

Angeliki Ziaka

Interreligious Challenges and Engagements for Churches and Islam in Europe

Interreligious Dialogue as mediator of nonviolence, understanding and reconciliation

Interreligious dialogue is a relatively modern trend among the churches. Decisive steps occurred in this direction in the churches of Europe from 1960 onwards with the official launch of interreligious dialogue: that is, dialogue with non-Christian religions, notably Judaism and Islam, which identify with a common biblical background. This dialogue brought recognition (both symbolic and essential) to other religions and in particular to Islam, which had for centuries been considered in Christian writings of both the eastern and western ecclesiastic milieux. At best it was considered a Christian heresy, a corruption of Christianity; and at worst, as the religion of the Antichrist¹ and of armed struggle (*jihad*) for the propagation of its faith (*da'wa*: call, invitation to Islam) against “the infidel”.²

The choice of subject matter for interreligious dialogue was not accidental: common themes found in all religions were sought that expressed concern for mankind and all creation. From the first, pride of place was given to the theme of peace prevailing on earth in accordance with the words of St Luke expressed in the Christmas carol: “Glory to God on the highest, and on earth peace and good will to all men” (Luke 2:14).

Interreligious dialogue advanced decisively after the Second World War when, faced with extensive destruction and misfortune, humanity realised the need for mutual understanding and the peaceful coexistence of peoples and religions. Along with movements of populations and the growth of the mass media, an optimism arose and prevailed concerning peacemaking,

communication between peoples, and the meeting of religions and cultures. As Stylianos Tsompanidis accurately notes:

This is the time when the churches begin to realize the need to come to terms with three major currents: secularism, Marxism and other religions. Also, at the same time, the issue of human development comes to be discussed and social and economic justice become key objectives, whose promotion was fully understood to require cooperation between people of different worldviews and beliefs.³

Crucial in advancing dialogue between the Abrahamic religions were the World Council of Churches (WCC), which awakened the consciences of participant churches to think ecumenically and act both collectively and locally, and the Second Vatican Council with its proclamation *Nostra Aetate* (28.10.1965), in which the Roman Catholic church made known its willingness to open a dialogue with non-Christian religions, specifically Islam and Judaism, and to walk on the “road of peace” (*in viam pacis*). At that time the question was posed as to how best to regulate human coexistence in the future generally, and what the common duty of religions was in this regard. It was also the first time the Roman Catholic church recognised the Ecumenical Movement, a decisive turning point in its own self-understanding and in its stance toward other churches.⁴

It was at this time that initiatives and organizations began to appear within the churches of Europe to address the task of bringing understanding between the churches and the Muslims of Europe. Among independent organizations the work of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), founded in 1959 in Geneva with 125 member churches, stands out, and particularly the role of its Consultative Committee on Islam in Europe (CCIE). Within the Roman Catholic church, the Council of Roman Catholic Episcopal Conferences in Europe (CCEE) played an important role, and especially the official cooperation between CEC and CCEE in April 1978, “a historic moment because this kind of cooperation had not been seen since the Reformation.”⁵ Many Europe-based Christian organizations started to develop dialogue programmes for interreligious understanding, especially with Islam. Over time, Muslims began to join these different organizations, and these organizations had common personnel in key positions whether or not they cooperated among each other. A systematic lack of cooperation with Islam

can be observed during the half century that preceded this moment, arising from (for example) a lack of theological unity vis-à-vis Islam, the fact that of the European churches were not well represented, and a lack of knowledge of what was happening at the local level within the various European countries, although serious progress was also made, a preparation and maturation that would help progress in the direction of understanding between the churches.⁶ Especially in recent years, with the new influx of refugees into Europe and the activation of many NGOs as “possible and paid mediators,” even traditionalist churches that have viewed Islam in a “virtual” and stereotypically phobic way, have engaged in charitable humanitarian work with all refugees without discrimination through the establishment of NGOs by the churches. This did not, however extend to an ecclesiological level that would consider the essence of the matter and respect for Muslims as fellow human beings.—This is where the progress made by the various church organizations can also make an important contribution in different local contexts.

Churches undertook to implement an interfaith approach in the context of European secular states, in part because of their own needs and in part to fulfill their obligations within secular European structures that offered them recognition and facilities but also antagonism. Their contribution was important and helpful for the secular states, because:

Whilst the secular structures of the various European states provide guarantees for the exercise of religious freedom, it appears that they have not found corresponding solutions for negotiating and managing religion and the coexistence of different religions as factors reinforcing the cohesion of the social fabric, rather than causing the isolation and segregation of religious communities within secular state structures. This inadequacy is evident in European institutions – the *Committee of Ministers* of the Council of Europe, for example, only recently included in its vocabulary the term interreligious dialogue as a supplement to intercultural dialogue. The Committee seemed to have far greater faith in intercultural dialogue and political facility in prioritising it. Recommendations for the management of religion and interreligious education and for the provision of satisfactory training to both teachers and pupils date back no further than 2001-2002. These recommendations were aimed at defending human rights, furthering respect for the religious or non-religious beliefs of every European citizen as well as those of citizens in neighbouring states,

promoting solidarity and helping to prevent conflict within the framework of formal and informal education.⁷

Furthermore, interreligious dialogue helped churches to go further than the “missions” and the association of many churches with political colonial interests in the East that had existed for several centuries. There remains, of course, the question of the possibility for a positive approach to the religious “other” using the methods employed up to now and employed by the mission programmes themselves. Can a religious mission overcome its dogmatic zeal and religious engagement in its encounter with the religious “other”?⁸ But it is also interesting to see and understand how some religious circles of the Muslim world understand the historical evidence: that is, critically but positively, even the missionary engagement of the Christian churches in the Middle East. Shaikh Abdullah b. Mohammad al Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman, observes that:

Dialogue between Christian and Muslim groups and organizations has been going on for more than a century, and there are major educational institutions in the Arab and Islamic East that were founded by Protestant and Catholic churches that played an important role in the Arab and Islamic renaissance and modernity. These institutions went beyond missionary activity and established true dialogue and lasting impact on different Arab and Muslim communities. I want to mention in this context the good work performed for over a century by the Reformed Church in America in Oman and Eastern Arabia. Many Western and non-Western scholars have criticized Orientalism, seeing its work in the negative light of colonial and missionary endeavors. In reality, Orientalism did a major service by introducing Islamic civilization to Europeans and Americans by highlighting the Arab and Islamic contemporary worlds, as well as their centuries-old relations with the rest of the world.⁹

As far back as the 1970s-80s, an academic direction was also created within a theological framework which established dialogue between religions with the understanding and knowledge of cultures as its main duty, despite the distrust (as May observes in 2004) that still existed in churches, religious

organizations, and theological schools towards dialogue between religions. This dialogue was promoted primarily by organizations such as the WCC and through individual initiatives and commitments within the church and academia.¹⁰

Today interreligious dialogue, though established in many academic institutions, seems called upon to move from theory to practice and to contribute to the reconciliation of urgent problems, to overcome (in a critical spirit) the intense and violent religious antagonisms of the new millennium, and to clarify the confusion of the times in which religion is seen as both abuser and victim. These institutions must in parallel find a multi-levelled approach to their students, some of whom are secular, others priests and other active members of the church, and (not infrequently now) also members of other religious communities, including Muslims.¹¹ They must inform them about the historical evolution and previous history of interreligious dialogue in connection with ecumenical dialogue, and to make them aware of the problems and gaps that still exist at an ecclesiological and missionary level.¹² They must then instill in them the individual principles of the Abrahamic religions, and inform them about the socio-political dimensions of Muslim societies as well as the progress and the difficulties encountered by interreligious dialogue in these various environments. Finally, they must promote dialogue and interreligious encounter at a practical level, in communication with local religions communities, to acquire the skills needed to foster respect for every human being and to negate stereotypes and religious "totalitarianism". We often find that the theological environments of our day, even within state education systems, are more introspective than those of previous decades. That is why one needs to start from the obvious with students, however discouraging it may seem and however slow the whole educational process can be. However, the meeting with people of different religious identities is crucial for the removal of stereotypes and fears, fears that often have penetrated deeply into people's subconscious, starting from religious community education and national religious education.¹³ The main outcome of academic interreligious dialogue through of the Study of Religion is the development of various skills to foster dialogue and "relationships" with our fellow human beings, a relationship springing from the university towards society and from society towards the university. The selection of people who will talk to students is important because their attitude, their knowledge, their positive overall intention and general culture and understanding will

grow within the students, and become a reference point for important social initiatives and attitudes in future life. Equally important is communication with all those in the priesthood who have an open mind, and whose actions concerning and experiences with religious diversity can contribute to these encounters of religions and peoples.

The emergence of interreligious dialogue within the churches

Christianity and Islam

Until the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD, Christianity only knew the religions of Judaism and of ancient Greek and Rome, especially the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world, with which it came into conflict. In the three first centuries, Christianity was persecuted by the Roman Empire and Christian scholars developed the genre of apologetic speech, which was intended to persuade the intelligentsia of the Greek world of the “high meanings” of Christianity (Justin the Philosopher, Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras the Athenian). Soon after the 4th century, however, the ancient cults subsided and Christianity came to prevail in the known world. So the need was not felt, at first, to develop a theology of religions.¹⁴ Had Christianity spread at the outset to the two major countries of the Far East, India and China, theology would certainly have developed a different structure in its systematic expression and would have related to other religions and cultures differently without changing the core of the Christian revelation.¹⁵

Things changed abruptly with the advent of Islam, a religion in competition with Christianity. The losses of Christianity in the East and, later, the threat from Islam to Christianity in Europe, brought two religious worlds face to face and of course engendered a negative understanding of Islam by Christianity. This relationship would become the model for Christianity’s view of other world religions as well. For the Christian East, however, “these relationships have many levels. They are relations of rivalry, difficulties and bitterness, but also relationships of symbiosis, mutual tolerance and understanding and, most important, the exchange of cultural goods that generated the specificity of each culture but equally those cultural features that they had in common.”¹⁶

So when Arab Muslims conquered Syria around 635 and Mesopotamia around 637, they came into contact with Christians in the region who had developed the fundamental themes of Christian teaching on the substance (essence) and attributes of God, on free will, and on other related subjects, which were points of reference but also points of disagreement for early Islamic theology, and thus led to the crossing of swords with the Muslims. Evidence for such discussions are the works of John of Damascus (+ c. 749), who systematized Christian theology logically and philosophically in a manner based mainly on the *Categories* of Aristotle, but who was also the first to write about Islam in an apologetic, theological tone, initiating the apologetic and controversial theology that was to follow.¹⁷ The work of his spiritual pupil, Theodore Abū Qurra (c. + 825)¹⁸ also bear witness to this, and also the Church of the East Patriarch Timothy I (+ 823), one of whose works describes discussions this cleric had with the caliph al-Mahdī around 782.¹⁹ For Muslim thinkers, these works provided motivation for logical thought and reasoning, as they soon realized that in order to defend their religion against the arguments of Christian theology they would have to develop Muslim theology systematically. In this they were greatly helped by Greek thought and philosophy, which had begun to penetrate the Islamic world as early as the 8th century.²⁰ The connection of Muslim scholars with the living tradition of Hellenistic scholarship was further strengthened by translations that were undertaken during the first two Islamic dynasties, the Umayyad and Abbasid, of the many works of Greek philosophers and Hellenistic scholars. These translations helped in the creation of the Arabo-islamic philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*).

Byzantine authors were the first to translate large passages of the Qur'ān. Nikitas Byzantios (9th-early 10th c.) in particular seems to have known Arabic and already in the 9th century managed to present an analysis of several sections of the Qur'ān in Greek for the first time, with of course an apologetic approach.²¹ Only in 1141 would Western scholars make translations of the Qur'ān into Latin, actually paraphrases of certain passages, such as that undertaken by Robert von Rétines on the order of Petrus Venerabilis, abbot of Cluny. Petrus Venerabilis had been in Spain (Andalusia), where the Umayyads dominated and Helleno-arabic philosophy was flourishing.²² The transfer of Greek literature into Arabic thought and the creation of Islamic philosophy (9th-13th c.) was a substantial intellectual dialogue that Muslim philosophers to this day refer to as a lifelong dialogue.²³

The Orthodox Churches

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had already paved the way to dialogue through the efforts it made towards bringing the churches closer together, and bringing peace between peoples, thus contributing to the formation of the Ecumenical Movement and the WCC. So at the dawn of the 20th century Orthodoxy came onto the scene of the Ecumenical Movement with two Encyclical Letters of 1902 and 1904, which the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Joachim III addressed to the heads of autocephalous Orthodox churches. In these, he refers with a special emphasis on the need to promote the unity of the Orthodox churches and to initiate dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, the Oriental Orthodox churches and the Protestant churches. Equally important was the decision of the Synod of the Russian church in 1918 to create a "Department for the unity of the churches".²⁴ However, the landmark in the history of the Ecumenical Movement was the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920, which came as a consequence of the two previous letters of Joachim III.²⁵ Even before the two World Movements of the Ecumenical Movement (i.e., Faith and Order and Life and Work) were completely formed, the Patriarchate of Constantinople addressed a Synodical Encyclical "To the Churches of Christ everywhere" and in it asked all to overcome the spirit of distrust and to demonstrate the power of love by creating a "League of Churches" on the model of the "League of Nations" which had just been established. This Encyclical points to the fact that, despite existing doctrinal differences, it was still possible for churches and society to come together, especially on social and moral issues "for the construction and facilitation of as full and blessed unity as ever, in God".²⁶ Thus, we can observe how the interests of the Orthodox church were extended to all the churches and confessions of the Christian faith. Peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding and communication between churches were the basic prerequisites for promoting the much sought-after unity and peaceful living together of the churches, *"ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν"* (that they may all be one).

Today this dialogue continues to be promoted by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I himself who, upon his enthronement on November 2, 1991, stressed on the one hand the importance of the unity of the Orthodox faith, and on the other, the supreme responsibility of the church toward all mankind. The Ecumenical Patriarchate situates this responsibility in the dialogue with the major world religions and the preservation of the worldwide spiritual and

moral heritage that honor all human beings. For this reason, the Ecumenical Patriarchate considers interreligious dialogue particularly necessary and essential.²⁷

There are many autocephalous Orthodox churches and the Older (Πρεσβυτενί) and Newer Orthodox patriarchates. Here we will give only a few examples of churches and patriarchates whose presence and activity is associated with the world of Islam, and are part of our broader research.²⁸

Until recently, the autocephalous church of Greece has hesitated to take steps toward interreligious dialogue. This hesitation is understandable, given the history of the relations between Greek Christians and Islam which reigned supreme in Greece until the early twentieth century. Islam, identified with the Ottoman Empire, moved neither the lay nor religious intelligentsia to seek an understanding of Islam until the second half of the twentieth century. In recent decades the Church of Greece, through the WCC and other organizations, has participated more and more frequently in activities related to interreligious dialogue.²⁹

In recent years, the Church of Cyprus has been very active in interreligious dialogue in collaboration with the churches of the Middle East and the WCC. Cyprus is, after all, the nearest European neighbor geographically to the Near and Middle East. Despite its long tribulations following the division of the island between Christian Cypriots (many no longer wish to be called Greek Cypriots) and Turkish Cypriots, with vivid memories of the occupation of a portion of the island by Turkish troops and suspicion it brought towards Islam and the “Turkish occupier”, the Church of Cyprus seem to be taking practical steps towards bridging the religious divide, mainly through meeting Muslims from the Middle East. In addition, a wealthy Lebanese community lives on the island.

Also important is the presence of the ancient patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem in interreligious dialogue: patriarchates whose religious communities live side by side with Muslims in the heart of Islam, in the Middle East, and in Africa. An outstanding personality of the twentieth century with worldwide authority and recognition was His Beatitude Parthenios III, Patriarch of Alexandria, who worked tirelessly toward peaceful coexistence and dialogue, both among Christians and among the faithful of other religions, particularly Muslims, among whom he had grown up in Egypt. Furthermore, the contribution to the dialogue with Islam of the Metropolitan of Lebanon Georges Khodr, and that of younger Arab priests, such as Father

Dr. George Massouh, Director of the Institute of Christian-Muslim Studies at the University of Balamand in Lebanon and representative of his Patriarchate at international interreligious meetings, has made the Patriarchate of Antioch especially responsible and active in interreligious communication. Massouh unequivocally stated in a 2007 speech given at the Academy of Theological Studies of the Metropolis of Demetrias (in Volos), that, if there were no peace among the Muslims of Lebanon, both Sunnis and Shi'is, then there would be no peace among Christians: "Our neighbor is the Muslim," he noted. "If he is not well, then we are not well. If he does not live in peace, then we do not live in peace."

These findings are extremely important for understanding the present time and the violent clashes taking place in the Middle East, which also affect Europe with large flows of refugees and terrorist attacks, and which will have an ever increasing effect for a long time to come. Peaceful coexistence is what is desperately called for by the troubled churches of the East. The situation for the Arabic-language Patriarchate of Antioch, mainly in Syria, is extremely difficult today, in a brutal, war-torn environment from which many Syrians have scattered and fled, Christians and Muslims alike. Although many declarations of sympathy have been expressed regarding this situation by the heads of various churches, their discourse does not seem to be effective in the face of the geostrategic upheavals in the wider region. And it is precisely here that we must ask how the churches will face the challenges of our epoch if they are incapable of effectively preserving their own integrity within the stricken regions, and, moreover, continue to compete between each other, especially those on missions within the suffering areas. In the case of Syria, a variety of ecclesiastical stances have been and continue to be observed in connection with the fluid political situation of the region, as well as the political antagonisms outside it. Aiming at hegemonic tutelage, they have either maintained communication with the Assad regime, or cut off relations with it, considering it the source of the entire problem. In reality, though, neither the supporters nor the critics of the Syrian regime could preserve the local churches which, although rich in confessions and historical testimony within the country, appear more allied between themselves within the Muslim majority, than the churches outside the geographical boundaries of Syria, which have acted in many cases in contradictory ways, in terms of a post-colonialism deconstruction of the afflicted churches of the East.

Finally, it would be an omission not to consider the dynamic entrance of the Patriarch of Russia into interreligious matters from 1990 onward.³⁰ Indicative here is the speech by the Blessed Patriarch of Russia, Alexius II, in October 2007 at the Council of Europe on the topic of interreligious dialogue. The Patriarch stressed that:

The Russian Orthodox Church is fully aware of the great range of religious beliefs in Europe and globally. It is open to dialogue with these, as well as with the followers of secularisation. However, we are persuaded that no single world view, including that of secularisation, can claim to hold the monopoly in Europe or elsewhere. For this reason, we believe that banishing religion from the public sphere is unacceptable. It is time for us to recognise that religious motives have the right to exist everywhere, including the public sphere. To avoid conflict between religious views worldwide, we need a sincere dialogue between cultures, in which especially active representatives of both traditional religions as well as the secularised tradition must be engaged. I believe that the Council of Europe, which has the capability and experience as a place of dialogue between European values, may be a good forum for a dialogue of this sort.³¹

Since then, there have been many Patriarchal proclamations as well as many instances of participation by the Patriarchate of Russia in the European Union, in international and religious organizations, as well as in the WCC in order to ensure that peace prevails. The fact that there are many Muslims and Jews, as well as quite a number of indigenous Buddhists-Lamaists, primarily in central and eastern Russia, makes this dialogue both timely and imperative. These religions are also officially recognized by the Russian Federation.³²

The Roman Catholic Church

The decision of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the relation of the church to non-Christian religions, included in the Proclamation *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), created an entirely new climate in the Roman Catholic church regarding its relations and communications with non-Christian religions. The Council's decision made known the willingness of the Roman Catholic church to proceed to the "opening" of a dialogue with

non-Christian religions, Islam and Judaism in particular, and to walk on the “road of peace” (*in viam pacis*).³³ This event was unprecedented in terms of the criteria of the past. To comprehend its significance, we have only to think of the bellicose past history, particularly that between Christianity and Islam. The Crusades, colonisation, missionary work and its instrumentalisation: all strikingly illuminate the encounter between the Christian West and the non-Christian world. The Catholic church’s new attitude was decisive both for its cooperation with other churches as well as for its promotion, in common with them, of interreligious dialogue. However, the successful opening of the Roman Catholic church to other religions with the Second Vatican Council was no sudden thing. It represented the crowning achievement of a long scholarly and dialectical course, one that had begun decades before scholars and thinkers among Europe’s intelligentsia made Islam known “anew” to the West, overcoming centuries-old differences and revealing new perceptions of Islam to the Western world, including the “inner mystical path”, Islamic mysticism (Sufism).³⁴

To this end, a central organ of the Roman Catholic church, the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (PCID), was created for the purpose of dialogue. This dialogue was primarily carried out through local churches. The PCID is in continuous contact with the corresponding organ of the World Council of Churches on issues of interreligious communication and dialogue but is not identified with the latter’s activities. The Roman Catholic church acts autonomously, with its own activities parallel to those of the WCC. In this sense, the Roman Catholic church is developing autonomous activities in its relations with other Christian churches. Its official organ for interreligious dialogue and communication with the traditions of non-Christian religions is the *Roman Curia*, which has various divisions, each of which is charged with specific areas of responsibility.

We find information and discussion in a number of sources of the many dialogues the Roman Catholic church has engaged in from that time to the present with all the world’s religions (Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism etc.), as well as with a number of native African religions. These include its official journal *Pro Dialogo*, which has circulated without fail three times yearly, as well as in the journal *Recognise the Spiritual Bonds which Unite Us*, which informs readers about Pope John Paul II’s trips to various countries throughout the world and his meetings with the political and religious leaders of these countries. Here we also find a detailed account of sixteen

years of Christian-Islamic dialogue (1978-1994). The *Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica* (PISAI) is specifically charged with developing academic communications and the Roman Catholic church's dialogue with Islam. The results of this dialogue are announced in its journal *Islamochristiana*, published since 1975.

A major step forward in the communication of the Roman Catholic church with leaders of all the Christian churches, as well as world religions, took place with its proclamation of the "Day of Peace and Prayer", inaugurated by Pope John Paul II on October 26-27, 1986 at Assisi.³⁵ At one point in his speech, Pope John Paul II stressed the following:

The fact that we are gathered here today does not compel us to search for any sort of religious consensus among ourselves, or to negotiate our religious beliefs. Nor does it mean that religions may become reconciled on the basis of a shared commitment to an earthly plan, which may go beyond religions themselves. Nor is it a concession or relativising of the various religious beliefs, because each human being must follow sincerely his conscience, with the goal of searching for the truth and obeying it. Our meeting is only a declaration – and here precisely is its great importance for modern man – that in the great battle for the rule of peace, mankind, through its otherness, is called upon to draw from its deepest and most vibrant sources, from the place where conscience is formed and from the place where men's moral energy is created.³⁶

The first meeting was organised during the civil war in Lebanon, the second during the conflict in the Balkans, and the third in the wake of 9/11. The concepts of prayer for world peace, the importance of the oneness of humankind, and the significance of the interreligious dialogue for achieving world harmony and peace were all stressed at Assisi. The proclamation of the Decalogue of Assisi for Peace resulted from the 2002 meeting in accordance with which the heads of the world's religions committed themselves to ten principles for peace in the world. Since then, the action of the Roman Catholic church with Islam at an interreligious level has been long and various, depending on the geographical areas and the initiatives involved. We have already referred to the role of the Council of Roman Catholic Episcopal Conferences in Europe (CCEE) and communications with other churches and Muslims.

The steps towards reconciliation taken recently by Pope Francis are important. He appears both theologically and intellectually innovative in his

determination to bring peoples, religions and cultures in a common respect and understanding and to break through the walls that divide them. The symbolic character of his visit to the island of Lesbos in April 2016, along with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew and the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Hieronymus, sent a positive message at a critical time for humanity, for the respect of refugees and their human rights by European states and churches.

The Protestant churches

The Protestant churches are very numerous and entirely independent of one another. Thus it would be impossible within the scope of this brief contribution to occupy ourselves in detail with the activities of all the Protestant churches. We will therefore limit our discussion to a description of the activities of Protestant groups representing the main branches of the Protestant Reformation, which were the fundamental agents in the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The Protestants had developed extensive missionary activities as early as the colonial period. But since these churches lacked unity and a central body to coordinate missionary activity, Protestant missionary work soon created major problems for these same Protestant churches because the various confessions competed with one another, resulting in the creation of disruption and discord amongst them. To bring an end to these problems, in 1910 a number of missionary bodies convened the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (Scotland), which created and developed an ecumenical consciousness and became the starting point for the Protestant ecumenical movement. Since 1948, the majority of Protestant churches have participated in the WCC, and from that time their major activities on issues involving interreligious dialogue, peace and understanding have been identified with the initiatives of the WCC.

The World Council of Churches (WCC)

The World Council of Churches is active in programmes for peace and interfaith understanding in various religious environments, and participates

in many of the activities of the *World Conference of Religions for Peace* (WCRP), which is the largest worldwide alliance of representatives of major religions, whose purpose is to promote world peace.³⁷ As early as 1970, the *World Conference of Religions for Peace* had already begun to become active in issues concerning the prevailing of peace in regions at war such as Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Israel and Palestine. It focuses on the creation of multi-religious collaborations to confront extremely difficult questions, including wars, hunger and the protection of the planet. The purpose of the conference is to highlight the enormous energy of religious communities and to lead them to common action on behalf of reconciliation, justice and peace.

The WCC has also developed independent activities for achieving peace in the Holy Land since 1948 and from 1995 onward has intensified its interest in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in bringing peace to the region. In 2007, churches from all corners of the globe gathered in Amman, Jordan, to found the *Palestine/Israel Ecumenical Forum*, whose main purpose is the commitment by involved churches to interreligious action on behalf of peace and justice, for the sake of all those living in the region. One of the WCC's efforts was its statement against the Gaza War of December 2008 – January 2009. This statement concludes with a call for the prevailing of justice and peace in Gaza, for doing away with the economic blockade of Gaza, and for a dialogue with the elected political leaders of the time.³⁸

The 29th Issue (2001) of the WCC journal *Current Dialogue* is interesting in this regard, as it is devoted to the theme of religion and violence, and considers the questions of peace, conflict and reconciliation from the standpoint of world religions today.³⁹

In October 2008, the *Intra-Christian Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Islam and Christian-Muslim Dialogue* was held in Geneva. This conference was organised by the WCC in cooperation with a number of Christian churches, among them the Orthodox church, the World Alliance of Reformed churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Roman Catholic church. It posed a number of questions concerning joint dialogue with Muslims, including human rights, proselytism, the concepts of secularisation, pluralism and nationality, as well as the use of religious symbols for political purposes and religiously induced violence. Participants spoke further on the topics of Christian-Islamic cooperation on matters of critical importance for humanity, including social and economic justice,

climate change, and peace and the healing response to painful experiences and memories (the “healing of memories”).

The WCC’s activity in its interreligious dialogue with Islam, indeed with Iran, is also significant. In November 2007, an initiative for women’s dialogue was inaugurated by the WCC and Iran’s Institute for Interreligious Dialogue on the topic “Women as Peace Makers through Religion: A Joint Workshop of Muslim and Christian Women.” The women conference attendees, including the present writer (university teachers and students, directors, physicians, and government ministers) met for the first time in Tehran in December 2008 and continued their work in Gothenburg, Sweden, in September 2009.

The WCC has also begun an official dialogue with Iran (since 1995) through the *Center for Interreligious Dialogue of Islamic Culture*. In December 2008 the dialogue held its fifth meeting in Tehran, a symposium on “Religion and Peaceful Coexistence.” The symposium’s conclusions on safeguarding peace were as follows: the need for the harmonious coexistence of peoples and religions; mutual understanding between different religious beliefs; constructive dialogue and the creation of bridges to mutual respect and a proper understanding of the religion of the other; a common tradition extending back to Abraham as an obligation to preserve peaceful coexistence and respect for different religious communities; common participation and responsibility by Muslims and Christians for social and political matters; respect for different religions, and the search for shared values involving peace and the dignity of man; shared commitments to overcome prejudices; and the strengthening of mutual understanding.

In the last decade there have been many interfaith initiatives in which Christians have been strongly involved, maintaining the high level of creativity in this area. One of the most recent was the World Interfaith Conference Asia 2010 held in Kuala Lumpur (3-7 October) on “Faith, Shared Wisdom and International Law”. Of the many issues discussed at the Conference, the most crucial was the awareness of the need for creation of a Global Plan of Action, which would draw its inspiration from the moral teachings of religions and other ethical and spiritual traditions of the world. So one of the main objectives of the meeting was to create a link that would introduce reflection of the wider community and contribute to the diffusion of many already existing local and universal ecclesiastical, academic and other initiatives for the prevalence of peace and reconciliation.⁴⁰

Churches, Europe and Islam. Asymmetrical steps and the challenges of the present

The participation of the churches was neither equal, nor qualitatively comparable, with regard to the positive initiatives of recognition and dialogue with the 'religiously other' descendants of Abraham, in this instance the Muslims. Thus, even though for the Christian churches of the East coexistence with Islam was the norm for more than fourteen centuries, at the local level all churches did not develop interreligious initiatives for a variety of reasons. This was mainly due to the different political and regime realities and political balances in the living spaces concerned. It was also due to the kind of religious and national education provided, the creation (or not) of a space for "religious diversity", the recognition (or lack of recognition) of the non-Muslim, and more recently the instability prevailing in Near and Middle East. We observe similar ecclesiastical stances in regions of South-East Europe where the constitution of nation states, with the gradual fall of the Ottoman Empire, did not entail initiatives towards a corresponding dialogue either between the churches or between the states and the native Muslim populations. There were various reasons for this. Historically, the Muslim "Turk" had been seen for centuries as "the conqueror" by non-Muslims, who by definition had been perceived by Muslims as agents of Christianity and of modernity. Politically, religious identities were often considered pre-modern and antagonistic to the secular powers and therefore often oppressed, mainly in formerly communist areas (Albania, Bulgaria and other countries). But there were also economic, national and social reasons. Muslims were often "poor" citizens, and often belonged to different linguistic families, with the result that although citizens of the same country may have recognized "religious minorities," these minorities did not enjoy, mainly because of national fears, equal participation as regards rights and obligations to the states where they belonged and lived and of which they were citizens. Moreover, many national Orthodox churches, such as the Greek Orthodox church, were indecisive, inhospitable or hostile towards Islam, tendencies occurring simultaneously within the same historical conjuncture and that emanate from different bishops even today. This is due to the fact that various bishops act at will, independently, doing whatever they perceive to be "good" for their Dioceses and indeed for the church, and speaking in favor of or against whatever is different: Muslim, Jewish, gay, atheist – the catalogue is long and familiar.

Similarly, in the multitude of Protestant churches only some have developed a dialogue with Islam, while others have remained inactive or even negatively inclined towards the religiously different. Concurrently, in the countries of West and Northern Europe many national churches undertook initiatives and steps toward encounter with Islam. This development took place especially after 2000 and more strongly after 2010, when Muslim immigrants and refugees appeared increasingly in France, Germany, Sweden, Norway and other Western and Northern European countries. The Catholic church, essentially the trailblazer in instituting dialogue with the religious "other" due mainly to its administrative structure, promoted interfaith dialogue more or less uniformly in most Catholic churches throughout the world, without much leeway for divergence, but nonetheless with disparities in countries not "traditionally" Catholic.

Of course, the effort to understand and to become familiar with the Muslims of Europe, Middle East and Asia, and indeed of Muslims generally, did not appear out of the blue. It represented an already distinct understanding of the world on the part of the churches following the demise of the Old Empires, the old Christian missions turning inevitably, due also to new circumstances that had developed in several parts of the world, towards a "Christian witness."⁴¹ This is the kind of "witness" which continues to take into consideration the command of the Gospel "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations", but which moves concurrently at the margins of the new "secular" and "post-colonial" requirements of the European States. During the second half of the twentieth century in North Africa, many Catholic missionaries such as the White Fathers (who had a serious knowledge of Islam, and also of the Arabic language, and even not infrequently also of the local Berber dialects), came into conflict with Protestant missions in the region, on account of their over-precipitate baptisms of Muslims, a practice which put lives in danger in certain Muslim countries (such as Mauritania) during the 1960s and '70s. For this reason, they put forward the spirit of "Christian witness", rather than the spirit of "christianizing" and of "proselytizing", something for which they accused the Protestant missions that came mostly from the United States.

Hence from about 1960 onward we observe a distinctly new approach to religion systematically promoted within European states. This approach originates from more or less secular models and is followed to a greater or lesser degree by the churches. Meanwhile, in majority-Muslim environments, the former "missions" focus today on understanding and on "Christian

witness". Meanwhile things are quite different on the African continent, especially in sub-Saharan regions. This is the case also in Asia, where apostolic missions act more or less according to the traditional missionary practice of proselytizing, which to some extent continues to clash and compete with both other "missions" of the various churches and with the Muslim "missionary", the call to Islam (*da'wa*).⁴²

The major question today is communication and the meeting of the religious communities in the common European public spaces. While until now the discussion has been directed towards ways of integrating Muslims within the "secular" European state, equally important may prove to be the initiatives of local churches for meeting, discussion and understanding between Christians and Muslims. And although both Christians and Muslims start from different religious, cultural and linguistic identities, they share a common identity: that of faith, and indeed a common biblical background. As such, they share a common understanding of the historical course of the world in a traditional way, along a straight path leading to the End of Time. Today interreligious dialogue needs as never before to transfer the weight of interfaith initiatives to local communities, with interfaith dimensions. Such initiatives have already been organized for quite some time now by the churches, often mediated by universities and other academic spaces but also by prestigious institutions dedicated to interfaith dialogue in many European churches themselves, mostly Protestant and Catholic. But such initiatives have not appeared in all the churches and notably not in the multitude of local churches. So what is required is an approach "from the bottom up": the education of priests in matters of interfaith understanding and organization, educational and religious character, and meeting with Muslim leaders of the various Muslim communities in Europe. We believe that the results can be significant in terms of the mutual respect and progress of societies, breaking taboos around religious diversity. In parallel, the ordinary cleric provides the social means to multiply the spirit of reconciliation for all those who practice religion, including the Muslim imam, mufti, or any of the leaders of the different Muslim communities. Such an encounter and such an effort may easily be achieved within secular structures, to the benefit both of the states involved but also of their citizens, whether they practice a religion or not. Instances of Muslim refugees and immigrants turning to the churches of Europe to find refuge are quite frequent today. The issue in Europe of voluntary Christian proselytizing of recently arrived refugees, but also of

many Europeans to Islam, similarly remains of huge importance. An even larger issue (and one harder to resolve) is the rise of ultra-right parties in many European states. This is linked to extensive economic suffering and inequality. It is identified with fundamentalist Christian circles, sometimes even ecclesiastical organizations. These I consider to be some of the major issues which will occupy the attention of the churches of Europe in relation to Islam, but also in relation to their very existence in the decades to come.

Coming from the field of education, I have focused on the contribution of the joint co-education of Muslims and Christians, priests and laymen, theologians and imams, whether religious practitioners or not, on common issues, be they religious, political or social. A religious education which respects religious diversity and makes religion a subject for study, developing critical thinking and common responsibility, is perhaps the only bright path for the secular societies of Europe. Sooner or later, critical religiousness will also come to be discussed in the world of the Middle East, as long as there is a model and a track laid out to be followed. Interreligious dialogue is an educational and humanitarian tool. It needs, for its part, to acquire a social and an ecclesiastical status, to understand and to go beyond an “orientalistic” approach to religious diversity, and to proceed to a satisfactory understanding and acceptance of the “other”, prioritizing shared responsibility and cooperation between the different religious communities in Europe, for the sake of the future of our children and of the world.

Notes

- ¹ Ziaka 2004, 207–211. For a brief synthesis of the Christian Orthodox literature toward Islam during the Byzantine and Ottoman period, see Ziaka 2014, 714–718.
- ² Tolan 1999, 97–117; Tolan 2003; Tounta 2011, 113–154.
- ³ Tsompanidis 2015, 472. Tsompanidis refers to George Laimopoulos (1992, 44) and to the contribution of the spirit of the WCC in Geneva in 1966 with its International Conference on the “Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time: World Conference on Church and Society” (official Report, WCC, Geneva 1967), as well as to the significance of the circulation of the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of Pope Paul VI in 1967. The need to work together for peace and dialogue between religions and people is also present in Muslim religious environments. The Minter of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman (*Salmi* 2015, 190), in his speech delivered

to the *American Society of Missiology* in Chicago (June 18, 2005), entitled “Reason, Justice and Ethics”, accentuated the continued efforts made by the Sultanate toward interreligious understanding and dialogue “for the sake of benefit, progress, stability and peace of all people”.

4 *Tsompanidis* 2014, 77.

5 *Huot–Pleuroux* 1995, 70, retrieved by *Slomp & Vöcking* 2011, 211.

6 Slomp and Vöcking (2011, 211–232) offer an extensive and comprehensive presentation of all steps taken to the year 2011 by the aforementioned bodies and of all the practical and theological issues related to the churches and Islam in Europe.

7 *Ziaka* 2016, 61. See “Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education (*Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 10 December 2008 at the 1044th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies*) [retrieved from <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1386911&Site=C.>] On the *Toledo Guidelines* and the relevant case law of European and United Nations human rights bodies as well as the key guiding principles relating to religious education in state schools, see *Evans* 2008, 449–473.

8 *Garvey* 2012.

9 *Salmi* 2016, 182.

10 May 2004 [retrieved from <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligions/cd43-03.html>].

11 *Riitaoja & Dervin* (2014, 82) refer to common findings in different environments when describing their experiences in monitoring a course on Islam addressed exclusively to Muslim pupils: “The presence of one of us in the class changes something: from the minority’s point of view it is not a lesson ‘among us’ anymore. The teacher, a non-European immigrant and Muslim herself, has to take into consideration the white, European and presumably Christian researcher in her classroom and probably adapt her teaching accordingly.”

12 *Illman* (2006, 137–139) gives a very interesting approach to the tensions between dialogue and mission.

13 Finnish society is well aware of these issues. Though it seems “closed” for the moment, particularly to the arrival of the Muslim immigrant, Finland has long done important work in the context of ecumenical dialogue both internationally and locally, with important ecclesiological, educational and social outcomes at the meeting of the churches in the country, particularly between the Lutheran and the Orthodox churches, but also to ensure equal representation of churches and other religions, including Islam, within the structures of the state. (*Vogelaar* 2013, 267-301).

In Greece, more independent and progressive steps are being taken towards meetings between the churches and other religions, mainly at an academic level, partly because the Theological Faculties are secular and public: thus, they are not supervised by the church. From 1970 onwards, academic institutions

began to open up to dialogue with Islam and Judaism. Very recently, from July 2014 to the end of 2015, joint training courses on issues of Religious Education and Intercultural Religious Education began to be implemented under the auspices of the School of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (with the present writer as academic supervisor), between Christian theologians and Muslim teachers and preachers in Thrace, where there is a Muslim minority living in the country (*Ziaka* 2016, 59-75). The project belongs to the Operational Programme “Education and Lifelong Learning” and has been co-financed by the European Union and Greek national funds. Recently too (2013) Islamic Religious Education was introduced to Greek State Schools (as distinct from the Muslim Minority Schools), exclusively in Thrace. Pioneers in Interreligious Dialogue have been the current Archbishop of Albania Anastasios Giannoulatos, professor of Religious Studies at the Theological School of Athens and an acknowledged member of the WCC, and Grigorios Ziakas, emeritus professor in religious studies at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, who in the past has organised many local and international initiatives, both in the Muslim academic world and with church and other organizations, such as CEC, UNESCO and the CoE. Archbishop Anastasios’ essays on Mission and the Christian Understanding of other Faiths is of fundamental importance: [«The Purpose and Motive of Mission» (1965); «Les Missions des Eglises d’Orient» (1972); Eastern Orthodoxy and Human Rights (1984); «Der Dialog mit dem Islam aus orthodoxen Sicht» (1986); «Your Will be done: Mission in Christ’s Way» (1989); «Facing People of Other Faiths – From an Orthodox Point of View» (1993); «Die Mission der orthodoxen Kirche» (1997); «The Global Vision of Proclaiming the Gospel» (1997); «Orthodoxy faces the third millennium» (2000); «Problems and Prospects of Inter-religious Dialogue» (2003).]

¹⁴ This would mean “rethinking how Christianity has defined itself through its contact with the ‘others’ and how Christian Churches deal with religious otherness and plurality in Europe. *Ziaka* (2015, 215) referring to Kwok-Pui Lan 2005, 67.

¹⁵ For an early history of Church of the East engagement with Chinese religions that perhaps provides a very early example of Eastern Christian interfaith dialogue, see Jenkins 2008.

¹⁶ *Ziakas* 2004, 235–397, here 239.

¹⁷ John of Damascus, PG 94, 677A–680D; PG 94, 1585A–1597C and PG 96 1336–1348B. *Husseini* 2014.

¹⁸ *Graff* 1944–1953, vol. 2, 7–23. Abū Qurra, PG 97, 1461A–1601B.

¹⁹ *Mingana* 1928, 1–192; *Fowden* 2004, 154–155.

²⁰ The oldest Muslim apologetic work against Christianity is considered to have been authored by Alī al-Ṭabarī (i. 240/855). It seems that some early Muslim writers like Ḍirār b. ‘Amr (i. C. 200/815) wrote works objecting to Christians in order to undermine their views. *Van Ess* 1968, 1-70. Josef van Ess draws this information from the K. al-Fihrist of Ibn Nadīm. An important bibliographical

evaluation of most of the of Christian-Islamic literature and the theological rhetoric of both sides, can be found in the series published by Thomas 2009-2015 and Thomas 2008. In these works David Thomas studies Christian teachings that are objected to by Islam. Thomas holds that the objecting Muslim writers focus on proofs of error in Christian teachings and defend the correctness of the Islamic faith, just as did Christian apologists of Byzantine and post-Byzantine times who wrote the same apologetic literature objecting to Islam. A concise presentation of objections to Islam in Byzantine literature can be found in *Ziaka* 2002-2003, 119-142.

21 *Ziaka* 2002, 14–24 and 31–32.

22 *Laurens, H., Tolan & J. Veinstein, G.* 2009, 52–53.

23 *Ziakas* 2007, 155.

24 *Borovoj* 1998, 286, retrieved from *Tsompanidis* 2014, 45–46.

25 *Tsetsis* (1989, 55–64) in his valuable work accentuated the contribution of these Encyclicals and refers to the specific texts. *Ziaka* (2011, 254–258) also provides a detailed overview of the steps of interreligious dialogue taken by the churches in Europe.

26 Patriarchal Encyclical 1920 «Προς τας απανταχού Εκκλησίας του Χριστού», (*Tsompanidis* 2014, 631).

27 A full and detailed study of the interreligious dialogue of the Ecumenical Patriarchate with Islam to the year 2000 has been published by Ziakas in the commemorative volume *Fanari, 400 years* (2001, 575–725).

28 On the churches in Finland and especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland and their relations with Muslims and Islam and for interfaith education in Finnish schools, Fr. Mikael Sundkvist, a fellow member on the board of the journal *Ortodoksia*, Pekka Metso, Editor-in-Chief of *Ortodoksia* and Dr. Teuvo Laitila, a docent of Religious Studies, were kind enough to provide us with the relevant bibliography and information. We thank them sincerely for their willingness and for the completeness of the material in English they provided us. The best place to find initial information on the religious situation in Finland is the Religion in Finland site: <http://www.uskonnot.fi/english/>. Some information on the issue also exists on the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland: <http://evl.fi/EVLen.nsf/Documents/C2257A16002103B3C2257C1A0048D442?OpenDocument&lang=EN>. See also a booklet of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland which is aimed predominantly at Muslim immigrants: [http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/26C13F2F2D14B14BC225771100453087/\\$FILE/Christian_guidebook.pdf](http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/26C13F2F2D14B14BC225771100453087/$FILE/Christian_guidebook.pdf). Some facts about religious education in primary schools can be found at: <http://www.suol.fi/index.php/uskonnonopetus-suomessa/religious-education-in-finland>. On interreligious dialogue in schools in Finland, see: *Riitaoja & Dervin* 2014, 76-90 [retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14708477.2013.866125>].

29 *Stathokosta* 1999. The activity of the Academy for Theological Studies of the Metropolis of Demetrias (Volos), which organises one-day conferences, meetings

and twice-yearly thematic teaching units as well as other events with theological, interreligious and educational content, has been noteworthy and systematic. The work of the Academy for Theological Studies of the Metropolis of Demetrias as well as of the Orthodox Academy of Crete are perhaps the only, but significant, examples of initiatives for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue at the local church and ecumenical level, systematically promoted by the Metropolis in Greece. Also important is the editorial contribution on these issues of the Academy for Theological Studies of the Metropolis of Demetrias, headed by the director of the Academy Pantelis Kalaitzidis.

30 Slomp & Vöcking (2011, 214) interestingly notes that “Russia gradually established a colonial empire extending into Central Asia. Russian Orthodox missions among Muslims had limited success. The end of the Soviet Union ushered in a new period in the relations between Orthodox and Baptist churches on the one hand and Muslims on the other.”

31 Russian Orthodox Church Representation to the European Institutions. Retrieved from <http://orthodoxeurope.org/> The Russian church also has its own journal, which began publication in November 2002. The *Europaica Bulletin* is both the news bulletin of the Patriarchate of the Russian church as well as that for inter-Christian and interreligious activities. Its basic purpose, however, is to provide information about the activities of the office of the church of Russia with the European Union, the intercultural or interreligious meetings it co-organises with the European Union, and its participation in such meetings.

32 According to the latest Pan-orthodox Council (Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church), which was held in Kolymvari, Crete, on June 20–25, 2016 in the Orthodox Academy of Crete, the Russian, Antiochian, Bulgarian and Georgian Orthodox churches were absent. In our understanding, their absence mainly reflected political reasons which affect the Orthodox church’s relations as well.

33 See *Fitzgerald* (1993, 55–70) on the commitments by the Roman Catholic church to interreligious dialogue from the Second Vatican Council onward.

34 On the pioneers of Islamic studies and the dialogue between Christianity and Islam, valuable are the works by Maurice Borrmans, Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, Georges C. Anawati and many others. *Borrmans & Laurent* 2002.

35 Since then, it has been realised at regular intervals, as in January 1993 and again in 2002.

36 For the entire transcript and proceedings of Assisi, as well as the list of participants, see the text of the Pontifical Council “Iustitia et Pax”, Assise, journée mondiale pour la paix, 1987.

37 <http://www.wcrp.org/>

38 Retrieved from <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/bossey-february-2009/20-02-09-statement-on-the-gaza-war.html>

39 For the issue and its contents see: *Christian and Muslim women dialogue takes shape*, <http://www2.wwc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-08-82.html>
 40 *Tsompanidis* 2014, 460–461.

41 Since the 1980s, Petros Vasiliadis (*Vassiliadis* 2007), emeritus professor of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, has been one of the main proponents of the new “paradigm” of *Christian testimony* (mission) in the postmodern period. Following the path of the Archbishop of Albania, Anastasios Giannoulatos, and Fr. Ion Bria, he promotes the concept of *Christian testimony* (mission). He insists on the necessity of inter-Christian and interreligious dialogue, and notably that of the liturgical renaissance. A continuing agent of this tradition in matters of Ecumenical Theology and Dialogue is my colleague Stylianos Tsompanidis. For the issue under research, the contribution of ecumenical theology and of the Orthodox churches within the framework of the WCC with religious plurality and mainly with Islam, the subject of the reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement and the relations within the churches and with the other religions, we draw from Tsompanidis 2015, 103, 293 and particularly 334–335, where he argues that “fundamentalism, which is apparent in all Christian traditions, even when it does not appear as explicitly anti-ecumenical, constitutes a challenge for the Ecumenical Movement. The challenge does not emanate only from within, that is from Christianity itself, taking the forms of the various forms of fundamentalism and fanaticism. It is linked more to the revival or the “return” of the big religions – especially of Islam, but also of Buddhism and of Hinduism [...]. The twenty-first century will be characterized – as is stressed with certainty on many sides – by religious pluralism. How the Ecumenical Movement and every church will react to this evolution remains one of the biggest challenges.”

42 An interesting approach to the Christian mission and the call to Islam is made by *Salmi* (2016, 161), who understands the issue of proselytism, which is a broad topic that historically has been disruptive and which continues to disturb relations between Muslims and Christians, as a “mutual positive desire to involve the other in the divine goodness (basically in terms of values) that both Christians and Muslims observe. The crux of the issue, however, is not this religious imperative of “calling” the other to correct faith (*da’wa*), or bearing witness or preaching the “message”, nor is it the moral values invoked by Muslims and Christians with the common factor of faith and synergy, but rather the conflict of interests, hegemony, and the imbalance in relationships.”

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Tiivistelmä

Angeliki Ziaka, Kirkkojen ja islamin uskontojenväliset haasteet ja yhteydet Euroopassa

Uskontojenvälinen dialogi on verrattain uusi ilmiö. Vaikka kristinusko on vuosisatojen ajan elänyt islamin vaikutuspiirissä, moderni uskontodialogi on syntynyt vasta 1960-luvulla. Toisen maailmansodan jälkeen pyrkimys ihmiskunnan keskinäisen rauhan vaalimiseen vahvistui. Kirkkojen maailmanneuvoston (KMN) muodostaminen ja Vatikaanin II konsiili (1962–1965) edistivät etenkin kristinuskon, islamin ja juutalaisuuden vuoropuhelun käynnistämistä. Kirkot ovat liittyneet eri tavoin uskontojenväliseen dialogiin, usein velvollisuudentunnosta eurooppalaisia sekulaareja valtioita kohtaan. Kirkollisen toiminnan rinnalla on myös lähtökohdiltaan ja luonteeltaan akateemista uskontodialogia.

Nykypäivänä uskontojenvälinen dialogi etsii keinoja, joilla käytännössä voitaisiin vaikuttaa polttaviin ajankohtaisiin ongelmiin, kuten väkivaltaiseen uskontojenväliseen vastakkainasetteluun. Tavoitteena on myös selkeyttää uskontoja koskevaa keskustelua. Uskontojenvälisen dialogin tärkein anti on antaa ja kehittää keinoja ihmisten välisen vuoropuhelun ja yhteyksien edistämiseen.

Islamin synty 600-luvulla ja nopea leviäminen toi kristinuskon kohdakkain islamin kanssa. Kristillisessä tulkinnassa islamia on pitkään tulkittu kielteisesti ja sen on katsottu edustavan uhkaa. Nykyinen ekumeeninen patriarkka Bartolomeos on voimakkaasti korostanut suurten maailmanuskontojen dialogin tärkeyttä ja erilaisten hengellisten perinteiden arvoa. Moskovan patriarkaatti puolestaan on 1990-luvulta alkaen osallistunut eurooppalaiseen uskontodialogiin. Viime vuosina myös Kreikan ja Kyproksen kirkot ovat aktivoituneet uskontojenvälisessä dialogissa, etenkin yhteyksiin luomisessa islamiin. Esimerkiksi Kreikan kirkon piirissä esiintyy osaltaan historiallisista syistä johtuen vihamielisyyttä islamia ja muslimeja kohtaan. Islamilaisen maailman keskellä toimivien vanhojen patriarkaattien piirissä esitetyt kehotukset rauhaansa uskontojenväliseen rinnakkaineloon ovat erityisen tärkeitä Lähi-idän nykytilanteessa.

Katolisen kirkon piirissä Vatikaanin toinen konsiili avasi tien uskontodialogille. Katolinen kirkko on sitemmin ryhtynyt dialogiin mm. islamin, juutalaisuuden, buddhalaisuuden, shintolaisuuden ja hindulaisuuden kanssa. Keskustelut käydään lähin-

nä paikallisten kirkkojen tasolla, mutta toimintaa ohjaa uskontodialogeista vastaava paavillinen virasto. Assissa vuodesta 1986 järjestetty Rauhan ja rukouksen päivä on konkreettinen ilmaus katolisen kirkon pyrkimyksistä maailman uskontojen välisessä vuoropuhelussa. Nykyinen paavi Franciscus on toistuvasti toiminut sen eteen, että ihmisten, uskontojen ja kulttuurien keskinäinen kunnioitus edistyisi ja niitä jakavat raja-aidat voitaisiin murtaa. Katolista kirkkoa voi luonnehtia uskontodialogin tiennäyt-täjäksi: dialogi on kytketty osaksi kirkon hallintoa ja uskontojenvälistä vuoropuhelua harjoitetaan kaikkialla katolisessa maailmassa kutakuinkin yhdenmukaisesti.

KMN on erittäin aktiivinen toimija, jonka monet ohjelmat ovat pyrkineet edistä-mään rauhaa ja uskontojenvälistä ymmärrystä eri puolilla maailmaa. Lukuisista pro- testanttisista kirkoista vain jotkin yksittäiset kirkot ovat ryhtyneet dialogiin islamin kanssa, useimpien suhtautuessa välinpitämättömästi tai kielteisesti toisten uskontojen edustajiin. Länsi- ja Pohjois-Euroopan protestanttiset kirkot ovat kuitenkin aktivoitu- neet islamin kohtaamisessa etenkin vuoden 2000 jälkeen ja aivan erityisesti ajankohtai- sen pakolaistulvan seurauksena.

Tärkein ajankohtainen kysymys Euroopassa on, miten uskonnolliset yhteisöt keskustelevat ja kohtaavat yhteisessä julkisessa tilassa. Jos vielä jokin aika sitten pai- notettiin miten tärkeää on integroida muslimit sekulaariin Eurooppaan, yhtä merkityk- sellisenä voidaan nyt pitää paikallisten kirkkojen pyrkimyksiä luoda tilaa kristittyjen ja muslimien kohtaamisille. Uskontojenvälinen dialogi tarvitsee tänä päivänä enemmän kuin koskaan aiemmin uskontojenvälisen toiminnan painopisteen siirtämistä paikalli- sille yhteisöille.