaders and theologians. These discussions should always be conducted in a spirit of respect, without offending the religious sentiments of believers of other religions. Denigration of the human dignity of the partners in the dialogue, use of inappropriate vocabulary, distortion of historical and other facts, as well as calls of representatives of one religion to revise the dogma of another religion, cannot be included in such a discussion. We also believe that the pursuit of political goals or the attempt to solve any problems of a social or ethnic nature should not be disguised by doctrinal controversies.

In the process of doctrinal dialogue, it is useful for Christians and Muslims to clarify the provisions of the teachings and practices of religions regarding certain issues posed by modern life. Above all, these are public and social issues. It is important that we work together to meet the challenges posed to the representatives of traditional religions. For example, common views can be expressed on the issue of protecting the life of the unborn child despite some differences in religious teachings in the context of understanding the origin of life. It is very important to actively discuss issues related to the family and the upbringing of children. These dialogues can contribute to adequate responses to the challenges facing the traditional family today. Religious leaders can use their positions to jointly help shape the discussion of issues related to domestic violence. It is also imperative that secular advocates and counselors appreciate the importance of believers' religious backgrounds and reach out to the clergy and religious communities to find resources to meet the needs of believers - women, men and children who suffer domestic violence.

The most common issues in interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims are certainly issues related to peace. The reason for this is that national-religious extremism is increasingly present, which is alien to any authentic belief in traditional religions. Questions about the attitude towards the new religious movements are of concern to the religious representatives of the traditional religions, as often these new religious movements are addressed to the believers and try to persuade them to join their communities.

Resolving interethnic, inter-religious, social and political conflicts peacefully, as well as protecting the rights of religious communities and their members, is also an important topic of dialogue. The purpose of this dialogue is to ensure a dignified

peaceful life for our society and all humanity. It is necessary to witness with good deeds the religious spiritual and moral values and to point out concrete examples of how to achieve peace and mutual understanding in the relations between the nations.

An important topic for dialogue in interfaith forums is the protection of the rights of religious minorities in those regions where they are exposed to discrimination. In that context, the protection of the monuments of the traditional religious cultures, which are a precious part of our spiritual heritage, is also discussed. We always teach believers to treat people of other traditional religions with respect; to take care of ensuring their rights and freedom in professing their faith and participating in social processes; protecting sanctuaries and preserving the cultural component of their tradition.

In addition, one of the topics that is often raised in interreligious forums is the problem of countering aggressive secularism. It is important to strive to develop a common attitude of believers from traditional religions in their relations with the secular state. The paradigm that modern society offers us is that religion should be outside of public life, understanding it as a private matter. We do not agree with this view. That's why during such controversies, our representatives defend the thesis that religion is not only a private matter of individuals, but has the right to participate in public life and influence society.

The search for common practical answers to the challenges of our time is another theme that often appears in interreligious dialogues. The topic of protection of traditional moral norms and their respect by society is discussed. We constantly witness how modern society imposes principles that often contradict traditional moral norms based on religious teachings. Christians and Muslims are called together to oppose this phenomenon. We always emphasize in interfaith forums that we have common moral principles. Despite our religious differences, we are united in morality.

Initiatives on such contemporary topics on which it is important to direct the dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Muslims encourage the participation of intellectuals, religious leaders, priests and imams in cooperation. By which they contribute to mutual understanding and respect.

Ultimately, all dialogues and advocacy will bring long-lasting benefits only if mutual understanding and assertive communication are passed on to future generations. In order for young people to be brought up in such a spirit, it is important to jointly actively and continuously advocate religions in the field of education. In this regard, there is a need to reform educational programs at all levels in education by introducing more religious-ethical content that will convey the message of fruitful inter-religious dialogue and cooperation between different social groups, in order to strengthen and promote social cohesion and to create a common dimension of cultural and spiritual progress.

In that context, the process of introducing intercultural education in public schools is increasingly relevant today. The concept of intercultural education states that it is education for community, solidarity, respect, mutual tolerance, helping, trust and other universal human values. Interculturality implies that people of different cultures and religions meet and communicate with each other; such community is open in terms of living conditions and availability of resources for its citizens, regardless of culture and religion. In fact, interculturality emphasizes the differences in the concepts of living next to each other and living with each other. The concept of community is something more than tolerance and breaking down prejudices about members of other cultures and religions. It includes knowledge of the cultural and religious particularities of others and differences, as well as sensitivity to those differences. Hence, we believe that religious education is of essential importance in order to understand the religious tradition of a people and to use that knowledge in open communication with them, because it is all part of their personal and collective identity. Lack of such knowledge and misunderstanding of others can lead to communication limitations, mistrust, prejudices and stereotypes, resulting in fear and conflict followed by violence.

That is why intercultural education must also include religious education and this should be seen as a need of our society. It should recognize the possibility of facing the challenge of finding the optimal ratio between cultural-religious differences and social cohesion. In an appropriate setting of the teaching process, students will be able to feel that the competence of action and change belongs to them completely, no matter how beginner it may seem at their age. Thus, peace-pedagogical incentives receive a new emphasis that extends all the way to caring for others and for the created world. Justice is understood as a decisive condition for peace and preservation of the created world.

Conclusion

Today, Christian-Islamic dialogue must take into account the current conjuncture of world events and increasing global interdependence. Within such a dialogue, constructive relations between believers of different religions are impossible without recognizing the other's right to be different.

Lack of communication between representatives of different religions leads to false perceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings and misinterpretation of the intentions and actions of a particular religious community. Therefore, constructive dialogue, based on the respect of all people as God's creatures, is a condition for breaking such prejudices and stereotypes. The goal of interreligious dialogue should be the search for answers to the challenges of our time, ensuring a peaceful life and cooperation with believers from different religions, nationalities and cultures.

Interreligious dialogue has a justified place within education; it has integrity and is neither contrary nor incompatible with the testimony and revelation of the scriptures. In the dialogue conceived in this way, everyone is invited to openly hear about the possibility that God, whom they know, can also be met in the lives of their neighbors of another faith. During such religious teaching, everyone gains new knowledge about God and discovers fresh resources that help him become more humane, more sensitive to the needs of others, more obedient to God's will for the whole creation, thus fulfilling the purpose for which God created humanity.

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