Building a Better Bridge


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Muslim and Christian Perspectives on Different Models of Governance and Justice

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In most of the analyses to be found nowadays, Christianity is defined as a strict part of Western civilization and Islam as a strict part of Eastern civilization. Whether intentionally or not, these analyses always forget the fact that there are Christians—Eastern ones—who live and develop in the same civilizations and historical circumstances as Muslims do. Eastern Christians such as Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Nestorians, and others used to live, or still do live, as a minority or majority along with Muslims, and mutual influences are present to this very day. If we take a look back, we will discover that in the times of the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, Eastern Christians lived on the same soil; at the peak of the ‘Abbāsid state, Nestorians lived alongside the other Christian churches, which enjoyed the very same privileged position. Then, in the Ottoman Empire, all Greek Orthodox patriarchates were gathered in one state, and, until the collapse of that empire, in the Balkans and Greater Syria, Eastern Christians were in an absolute majority as well. The Eastern Christian states of medieval times—Byzantium, Serbia, Bulgaria—had the same “nomocratic” system of law and governance as the Ottomans, and previously the Umayyads and ‘Abbāsid, which remain today in all Islamic states.

Conversely, the Eastern Christian churches, along with the Muslims, had the same bitter experience in encounters with the crusaders, who came from the West (in all its forms) and who established a Latin Kingdom in Constantinople that lasted for seventy years. Up until recent times, the political situation in Muslim countries coincided with political climates affected by the development of nationalism in countries where the majority of the population are Greek Orthodox; the Iranian revolution turned into the defense of the nation
as, in the end, Khomeini affirmed state interests above Islamic ones; in Turkey, the Refah Party was more of a Turkish nationalist party with an Islamic domestic agenda. Meanwhile, Bulgaria expelled several thousand Turks and others who did not want to accept changing their surnames with the Bulgarian common suffix “-ov” and who refused to be called Bulgarians, and so the question of Bulgarian national integrity was raised; in the former Yugoslavia, the movement MASPOK claimed for Croatians a bigger influence on the society, and the memoranda of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts raised the same questions as those raised by the Bulgarians, this time with dreadful consequences. All this points to the same civilization and historical environment in Eastern Christianity and Islam. What is it that distinguishes this Eastern civilization?

The Eastern conception of life, which is incorporated in religious teachings, is based on personalism rather than on a system of law and wide legislation. According to Orthodox teachings, it is only with a second person that we can establish communion and community. In a deeper meaning, it is in the other person that we should search for, and find, Christ. Wherever love exists, one person would always find justification and the perfection of the other, finding and discovering in this other the personality of God, the face of God, and the truth and truthful presence of God. In Islam, we may find a similar approach to the subject, recalling T. E. Lawrence’s observation that “Arabs believe in individuals, not institutions.”

Generally speaking, this means that personal relationships are above legal ones and are based on complete trust in the morality of the trustee. This strongly rooted personalistic point of view to a life created the title—if we may consider it a title—“neighbor.” On the street or in the supermarket, an unknown person is a “neighbor.” In the Balkans, as well as in Turkey and the Middle East, the neighbor and the nearest neighborhood is treated as close family, to the level of holiness. Thus Eastern Christians and Muslims have a rather strong and close-linked community. This “neighborly way of life” opens wide a door for corruption. On the one hand, this could not be strictly called corruption, because the neighbor is the one from whom one would expect to find a friend or cousin at a given institution, who could help in avoiding bureaucracy; on the other hand, this kind of help usually neglects the protection ensured by good governance of a given institution. Therefore institutions can easily fail to be just and well governed. Fortunately this corruption—if we talk
about giving a bribe—is not too common a custom. Whether the bribe is defined as giving a reward in advance for a job or task that has to be finished successfully, in Eastern countries a reward is given after bringing the task to its end. There are numerous examples of thankful patients who give a reward to doctors for good treatment. Also the rewards could be given, for example, to avoid long delays in issuing driving licenses. Guided by the quotation that “a friend of my friend is a friend of mine,” people in the East are prone to the custom of rewarding institutional employees, because rewarding in advance could be considered an offence.

The personalistic lifestyle has created a special taste in the East for autocracy. The figure of the president is a recognized incorporation of justice, nation, and faith, keeping leadership by fostering all together—in one word, a figure of the father—and Easterners have believed in their leaders as one believes in his father. The figure of the sovereign is the archetype of Byzantine emperors, who had all these attributes. The most common epithet for the communist sovereigns was “father of the nation,” meaning that they kept nation and faith interests, and they were always those to whom the last word was given: they were considered the absolute keepers of justice. The Byzantine state system (based on nomocanons) and government had been adopted by the Umayyads from the southeast borders of the Byzantine Empire, in medieval kingdoms in the Balkans up to the late nineteenth century, and by the Ottoman Empire too, and—in various forms—it also remained in the times of communism in the Balkans.

Unfortunately, these sovereigns were, and are, prone to abuse their power and constitutionally given authorities. In multiethnic and multiconfessional countries, as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were, the sovereign’s principle of keeping the nation together was based on the idea of “fraternity-unity.” Whoever spoke against this principle was seen as a public enemy and necessarily became a political prisoner. The idea of political captivity is as old as Byzantium; in the Byzantine Empire and in the countries that were established on the Byzantine model, political prisoners and public enemies were those who were against the sovereign, or in the Middle Ages against the state religion. Speaking against religion was in the period of communism modified to speaking against the nation. The least that these “enemies” could expect was to be expelled from the soil of a particular empire or kingdom. In more recent times, expulsion for political reasons is not the method, because of the institution of
asylum. Thus in the West there are many asylum seekers from Eastern countries who were directly faced with repressive regimes in their native countries. For example, Slobodan Milosevic’s regime insisted on keeping the Serbian national and religious identity above others, completely neglecting and denying other identities and their impact on Serbian identity. So this regime exerted tyranny on all outside the Serbian identity, including national, religious, cultural, and other identities. Many people emigrated then or sought asylum in order to escape the madness of this tyranny. Conversely, in the post-Milosevic era, the leadership of democrats and democratic movements has brought confusion to the people; so the Radical Party, with an ultranationalist conception, appears to be the most popular party. In Bulgaria today, the prime minister is actually heir to the throne and is expected by the Bulgarian people to pull the nation together. This shows a possible preference of Bulgarians for an “iron hand” in someone capable of leading the nation. Nationalism sows the seed of autocracy, to which all Eastern nations are very prone.

The nomocanonical law system, still present in the legislation of Muslim countries, does not exist today in the legislation of countries where a Greek Orthodox majority lives; yet some tendencies still remain and are evident. The leaderships of these countries usually ask for the opinion of the church, especially on questions of national interest, reflecting the role the church had historically and the fact that the church kept national and religious identities aligned. From the point of view of state leadership, the church is seen as an intermediary between government and people. Every idea supported by the church is always welcomed warmly among the Orthodox people, so the place and the position of the church are very significant. For example, the withdrawal of the proposed national anthem of Serbia and Montenegro took place at the insistence of the church. The Greek lobby in America always has a church representative in negotiations. In Muslim countries, too, the opinion of religious authorities is strong, and they participate in decision making in particular states. The opinion of religious authorities in the East has such a strong influence that the rejection of some human rights issues can be traced to the fact that human rights are not always in accordance with Islam or Christianity in general.

How then is it possible to overcome the unjust phenomena of corruption, autocracy, and the rejection of human rights? The pattern of repulsing corruption in Swaziland is an extremely good example. According to this, giving rewards is now allowed and has become legal, as it is considered an act of
charity. Because the salaries of employees in government and medical institutions are chronically low in the Balkan countries, giving rewards for a job well done would not be considered a bribe, but an act of charity. The law would act, however, if the reward were given in advance, when it would be considered a bribe. Pyramidal responsibility can monitor institutions such as the courts in order to obtain just and fair trials. Conversely, the less corrupt the official government, the less corrupt society as a whole. As the opinions of religious authorities are very important, fruitful dialogue has to begin on the basis of a complete respect for different identities, with open communication to each other. The religious authorities should be included in making decisions in order to find the best solutions for the common good and for building a better society. In addition to including them in decision making, religious authorities can also make efforts to overcome ignorance about other faiths, because this kind of ignorance is present in both Christians and Muslims. Christians do not know much about Islam, and Muslims do not know much about Christianity. Once this ignorance is overcome, people would be more tolerant, have a better understanding of one another’s needs, and be able to live in harmony.
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