

CEC PEACE CONFERENCE 2019
10-12 September 2019 - Institut Protestant de Théologie Paris

Panel discussion: The Abrahamic Religions and the Dialogue of Peace

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The growing tensions and conflict between Christianity and Islam in our time and especially the violence and terror that appears as a result should concern all of us to find out how we should react before it's too late. Any effort to underestimate the dimensions of the problem it is not the solution. Not either to confront violence using violence.

Thus, it is needed to study carefully the religious dimension of the situation, searching for the common principles for peacebuilding. Since much of the conflict has a religious dimension, it is needed to find out these resources within Christianity, Judaism and Islam for peacebuilding.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the Abrahamic religions, should enhance and sustain a dialogue of peace in an effort to understand each other, but more importantly to reveal the deep resources for peace they have.

This points to the general conclusion that each religion should understand why some of their people are involved in violence, terror and even in wars, while others are deeply committed to peacebuilding, human rights and democracy. We should not hide under the carpet our problems, neither should we underestimate them, but rather to find out the real reason behind these negative and dangerous behavior.

This make our panel discussion very important, because we are participating in an interactive discussion on the role of the Abrahamic religions in peacebuilding. Obviously, from my part I recognize that my effort is to indicate the deep resources of Christianity for peacebuilding.

Theological principles.

Defining the term peace in Christianity is our starting point.

Peace is not just a virtue among many others. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, where he exposes the mystery of the fulfillment of God's internal will for the salvation of all people through the Church, he states that our Lord Jesus Christ *is our peace* (2,14), and that *He came and proclaimed peace to all* (2,17).

In many other instances, Paul calls God as God of peace (Rom 15,33. 16,20. 2Cor 13,11). Paul wishes that *may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways* (2 Thess 2,16).

For Paul peace is a gift given to us by the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Galatians he states that *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace ...* (Gal 5,22).

Another important characteristic of Christianity, that we should take into account, is love. According to Paul, love is also a fruit of the Spirit.

In the Gospel of John, our Lord Jesus Christ strongly insists that *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (John 13,34-35).

The understanding of this passage is very useful in our effort of revealing the deep resources of Christianity for peacebuilding.

The command of love is a command given directly by the Lord. We should love all people around us, even our enemies. In fact, we cannot even have enemies, because -according to Genesis (1,26)- God created humankind according to His own image and likeness.

The measure of love is also given in the above passage. We should love all people, our neighbours (as it was defined in the parable of the Good Samaritan) as Christ have loved his apostles, who was crucified, buried and resurrected from the dead for the salvation of all. The virtue of love is the sign to recognize someone as a true Christian.

Thus, in order to summarize, peace and love should guide everything in our behavior in the world, otherwise we are not true Christians.

In the morning prayer we said something very useful to our discussion that is *the litany of peace*, as we call it in the Orthodox Church.

This prayer is used in many cases in the Orthodox worship as in the divine liturgies, in vespers and matins, in the sacraments of baptism and matrimony and many other prayers.

In particular, in the three first entreaties of *the litany of peace*, we pray for peace. In the first one we say in peace let us pray to the Lord, in a way that peace becomes the needed condition before daring to pray to God. And peace here points to our relationship with God, our neighbors and our conscience. If we are not peaceful with God, our neighbors and our conscience, it is better not to pray at all.

After having set the theological principles of peace and love, it remains to find practical ways to apply them. Although the theological basis in Christianity is very clear, the effort to apply it in practice is by no means easy. Mainly because of the fact that actions taken in the past cannot easily be put aside.

Thus, on the one hand we can see people who unfortunately prefer to appeal to the past in order to give more strength to the existing violence and terror, while others on the opposite prefer to insist on human rights and democracy.

From this point of view the case of Cyprus and the relationship between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, especially after the Turkish invasion in 1974 is a test case for coming to the right conclusions of what shall be done regarding the general issue we discuss in this panel.

Thus, it is useful to describe the situation that exists in Cyprus and the role of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus in this situation. The Cyprus problem is not a religious problem but a political one.

In the past Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were living together without having serious problems in their daily life. However, after the Turkish invasion in 1974 and the move of the Turkish Cypriots to the north side of Cyprus the situation has changed. There was a separation of the two communities. Also some 200 thousand Greek Cypriots became refugees in their own country.

Hostile feelings appeared in both sides because of the results of the war. Many people from both sides died or remain missing, more in number for the Greek Cypriots and less for the Turkish Cypriots. Families are still waiting for their beloved people to return.

Many Christian monuments and historical churches are in very bad condition, some of them became mosques, some destroyed. Icons of great value and importance removed from many churches and sold illegally. Many Christian cemeteries were desecrated.

Nevertheless, in this difficult environment, the Church of Cyprus established a formal dialogue between the religious leaders of both sides in Cyprus, namely between the Archbishop Chrysostomos II, the leader of the Church of Cyprus and the Mufti Atalay, the religious leader of the Turkish Cypriots.

The achievements of this dialogue for both sides are very notable.

List of achievements for the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus

- Opening of churches for worship closed since 1974. From 2012, a total of 33 churches were opened.
- The trust and relation Archbishop Chrysostomos II established with the Mufti as well as the new leadership of Evqaf facilitates the signing of the historic agreement between the Archbishopric of the Church of Cyprus and Evqaf for the restoration works of Apostolos Andreas within the framework of the technical committee on cultural heritage (2013).
- In August 2015 Mufti Atalay ensures that the decision by former TC leader Mr Talat for the Church of Cyprus to pray at the small chapel at the Monastery of Apostolos Barnabas once a month is fully respected
- A joint delegation of representatives of Archbishop Chrysostomos II and the Mufti Atalay coordinated start visitation to churches, mosques and cemeteries on both parts of Cyprus which are on the priority list of the religious leaders with the purpose of joint assessment and follow up. The progress in itself builds trust , empathy and inspires joint advocacy.

- Increased interest and attention on freedom of religion and the role of religion in the Cyprus peace progress as a result of the RTCYPP (Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Progress) and Swedish government's role.

List of achievements for the Muftiate of Cyprus

- For the first time in Cyprus history the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus personally receives the Mufti in the Buffer Zone at the Home of Cooperation and accompanies him to two major historic mosques in the government controlled areas of Cyprus he had never been to before due to the conflict. Both leaders visit the mosque fo Bayrakdar and Hala Sultan sending a sympolic and yet powerful message.
- The Archbishop supports the request of the Mufti to visit all the mosques in the government-controlled areas, which he had never been to before.
- Archbishop Chrysostomos II supports the request of Mufti Atalay to allow a special crossing for pilgrims of Turkish origin to worship at Hala Sultan Tekke and receives the political support of President Anastasiades.

The above list of achievements for both sides proves that the dialogue between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Muftiate of Cyprus is successful. Thus, the test case of Cyprus should be taken seriously into account in any effort to confront tensions and conflict between Christianity and Islam in Europe.

Concluding I would like to repeat Paul's wish:

May the Lord of peace himself give to all of us peace at all times in all ways (2 Thess 2,16).