

WORLD PUBLIC FORUM
“DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS”

Dialogue between Islam and Christianity.

“Capacity – building for interreligious dialogue”

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Title: Religious coexistence between Christians and Muslims. The experience of Cyprus.

The island of Cyprus became a Christian country since the first century A.C. and, according to the New Testament (Acts of the Apostles) it was the first Christian place outside Palestine. A great number of monuments, documents, holy places and objects reveal the origins of Christianity in Cyprus and compare the island with significant persons of the early church (Apostles Paul, Andrew, Philip and Barnabas, Mark the Evangelist, Saint Lazarus and many other).

The Muslims appeared for first time in the island during the second half of the 7th century A.C. and their appearance is connected with the Arab's invasions. Their presence and residence were circumstantial and of course it had not any religious character. In short terms we can say that since the 7th century and until 1571-2, years during which Cyprus conquered by the Ottoman Empire, in the island is found a small number of Muslims, belonging to the groups of: Saracen or Arab invaders or captives, Albanian mercenaries who were employed as guardians of the sea borders, merchants from various areas of Middle East, Gypsies and slaves of African origin.

During the period which starts at 1571 and finishes at 1878 and is known in Cyprus History as the period of the ottoman rule, the presence of Muslims in the island was more massive and permanent. Hence, we can say that, during that period, coexistence between Christians and Muslims was a reality, which functioned as a very significant factor which affected every area of the life, the history and the culture of the country.

It is proved that during the period mentioned above there wasn't any conflict between the followers of the two religions, which had a religious character or it was due to religious causes. Moreover, it is also proved that the main cause of every conflict in the island, was the exploitation of the religious diversity of the members of the two main religious communities of the island, by foreign countries or forces, which aimed to achieve their imperialistic goals.

Religion in Cyprus, undoubtedly, functioned, during the last four centuries, as a unifying factor and this opinion is founded on many facts. I will try to give some special examples in the following minutes of my speech. But first of all I would like to underline that the understanding of those examples will be much easier if we take into consideration the historical truth that a great percentage of the Muslim inhabitants of Cyprus is of Christian origin and belongs to the groups of Cryptochristians or converts from Christianity by force.

A. Mutual respect for places of worship

It is well known that the vast majority of the Islamic mosques of Cyprus were former Christian churches, orthodox or roman catholic, built during the periods of French and Venetian conquerors of the island. When the Ottomans came in 1571-2, they converted a big number of churches, especially those which belonged to the Roman Catholics, in Islamic mosques. It is remarkable that many of those mosques kept their old Christian names, and some of them continue to keep it until today, and those names were in use not only in every day's discussions but also in official documents of the Ottoman government, or the British by which it was succeeded, even in official papers of the department which was responsible for the maintenance and function of Islamic foundations and is known by the name E.V.C.A.F.. That's the reason why in nearly every town in Cyprus there is a mosque, the name of which is known to every writer, to every traveler and every inhabitant of Cyprus as Ayia Sophia (in English God's Wisdom) which means Jesus Christ.

The old mosques and those which were built later, were respected by the Christians, not only during the period of ottoman rule, when the Muslims were belonging to the governing class of the population, but also after 1878, when Cyprus became a colony of Great Britain and of course after 1960

when the island was proclaimed as an independent country. It is very important to take into consideration that after 1974, the year during which Cyprus was invaded by Turkish troops and the members of the Muslim community moved to the northern part of the island, Cyprus government spends a lot of money, every year, in order to keep the Muslim places of worship in good condition. At the same time, people respect these places because they respect their Muslim compatriots and because this kind of behavior matches their culture and their religious beliefs.

On the other hand, a large number of Christian churches have been destroyed or plundered in older times and especially after 1974. Icons have been stolen and sold and Christian attributes or places profaned. However, all these actions have nothing to do with religion and of course they can't be considered as expressions of religious fanaticism. It is more than clear that all these effects were incited by political or nationalistic forces or factors outside the island, or they were due to actions of smugglers or members of military or political authorities and generally persons who are not related with religion in any way.

If we travel through Cyprus and if we visit towns or villages with mixed population before 1974, we will find out that in many of them, the Christian church and the Islamic mosque are located in the same quarter and sometimes in the same plot. Moreover, if we discuss with the eldest, who were living in such villages or towns before 1974, we will be informed that the ringing of the bells from the church or the voice of the muezzin from the minaret were parts of their every day life, absolutely acceptable and respectable. I would like to give for example an official paper from the British period, which contains the answer of the religious leader of the Muslims of Nicosia to some Muslim nationalists, inhabitants of an agricultural community, who were complaining about the ringing of the bells of their village's church, at the time of the Sunday's service. His answer was as follows: "You are not better Muslims than we are. In Nicosia we hear the ringing of so many bells but we are not annoyed".

The best example through which we can prove the mutual respect which Muslim and Christian Cypriots give to the sacred places, is the fact that some places or buildings are used as places of worship by the members of both communities. We can mention the church or catacomb of Forty Saints near Tymbou village, where the Christians used to gather for religious purposes. The same place was also a shrine for the Muslims and it was

known under the name “Kirkklar Tekke”, which means “convent of Forty Saints”.

Another example is the old church of Saint Therapon (means the person who cures people, the doctor) which is located in the town of Larnaca and which is visited by Muslim pilgrims, to whom it is known as Turabi Tekke. The third well-known example is the Christian shrine of Agioi Fanontes (Saints who appeared) near Kyrenia, which was respected by the Muslims as the Tekke Haziretti Omer.

B. Coexistence in monasteries and tekkies.

The presence of persons of a community in religious places of the other community, in a permanent basis, proves in the better way that there was a peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. The most of those persons were tenants of agricultural areas, which belonged to Orthodox monasteries or Muslim tekkies, or workers, who were employed in various works of the above institutes. We can talk about the five Christians, inhabitants in 1901, of the most famous Muslim place of worship in Cyprus the Tekke Hala Sultan and even more for the 133 Muslims, who were listed in the census of 1921 as inhabitants of several Orthodox monasteries in Cyprus.

Moreover, Muslim and Christian workers, beside of their religion or tradition, were used in repairing of ecclesiastical buildings or mosques . The same used to happen in the field of supplies, where we found Muslims to supply churches or monasteries with building material. Augasida’s monastery, for example, bought, in 1912, building material from a Muslim of the village Sandalaris, when at the same time and for years, a Muslim from Lurugina was the tenant of the property of Saint Thekla’s monastery. Furthermore, permanent supplier of gun-powder for the Bairam’s celebrations, for the Muslims of Famagusta, was a Christian merchant named Emfiertzis.

C. Cooperation in the field of charity.

Another field, in which religious diversity couldn’t prevent peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims, was the field of charity. In the pages of the register books of the Archbishopric of Cyprus and those of other metropolis and monasteries we can see entries which are related with sums, given to Muslim inhabitants of the island as aims in several cases. It is

extremely interesting that among those persons we can find prominent servants of Islamic religion such as hodjas and dervishes and of course the fact that in some cases the said money was being used to satisfy religious needs. In some entries, for example, we can read that the essential money for the ceremony of circumcision of Muslim boys had been provided by the Orthodox church and in some other, persons who were in the service of mosques and tekkies had been supported in various ways by the Christian church.

In many other cases the members of the two religious communities cooperated in order to face the problems which were arising from earthquakes or other physical causes. In 1953, for example, when two Christian villages in Paphos district had been destroyed by an earthquake, the Muslim imams and hodjas participated in the committee which was created for relieving the people, who lost their relatives and houses.

D. In Social-religious field

It is well known, especially among the eldest, that in villages with mixed population, the performance of an engagement or a wedding, a baptism or a circumcision or a funeral, were, till 1974, occasions, for Christians and Muslims, to meet together, to celebrate, to cry or to amuse together. Such events were accepted as intercommunal or bicomunal, in spite of the fact that for Christians the religious ceremonies have a sacramental character, while for Muslims they are regarded, more or less, as legal or canonical affairs.

In Cyprus, until 1960-1970, it was very usual for Christian girls to dress and adorn the Muslim bride and for Muslims to accompany a dead Christian to the cemetery. In many cases Christians were present in Muslim houses at the day of the circumcision and they participate as “tata”, word which is in use by Christians and Moslems and means “godfather”.

A large number of Muslims, coming from every part of the island, were present in the church or the monastery at several religious anniversaries of the Christians, such as the days of Saint Andrew and Saint George and they celebrate with their Christian compatriots, neighbors or friends in the fair which was following the divine liturgy. At the same time, for Christians, the day of the Bairam was an opportunity to co-organize fairs, agricultural exhibitions and athletic games, for the members of both communities.

E. Today's situation.

According to what is said before, it can not be denied that religion in Cyprus had played a very significant and positive role which helped the inhabitants of the island, Christians and Muslims, to accept and respect each other and live in peace. We hope and we believe that the political and military factors and foreign countries which are interested in Cyprus affairs for their own reasons, will understand this fact and allow religion to reunify people and to build a peaceful future for all Cypriots.

It is true that during the last years something hopeful is happening in Cyprus. Christians can visit the occupied churches in the north of the island, unfortunately the most of them are found to be in bad condition, and Muslims can visit and use any islamic place of worship in the south. Archbishop Chrysostomos II believes that Christians and Muslims can live peacefully as they are used to do for centuries and already he had several meetings with the Mufti of Nicosia. A very important initiative has been undertaken by the bishop of Kykkos and Tylliria Nikiforos, with the establishment of the World Forum of Religions and Cultures. During the three meetings which already have been organized by the Forum, we had the opportunity to meet religious persons from the Muslim community and hear their views about the necessity of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and about the future of our country.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Cyprus tries to create a culture for reconciliation between the two communities of the island.

The seminar which is organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the World Islamic Call Society under the title “ Capacity – building for interreligious dialogue” is a very considerable initiative towards the target of bringing people together. Hence, we feel obliged to thank the organizing committee, especially Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, for the invitation and all of you for your patience to listen to my speech.