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Muslims and Christians in the Balkans: Historical Aspect and Contemporary Challenges -Dialogue without Alternative-

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Balkanlarda Müslüman ve Hıristiyanlar:
Tarihsel Görünüm ve Modern Zorluklar -Alternatifsız Diyalog-

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Abstract: For ten turbulent years, from 1991 to 1999, high intensity armed conflicts, which had devastating effects on the relationship between the inhabitants, broke out in Kosovo. While it is not the purpose of this paper to present a comprehensive overview of the recent history of the Balkans, and Former Yugoslavia in particular, focusing on certain facts and events will enable us to understand the conditions for the formation of new countries after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Among those language, identity, relations with the other and interreligious dialogue are extremely delicate and political issues. With a reference to interreligious dialogue this paper seeks to present the characteristics of the relations between Muslims and Christians in the Balkans. In this regard, firstly, I will focus on the meaning and significance of dialogue in the Balkans and then deal with Qur'anic approach to the dialogue. After discussing the barriers set against the dialogue in the Balkans, and particularly ideological prejudices among them, I will analyse the possibilities to build collaboration be-

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tween the Balkan Muslims and Christians in the face of new world challenges.

Key Words: Dialogue, Identity, Disintegration, Balkan Peninsula, Love of God, Islamic Faith, Ottoman Influence.



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Öz : Kosova sakinleri 1991-1999 yılları arasında çalkantılı bir süreç geçirmiş; bu süreçte çeşitli yoğunlukta kanlı çatışmalara şahit olmuşlardır. Bu makalenin amacı ne kapsamlı bir Balkan tarihi sunmak ne de Eski Yugoslavya'nın yakın tarih konusunda genel bilgi vermektir. Ancak bazı olgu ve olaylar üzerinde durmanın Yugoslavya'nın dağılmasının ardından bölgede yeni ülkelerin kurulmasında rol oynayan etkenleri anlamamızı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir. Bu unsurların başında gelen dil, kimlik, öteki ile ilişkiler ve dinler arası diyalog kuşkusuz siyasi ve bir o kadar da hassas konulardır. Çalışmamızda bunlardan dinler arası diyalog konusundan hareketle Balkanlar'da barışın sağlanabilmesi için Müslüman ve Hıristiyanlar arasındaki ilişkilerin hangi esaslara göre kurulması gerektiği tartışılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda öncelikle Balkanlar'da diyalogun anlam ve önemi üzerinde durulacak ve ardından Kur'an'a diyalog konusuna nasıl yaklaştığı incelenecektir. Balkanlar'da oluşturulmaya çalışılan diyalog ortamına engel olan hususlar ve bunların arasında da özellikle ideolojik ön yargıların tartışıldıktan sonra ise Balkan Müslüman ve Hıristiyanlarının yenedünyanın sorunları karşısında nasıl bir birlik oluşturabilecekleri ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Diyalog, Kimlik, Dağılım, Balkan Yarımadası, Tanrı Sevgisi, İslam İnancı, Osmanlı Etkisi.

Introduction

The Balkans or the Balkan Peninsula lies between East and West in all aspects of East-West relations: geographically, politically, culturally and religiously. In 395 CE, the Roman Empire was divided in two, and most Rome's possessions in the Balkans were transferred to the eastern Roman Empire. The Ottomans influence on the Balkans began in 1358 with their introduction of the Islamic faith and culture to the Balkan Peninsula.¹ However, it is not possible to speak about the most important challenges and vicissitudes which people of different religions in the Balkans are facing with-

¹ Mustafa Ceric, "The Meaning of religious Education for Peace and Dialogue in the Balkans" in *Islamic Textbooks and Curricula in Europe*, Ednan Aslan, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2011, p. 13.

out recalling recent history of Balkans - Former Yugoslavia in particular. Entire history of the Balkans could be seen as periods of wars or peace treaties. Dissolution of former Yugoslavia communist system was violent. For ten turbulent years, from 1991-1999, bloody conflicts of various intensity broke out, affecting the relationship among its inhabitants. While it is not the purpose of this article to present a comprehensive overview of the recent history of the Balkans, and Former Yugoslavia in particular, certain facts and events are important to keep in mind as they set up the background to the formation of new countries, after disintegration of Yugoslavia, and their own national aims. In such circumstances the issues of language, identity, image of the "other" and dialogue among religions remain sensitive and extremely political.

Meaning and significance of dialogue in the Balkans

Karl Jaspers rightly emphasizes that "one mind cannot encompass a whole". Dialogue comes out of the incompleteness in a man; in order to deal with that incompleteness, he needs another man *who is different from him*. If you and I are exactly the same, nothing happens to us: we have nothing to talk about! The difference between me and you makes it possible for us to talk to each other!²

The idea of peace and dialogue in the Balkans is of utmost importance because of the fact that almost the entire history of the Balkans may be seen as periods between wars or between peace treaties.

Qur'an calls for common word and dialogue

Message and expression of interreligious solidarity at the time of religious tension speak of a shared Christian-Muslim commitment to love of God and love of neighbour. It is not surprising to find common ground between Christianity and Islam, which, along with Judaism, look to Abraham as a proto-monotheist, friend of

² Đuro Šušnjic, 'The meaning and significance of dialogue' in *Religious dialogue in the Balkans: The Drama of Understanding*, Vukomanović Milan, Vučinić Marinko, Belgrade open school, Belgrade, 2000, p. 11.

God, and father of the covenant between God and his people.³ At the same time religions make unique claims. Indeed, very concept of religion may differ from one tradition to another, but unique claims will be affirmed.

Readiness of Christianity and Islam for dialogue is promising.⁴ However, there is good deal of scepticism about religious dialogue, and much of its health. Why cram different traditions in a single box? They may use the same language but often mean very different things. When religious communities live side by side, they often share common cultural values. Christians living amidst a Muslim majority often take on various aspects of the Islamic heritage, and the same is true of Muslims living amidst a Christian majority. But, in the end, adaption always takes places in reference to recognized set of truths that do not change.⁵ Religious pluralism, then, does not aim to cram different religions into a single box but seeks to reach greater understanding of religion.

Humanity began as one and must remain one, but it is unity in diversity. This diversity, moreover, is not due to the gradual degeneration of human society from an ideal or utopian state.⁶ Nor is it the result of a lack of divine guidance or human understand-

³ Paul L. Heck, *Common ground: Islam, Christianity, and religious pluralism* (Washington DC: Georgetown University press, 2009), p. 1.

⁴ The 2000 Declaration of the Congregation for the Propagation of the faith, *Dominus Iesus*, promulgated under the prefecture of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XXI, invites theologians of the Church "to explore if and in what ways the historical and positive elements of... (other) religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation". Indeed, article 841 of the Catholic Catechism states that God's plan of salvation includes Muslims who acknowledge the Creator... and profess to hold the faith of Abraham. Quite straightforwardly, a verse in the Qur'an 10:99: *And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed - all of them entirely. Then, [O Muhammad], would you compel the people in order that they become believers?* The point, as drawn by many Muslim thinkers over the centuries, is that religious pluralism is part of the divine plan. Ibid., p. 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Davud Bessam Adžek, *El-Hivaru-l-islamijju-l-mesih-el-mebadiu, et-tarihu, el-mevduatu, el-ehdaf*, Daru kutejbe, Bejrut, 1998, p. 217.

ing. It is corollary of the diversity of human cultures, languages, races, and different environments.⁷ The Qur'an states:

*Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book, after the clear Signs came to them, did not differ among themselves, except through selfish contumacy. Allah by His Grace Guided the believers to the Truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For Allah guided whom He will to a path that is straight.*⁸

Qur'an advocates good relationships with Christians and Jews. However, their dispute could be defined on two essential dimensions: when the Qur'an discusses Christian doctrine, an issue pertaining to the person of Jesus, then Qur'an has rigorous and polemic tone, but on the other hand when it talks about social and political relationships between Muslims and Christian—tone of Qur'an is realistic and kind.⁹ Reason for that has been contented in Qur'an verse that stipulates next:

*Nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say, "We are Christians": because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant.*¹⁰

Barriers of dialogue in the Balkans – ideological prejudices

Previous history of living together between followers of these religions in this region has varied. If we manage to eliminate primitive and non-authentic interpretation of religion we could repeat what have happened on this continent far away from cries of human butcher shop: I mean historically significant intellectual exchanges between Islam, Christianity and Judaism—Ibn Rushd,

⁷ Mahmoud M., Ayoub "The Qur'an and Religious Pluralism" in *Islam and Global Dialogue – Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 273.

⁸ Qur'an, 2:213.

⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Srce Islama – trajne vrijednosti za čovječanstvo*, Duh i vrijeme, Sarajevo –El-Kalem, Sarajevo, 2002, pp. 63-66.

¹⁰ Qur'an, 5:82

Roger Bacon and Maimonides in Spain.¹¹ All, Muslims, Christians and Jews benefited due to understanding the dispute in the broadest sense of the word. Nonetheless, almost two decades ago UNESCO called peoples to follow example of Spain.¹²

God has not sent revelation to be in margins of life and if the purpose of its sending down is not helping mankind then it will not be from God. In future of the Balkan's dispute everybody will bravely express his views on 'others' and benefit from them. Muslims and Christians have already had tradition of joint understanding and respecting. On global scale, tradition of Muslim-Catholic dispute launched Sharl de Fuco and his student Louis Masignon, whose presence in Muslim Morocco brought back not to Islam but to Christianity, started dialogue with Islamic world establishing foundations on which such dispute has to rest upon if he wants it to be meaningful and constructive.¹³ First condition is that people not to sacrifice doctrines of each religion, says S.H. Nasr and adds: I will never forget lesson I was learned by my professor in Persia. He said: It is wonderful having opened spirit; it is like opening windows in rooms, but of course, with conditions that the room has walls. If you bring several windows in the middle of desert it is not important whether you hold them opened or closed, because there are not the walls.

Such disputes took place between Muslim Bosniaks and Croat Christians which was started two decades ago by Croatian poet Vlado Gotovac and Nerkez Smailagic. It seems to me that none of these two people was aware of such a close legacy. However, because of the ideological aims of Croatian state blood was shed but fortunately Catholic church did not follow the way of erstwhile Croatian policy in those difficult moments. Furthermore, in the times of mass deportations of Muslims into camps Catholic Church officials, cardinal Kuharic, were deploring frankly such actions of

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 72-80.

¹² Dzemaludin Latic, *Muslimani i krscani na Balkanu*, u ediciji: Islamski svijet danas, Zagreb: Islamski centar, 1995, p. 128.

¹³ Ibid., p. 129.

erstwhile Croatian actual policy. In Zepca, provincial Bosnian town, Serbian and Croatian nationalists, away from Christianity, agreed to join and harness their power against Muslims.¹⁴ If they were people of faith their agreement would be that no one dares to harm other regardless of his religion, ethnicity and culture. To be stopped invasions on Muslims neighbouring Serbs and Croats should renounce ideological sources that trigger the invasions. When it comes to Serbs, it is idea of *The Inquisition of the Turkicized – Istraga poturica*, and with the reference to Croats it is about Croatia as a gate of Christianity in Europe.¹⁵ In Serbian legacy the idea of 'researching of Turks' is literary done by bishop Petar Petrovic Njegos in his poem *The Mountain Wreath - Gorski vijenac* in 1848. It is regarded as the most famous and influential literary work in central part of the Balkans and the author is proclaimed as the greatest poet in Serbian language. Reading this poem is binding for all students, Christians and Muslims, in primary and secondary schools. Some citations of the poem are as following:

Hodja (imam) bellows on the plain Cetinje

Everything has gone the devil's way.

Of Mohammed our entire country reeks.¹⁶

Somehow at the same time Ivan Mazuranic,¹⁷ after he met Njegos and agreed with him how to wipe out Ottomans from the Balkans, has written poem in Croatian language Death of Smail-aga Cengic - Smrt-age Cengica. In the poem the author is singing about torments that Christians suffered during Ottoman reign. In contrast to that, in Bosniak literature there is no single piece that promotes hatred. Unless Serbs and Croats give up from these mis-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁵ Rasim Muminovic, *Filozofija, i ideologije – ideolosko otreznjivanje*, Sarajevo, Duh i vrijeme, 2/256.

¹⁶ P.P. Nyegosh - Bishop of Montenegro, *Mountain Wreath: Knez Rade* (brother of Vladika Danilo).

¹⁷ Ivan Mažuranić (11 August 1814 – 4 August 1890) was a Croatian poet, linguist and politician—probably the most important figure in Croatia's cultural life in the mid-19th century. Mažuranić served as Ban of Croatia-Slavonia between 1873 and 1880. <http://en.wikipedia.org>

apprehensions and ideological prejudices—harmony between Muslims and Christians will not be conceivable over here.

Nonetheless, we have in our history excellent instances of mutual understanding and dialogue between Muslims and Christians. Good example of tolerance and dialogue is Ahdname (Accord) issued by Sultan Mehmed Fatih on May 28th 1463 to the Franciscans of Bosnia, guaranteeing them five fundamental rights: the right to life (*nefs*), the right to faith (*din*), the right to freedom (*'aql*), the right to property and the right to dignity (*I'rd*).¹⁸

It is interesting how one of the most influential Raisu-l-ulamas Mehmed Džemaluddin Čaušević conducted a constructive dialogue in his time can be a good example for all today. He had witnessed the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the beginning of the Kingdom of Old Yugoslavia. He had been appointed as the Raisu-l-ulama of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the King Francis Joseph's decree in 1913. It is interesting to know that he wrote a special prayer for Francis Joseph I in which he asked God for his long life and good health. He did not do this out of fear or personal gain but out of deep awareness of the historical circumstances in the Balkans at the time, but also out of his appreciation for King Francis Joseph I who demonstrated deep sensitivity towards the principle of religious tolerance in general and Islam in particular.¹⁹ Also, Monarch Francis Joseph I helped Muslims to cope with the complexities of Balkan history, as the European Muslims are the descendants of Sultan Mehmed Fatih who saved the Franciscans of Bosnia with his famous Ahdname.

Balkan Muslims and Christians in the face of new world challenges

Muslims and Christians constitute more than half of world population. Without peace between these two religions peace in the world is impossible. Consequently, peace in the world depends on peace

¹⁸ Ćeric, "The Meaning of religious Education for Peace and Dialogue in the Balkans", p. 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

between Muslims and Christians.²⁰ It is a part of essential principles of two religions: love towards one God and neighbor. Sooner or later Muslims and Christians will be forced to make cooperation by world challenges. In the face of inconceivable arsenal of weapon destined for mass destruction of nations, animals, and entire dehumanization of man, secular society that confronts religion, and moral anarchy, and menace that in modern national state numerous small nations and ethnic group could extinct—a need for religion that teaches a freedom, equality, justice and solidarity among peoples is pressing. In this regard, Islam and Christianity, two most powerful teaching in whole history of mankind, could play a saving role for humanity in forthcoming epoch.

The most important issue is the good education, which promotes peace and dialogue. Religious traditions are important forces in the lives of individuals and religious communities and therefore have great significance for society as a whole. Understanding these convictions is necessary if people are to understand one another in our diverse societies, and if they are to appreciate the significance of the rights that protect them. Learning about religions and beliefs contributes to form and develop self-understanding, including a deeper appreciation of one's own religion or belief. Studying other religious traditions opens new venues of mutual understanding. It also opens up questions pertaining to the meaning and purpose, and exposes students to critical ethical issues addressed by humankind throughout the history.²¹ Knowledge of religious traditions can help promoting right attitude and behavior, and thus enhancing social cohesion.

From an Islamic perspective it is God's foreordained plan that followers of Islam and Christianity live together in order to recognize each other. They can live only in a state 'bellum omnium con-

²⁰ *Zajednicka rijec za nas i vas*, Kraljevski institut za islamsku misao Ahl Al-Bayt, Sarajevo: El-Kalem, CNS, 2010, p.13.

²¹ Tarik Ramadan, *Evro-američki muslimani i budućnost islama*, trans. from english by Karčić Fikret, Karčić Hamida, Latić Džemaludin and Alibašić Ahmet, Udruženje ilmije Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini, Sarajevo, 2007, pp. 262-263.

tra omnes' - wars of all against all or in prosperous peace. Hopefully, Muslims and Christians are fully aware of the historical circumstances and present challenges in the Balkans so they can opt for prosperous peace.

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