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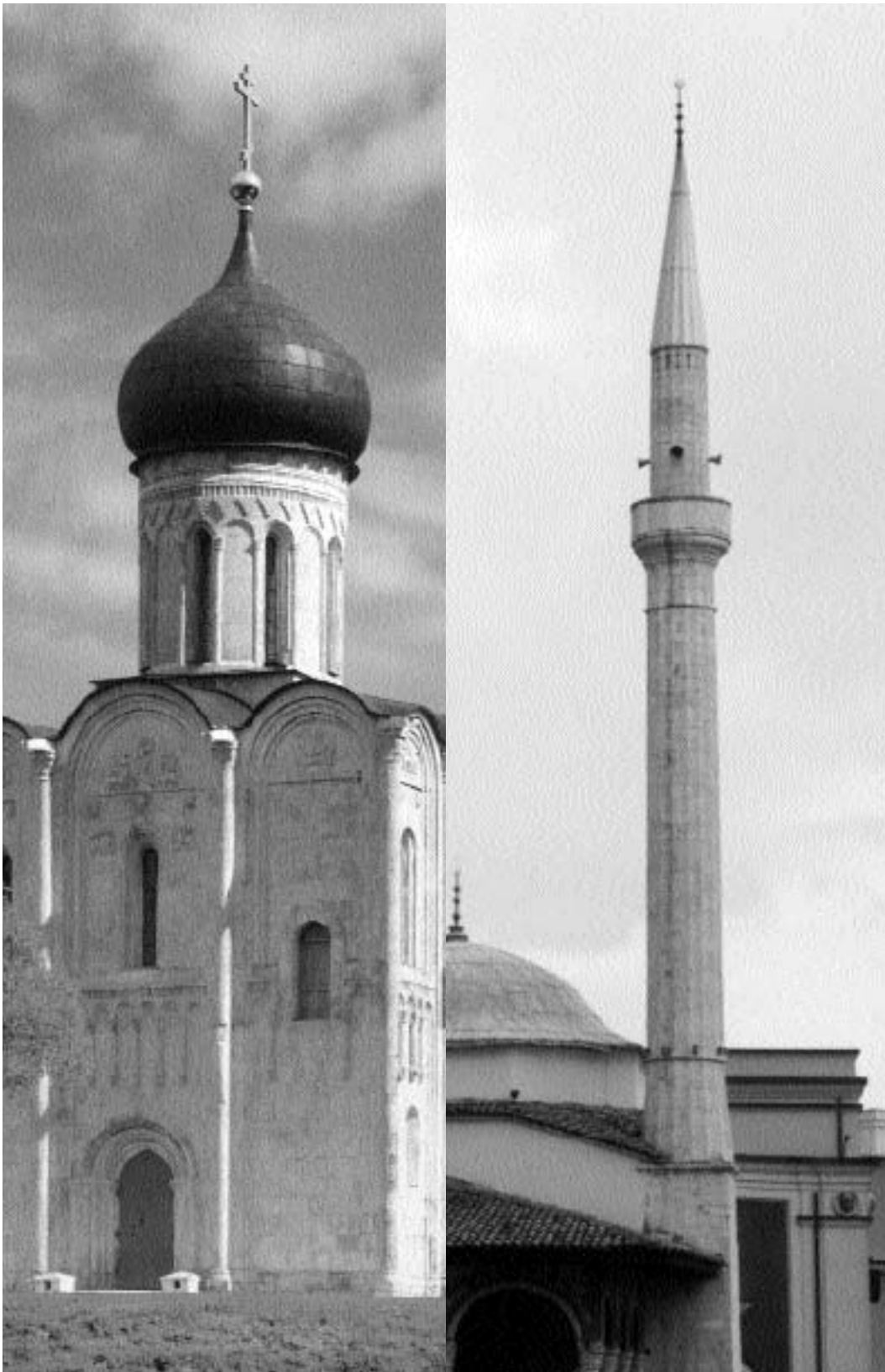
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GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS AND LOCAL RELATIONS:

Pitfalls in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

In 2002, Dr. Tarek Mitri, a noted Lebanese Orthodox professor at Balamand University, visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School (Winter-Spring 2003), and coordinator of Christian-Muslim Dialogue for the World Council of Churches, presented a week of talks to a small international conference of Orthodox at the Volos Theological Academy, Volos, Greece, that were remarkable for their practical depth and clarity.

There are many Orthodox Christians and Muslims who live with each other as neighbors, and there are times of crisis in their lives where they turn into enemies – but often this enmity comes as a result of a perception that does not necessarily reflect the local reality but the global reality. If we see global reality in terms of confrontation between Christians and Muslims, then our Muslim neighbor becomes a threat to us. There are many cases in which neighbors, living in peace with each other for decades, have seen their relationship deteriorate because of the perception they have of each other's religion, tradition, community, history.



Dr. Tarek Mitri

How does this happen? What are the pitfalls and threats that face us all in today's world?

Jihad, Crusade, and Religious Wars

We often hear words like “jihad,” “crusade,” “religious war,” “ancestral hatred.” These four words are used more widely now than ever before. Jihad and crusade function as mirror images. When Christians refer to Muslims being inherently violent, they invoke the word “jihad.” It carries a great deal of emotion. It is meant to frighten people. Often images go along with the use of this word: beards, swords, knives, blood. This is what the word “jihad” conveys in today’s world.

When Muslims use the word “crusade,” they equally think of what they see as inherent violence and western supremacy over Muslim people. They interpret crusade to mean religious war the way Christians interpret jihad to mean religious war. No matter that in English the word “crusade” might have lost its religious overtones; sometimes crusade is used in the sense of a campaign. A crusade against smoking has nothing to do with religion, it has to do with campaigning against a social or medical evil. Nevertheless, when George W. Bush (to mention one instance) used the word “crusade,” immediately for Muslims, the image of a Christian West waging an all-out war against the Muslim world came to their minds.

Ancestral Hatred

Now, I mention the fourth word, “ancestral hatred.” When wars in former Yugoslavia broke, many people in the West could not make sense of what was happening. They lacked the analytical tools to understand why it was that people who had lived together under one political system, and who seemed to be co-existing and intermarrying, suddenly became enemies and did not refrain from using wide-scale indiscriminant violence against one another.

The temptation has been to interpret what happened as a modern expression of an ancestral hatred. “Now,” the theory goes, “these people have a long history of hatred, and somehow in recent years they were prevented from hating each other; but once the authoritarian socialist-communist political system that controlled their lives and prevented them from hating one another imploded – when the system collapsed – they went back to the thing they know best: that is, hating one another.”

I’m sure you sense that I personally don’t agree with this, and it is not only untrue but quite dangerous to see conflicts in terms of “ancestral hatred.” In fact, I am going to argue that it is not ancestral hatred that produces war; it is war that reinvents ancestral hatred. History is not always something we remember: history, unfortunately, is often something people invent. Ancestral hatred is not just transmitted, it’s invented.

I remember visiting Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia and I met a young Orthodox woman who told me how little she knew about her family history until the war broke, when her grandmother started telling her stories about Orthodox Christians and Muslims killing each other at the end of the 19th century. She wondered why it was that her grandmother had been silent for so many years, and was only now telling these stories. Much to her dismay, she discovered that the stories she was hearing from her grandmother were not stories that her grandmother remembered, but were stories that her grandmother had recently heard on the radio. So, it is the media and what it represents that often fabricates history and “memories” of hatred. It is true that there are real memories of hatred in the world today, but often these memories are activated, exaggerated, and as I said, even invented.

Sensationalism

A few moments ago I spoke about a number of temptations that we face in today’s world. Let me mention three of them. Never mind the words I will use. I will explain them if they sound a bit complicated. They are the temptations of sensationalism, essentialism, and culturalism.

We live in a world where things that are sensational capture the attention of media, and things that capture the attention of media become important. I have a journalist friend who often jokes about this. He says, “If a dog bites a human being, and even if this human being dies, that isn’t much to talk about; there’s nothing sensational in it. If a human being bites a dog, it’s front page news, even if it doesn’t mean much.” Sensationalism is about images that prevail, that simplify and blur reality. During the war in Afghanistan, like many of us, I watched CNN, and I often heard journalists apologize because the pictures they were showing were not very clear. I often said to myself and to my son, “If I were them I would apologize for the clear images, because it is the clear images that are the most misleading.”



Christian - Muslim conference organized by the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture – Rabat, Morocco, June, 2002.

Christian - Muslim conference organized by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East – Damascus, November, 2002.

When you clearly see a man beating a woman, then you think, “This is essentially what the relationship between men and women is about.” So, clear images often blur or distort realities, but realities are much more complex than they seem to be. This is the problem with sensationalism.

Essentialism

Now, what do I have to say about essentialism? Those of us who are religious are often tempted to fall into the trap of essentialism because religion is about things that are essential, and essential things don’t change. This is true as far as religious matters are concerned. But there are those who project unchanging religious truth into the realm of sociology and politics, and therefore see *people* as essentially the same. I have heard a number of Orthodox Christians speak about Muslims in a way that suggests that Muslims yesterday, today, and tomorrow are essentially the same; that there are characteristic elements that have to do with the essence of Islam that explain their past, present, and future behavior. And you can hear Muslims speak about Christians in much the same manner. “Christians are essentially the same, past present and future. This is how Christians are.”

Let me give a more concrete example. One of my students has worked on

imaginary constructs, a study of how people, in their imaginations, construct an image of each other. He looked at hundreds of texts, Muslim, western, and Orthodox, and he found that most of the Muslim texts from the last ten years describe western civilization as “selfish,” “materialistic,” and “dominating.” These are the three features of western civilization as perceived by the Muslim authors he studied. Now, if you cross the border and go to the West and see how westerners in the media and in many books depict Muslims, another three words appear very often: “fanatic, irrational, and expansionist.” You can find these words on both sides again and again, sometimes with variations.

So, you have an imaginary construct in the Muslim mind about the West. Of course, there is selfishness in the West, there are materialistic tendencies, and there is a propensity for being dominating. This doesn’t mean that every western person is selfish, materialistic, and dominating, but the problem with an essentialist perception of reality is that you do not see the differences between people. You tend to attribute an essence to people. Their lives are not a variety of lives, but only expressions of the same essence.

Now, if you look at how this plays out, you will see that these same essentialist words are attributed to Orthodox by westerners and Muslims alike. If you read French or German newspapers in the mid-nineties, whenever they talked about Serbs (and they almost always referred to them as “Orthodox

Serbs”), they were “fanatic, irrational, and expansionist.” Whenever there was a reference in the western press to the conflict in Chechnya, then the Russians are seen as “fanatic, irrational, and expansionist,” while the Russians see the Chechens as “fanatic, irrational, and expansionist.” Imaginary constructs can sometimes be interchangeable, and what your imaginary construct proposes as far as “the other” goes, can also be proposed by “the other” to depict your reality. So, that is the pitfall of essentialism.

The critique of essentialism is extremely important. It is important also for theological reasons. I think that God has created us all unique and that it is part of the theology of creation to recognize that we are different, that we are not essentially the same. A Muslim in Indonesia is not the same as a Muslim in the Philippines, and a Muslim of the Philippines is different from a Bosnian, a Chechen, an Egyptian or a Palestinian. People are not the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. People change. Their reality changes and also their hearts change.

Culturalism

The third pitfall is that of culturalism. Now, there was a time, mostly in western Europe and North America, when there was very little interest in the cultures of other people. When there was interest in those cultures it was motivated either by colonial design, economic interests or political domination. Most westerners who studied Africa or the Muslim world did so for colonial or economic reasons. Some did so for religious reasons: missionaries were interested in the cultures of people they wanted to convert. But again, it was part of a design of domination.

In the last half-century, however, with the development of anthropology, ethnology, archeology, history, and the democratization of tourism (which is not the elite activity that it used to be twenty or thirty years ago), people have developed a curiosity and knowledge of other countries. But along with this curiosity and knowledge has developed a tendency to interpret other people’s behavior in terms of what is *thought* to be their culture. I know many people who have visited here in Greece, who return after spending a week in Mykonos or on Santorini and say, “I’ve been to Greece. You know, the Greeks are this and that... this is how Greek culture functions...” and they make theories about your behavior on the assumption that your personal behavior is simply an expression of a whole totality called “the Greek culture.”

Culturalism is the tendency to explain people’s behavior in the name of a culture that has its own coherence. Of course, all of us are the products of a culture, but there is always a tension between the culture in which we are brought up and the many other cultures to which we are exposed. And all of us, whether we are Christians or perhaps even humanists who do not believe in religion, have beliefs that are universal. They transcend our own culture. Therefore we live in a tension between what is supposed to be our culture and the universal values that surround us. Cultures are not completely self-enclosed; they also interpenetrate, cultures borrow from each other, they give and take, there is traffic between cultures.

Culturalists are people who do not see this. They are interested in differences, they are not interested in similarities. This is true even among historians and sociologists of comparative religion.

Twenty or thirty years ago in the West, if you were a sociologist you tended to think that differences between religions are not so important, that religious phenomena are basically the same and that religious claims to uniqueness are subjective claims. “Christians *think* they are unique, Muslims *think* they are unique, Hindus *think* they are unique, Imara Indians *think* they are unique, but we French scholars see that they are not so unique, they are alike.” Implicit in this, I believe, was an attempt on the part of historians and sociologists of religion to discredit the Christian claim to uniqueness. “All religions, after all, are about the same. There is nothing really unique about Christianity. Even resurrection is an old idea...” Then they refer you to the Caananite religions, of Ishtar and so on. At that time the dominant trend among intellectuals was to minimize the religious and cultural differences.

In the past ten or fifteen years, however, the tendency has become the opposite; that is, to maximize the differences. And those very people, who in the past thought that we were much the same religiously and culturally, are now obsessed with difference. You can test this for yourselves. Try to make a comparison between meditation in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, and immediately people will say, “No, no, in Hinduism, mediation is...” Of course, Hindu meditation is different than Christian meditation, but there is an increasing obsession about differences that overshadows similarities.

Let me go a step further and talk about one of the paradoxes of globalization. We speak of globalization as both an economic and a political process. I am sure that I don’t need to propose a definition of globalization in political and economic terms, but I do want to speak about the cultural dimension

of globalization. This is a process of cultural uniformization. If you walk on the streets of Volos you see the way women are dressed, the way men are dressed, the McDonalds and Goodies restaurants, the television, and so on. These are the manifestations of a process; sometimes overt, sometimes subtle, sometimes smooth, sometimes violent, but it is a process that is attempting to make us culturally uniform.

(As an aside, people sometimes underestimate the importance of entertainment, but to a great extent, entertainment shapes the cultural personality. Just think of young people who spend hours and hours of their lives playing video games, listening to music, watching movies....)

So, here you have a process of cultural uniformization, but at the same time, people are not the same. People want to be different and therefore they look for distinctions. I would even say that the more people look alike, the more they want to be seen as different. The smaller the difference the more important it becomes.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate this. Once I visited my son's school in France, and there, all the boy students (and I think all the girls as well) had on blue jeans. I said to my son, "But they are all the same. This is almost a school uniform." He said, "Uh-uh-uh-uh, they're different. There are no two pair of jeans alike." And he started telling me, "This is Levi's 501, this is 502, this is something else." For them, the minor differences were important. For me they were not perceptible, I could not even see them.

Once when Sigmund Freud was treating a case of hysteria, his patient always compared herself to her twin sister. Much of her hysteria had to do with an irrational attempt to differentiate herself from her sister. Freud calls this "the narcissism of minor difference." Just think – two twin sisters that look alike, but one of them is obsessively interested in differentiating herself from her twin to the point of becoming hysterical. I'm going very far afield here, and I am not saying that we all have the disease of narcissism of minor differences, but one has to be cautious of possible pitfalls.

I like very much the Gospel metaphor of the narrow gate, and I think that as Christians we are always invited to go through the narrow gate. And it really is narrow. On the one hand we have those who think that all people are alike, essentialists who don't care about differences; and on the other hand, culturalists who maximize differences. The narrow gate is that of people who recognize difference but without exaggeration. We recognize difference where there is difference, but we don't aggrandize, maximize, or

exaggerate minor differences.

So these are the three pitfalls; sensationalism, essentialism and culturalism and you can see that they do affect much of our perception of each other across religion and culture.

Now, as I said, there is also the reality of conflict in today's world. There are many more conflicts in today's world than anyone thought there would be after the Second World War. (I personally don't like to call it a world war, it was a European war, but Europeans think that Europe is the world, and therefore war in Europe is a world war.) After the war was over, most people thought that this was the end, that we were entering into a phase where people would not fight each other. The League of Nations, and later, the United Nations, were created with the assumption that peace should prevail among nations. The U.N. Security Council was supposed to make sure that peace was secure, but the irony of history is that the Security Council, if you look at the 2,372 decisions it has taken, is all about conflict. These decisions were not about securing peace, they were about dealing with conflicts. So, we live in a world of conflict. Conflict between nations and conflict inside of nations; Indonesia, the Philippines, Nigeria, Sudan, Chechnya, Kosovo, Macedonia, the list is very long.

Now, in the past, conflicts were seen in terms of their political, social, and economic determinants. People fought over land, over power, or over national representations (that is, they thought of themselves as an independent nation entitled to statehood, so they fought those who wanted to prevent them from having a state). This is how we interpreted conflicts and there was very little attention paid to the role of religion in conflicts. But if you look at what has been said in the last ten years, there is an increasingly obvious tendency to view religion as a primary determinant of conflicts. To refer to religion as a primary determinant of conflicts, however, is a corollary related to the pitfall of saying that conflict is an expression of ancestral hatred.

Because religion is about memory, religion and memory cannot be dissociated; they are intimately related. And because conflicts are seen as modern expressions of ancestral hatred, there are those who increasingly see religion as playing a far greater role in conflicts than ever before. Now, I am not saying whether this is true or not, I am talking about perceptions. People are talking about conflicts as being more influenced by religion because people have come to realize that the secularization theory that prevailed as an explanation of the relationship of religion and society does not hold true

anymore. What is the secularization theory and what is happening today? This is the second part of my presentation.

Secularization

Let me propose a simple definition of secularization; it is not very easy to define – there are 172 definitions, so you must try to choose one and then stick to your own definition. Mine is that secularization is a social-historical process in which a society in a particular place, in a particular historical context, achieves greater autonomy in relation to religious institutions, symbols, and teachings. Twenty or thirty years ago most people thought that secularization was a universal phenomenon and that it was progressive – that when a society was secularized it could not go back. Secularization was perceived in terms of a chronological scheme. The more developed a society is, the more secularized; the less developed, the less secularized. Therefore, access to development accelerates secularization.

When French people visit Sweden, they think of Sweden as the France of tomorrow; when Greeks go to France, they think of France as the Greece of tomorrow; and when a Lebanese comes to Greece, he thinks of Greece as the Lebanon of tomorrow. All of this is basically an expression of the secularization assumption, that with modernization and urbanization comes secularization. But (the theory goes) since our societies are at different stages, one is more developed and therefore more secularized, another is less developed and less secularized, and all of this fits into a chronological scheme. This was the assumption made by most sociologists of religion twenty years ago.

I don't think that anyone would dare to defend the secularization theory now. Most people realize that secularization has led to movements of counter-secularization. Think about the Soviet Union. It was probably the most secularized society in the world. Secularism was the official state religion, if I may say so, and yet, the political change that has taken place in the Soviet Union has reversed the process of secularization. Not only is religion returning, not only is Orthodoxy returning to Russia (which we rejoice over), but there are all kinds of crazy religions as well – spiritists, cults, sectarian movements – and all of these are phenomena of counter-secularization.

There is a famous sociologist of religion, an American, Peter Berger, who writes that our century (he wrote in 1999 so it was the last century) is most "furiously religious." There is something furious about the way religion has

come back. This is true of Orthodoxy and this is true of Islam. These are probably the two religions that have returned to the public stage most prominently.

Opinions are divided on how to evaluate this process of counter-secularization. There are people, especially those who are religiously minded, who say, "This is very good, there is a future for religion, people are now coming back to God," and they try to imagine this next century as a century of mysticism. Andre Manrouf, the famous French Minister of Culture under General De Gaulle, said, "The 21st century will be religious or it will not be." So, there are many people who predicted more religion and were rather happy about this, but there were also people who were apprehensive because they said that the return of religion will mean the return of conflict. "If Muslims become more Muslim, if the Orthodox in Russia become more Orthodox, then they will fight, and fanaticism, bigotry, all of this will increase."

Again, to use a Gospel metaphor, one can use the example of the wheat that grows with the tares. The return of religion is a little like this. You have to look for the wheat. As in the Epistle to the Galatians, we Christians have to look to see if religion is bearing any fruit: love, kindness, patience.... You have to look. You cannot applaud the return of religion just like that, nor should you be apprehensive; you must be very cautious. There is wheat in this, but you have to find it. It is not all wheat.

The Clash of Civilizations

Now, this leads me to the third part of my talk, about the clash of civilizations. The theory of the clash of civilizations starts very simply with the reasoning that in the past people fought around national lines; Germans were at war with France, Greece with Italy, and so on. Later, people fought along ideological lines; the U.S.A. and Western Europe against the Soviet Union and socialist countries – capitalists versus socialists. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet system that frontier was abolished, and now the emerging frontier is predicted to be not national or ideological divisions, but across civilizational divisions. One famous theoretician of the clash of civilizations, a Harvard political scientist named Samuel Huntington, has put forth the theory that the world is made up of seven civilizational areas. One is Slavic-Orthodox, one is Muslim, one is western Judeo-Christian, one is Confucian... and all of these civilizational domains will be in confrontation with one another in the future.

He suggests that there are fault lines between these civilizations that will turn into bloody borders, and the most unlucky people are those on the wrong side of the bloody borders. If you are a Christian in the Muslim world, if you are Orthodox in the western world, if you're a Muslim in a Confucian world, then you are in trouble because you happen to be on the wrong side. If you are a Polak in Bulgaria you are finished. I'm simplifying a very complicated theory, but the idea is that borders will be defined by civilizations and cultures and we all know that civilizations and cultures have been greatly shaped by religion. Therefore, in this clash of civilization theory, the role of religion as an identity marker, as a definer of borders, is emphasized.

But this is not religion as we religious people view it. It is not religion in terms of its content but in terms of how it functions as a provider of identity. Let me say that there are people in today's world who fight in the name of religions in which they either believe very little or have ceased to believe. When Irish Catholics fight in the name of Catholicism, in fact many have ceased to believe in Catholicism as a foundation for life, but they continue to fight in its name, as do Protestants and Orthodox Serbs and so on and so forth. But then, if you fight in the name of a religion in which you have ceased to believe, sometimes you are tempted to rebelieve in this religion, in the name of which you fight. You reinvent your own religion. The most eloquent case in my view is the case of Chechnya. Chechen Muslims were hardly Muslim; they were quite secularized. There were some Sufis in Chechnya, but most Chechens were secular. Once they started fighting the Russians, however, they began fighting in the name of Islam, in which they did not believe, but the more they fought in the name of Islam, the more they became Muslim. So here is the process of the Islamization of Chechnya. This was also true of Bosnia. Bosnian Muslims were not terribly Muslim, but they fought in the name of a religion that was their identity. They did not particularly believe in it, but the more they had to fight in its name the more they believed – in their own way. They “reinvented it.”

To sum up thus far, I have tried to warn against a number of pitfalls: sensationalism, essentialism and culturalism, then I looked into the problematic secularization theory and the process of counter-secularization. I focused on the role of religion in conflicts in today's world, and then suggested that in the scenario in the clash of civilizations, religion is now invited to play a greater role in defining borders among people.

Crisis in the Nation-State

One other thing I should mention is the crisis in the nation-state. Nation states have become too big to solve small problems, or too small to solve big problems. Either they have weakened because of this or they have become more authoritarian. What happens in most societies when the state is too weak or the state is too authoritarian, is that people tend to go to their traditional community for security and meaning. It is when the state becomes weak that you go back to your community.

In Egypt there was an earthquake, and I remember one political scientist who wrote an article about the growth of the Islamic movement in Egypt after the earthquake. The empirical data he collected was that when the Egyptian government proved to be too weak to provide for the needs of the victims of the earthquake, some Islamic organizations with Saudi Arabian money stepped in to offer medical aid and material security to the victims. So, if the state is weak, people go to their communities for security.

Now, if the state is strong or repressive, people also turn to their communities. Take, for example, Iran before the fall of the Shah. This regime was very despotic. If you had an opinion that was not in favor of the Shah you were thrown into prison. The only place you could find security was in the mosque. The mosque provided security for Iranian opposition to the Shah. One reason why Khomeini's revolution was so popular is that Islam, the mosque, the Shi'ite clergy of Iran, offered an alternative to a despotic state. So, when the state is weak, religious communities invite people, but they also welcome people when the state is authoritarian.

Global Confrontation and Local Reality

Now, if we take all of this into consideration, we will see that there is a growing tendency to see the world in terms of global confrontation, at least between Christians and Muslims. Therefore, if you perceive the world in terms of global confrontation, then you look at local realities as expressions of this global confrontation, and this is extremely dangerous. I think that the great danger of our time is to look at local reality, which is real, as a reflection of a global perception, which is not real.

Christians and Muslims in the Philippines are real. “Christianity and Islam

in the world” are not real. They are imaginary constructs. It is most dangerous to allow imaginary constructs to disturb local realities. Neighbors should not be sacrificed on the altar of perceptions, of ideas, of imagination, of representations. But this is happening today and it is very dangerous. It destroys the social fabric in many places and drives apart people who had lived together for many years, even for centuries, as neighbors and co-citizens.

Violence spills over. You know, when the war started in former Yugoslavia, many people who were sure that the war in Bosnia was going to spill over to Kosovo. Then when Kosovo broke people said, “It will spill over to Macedonia,” and it did spill over to Macedonia. God forbid that it may spill over again. Why is it that violence spills over? It is precisely because of these globalizing perceptions. If you are Macedonian and you think that the conflict is between Muslims and Christians in Kosovo, then in Macedonia, because there are Muslims and Christians, it seems clear to you that they are bound to fight. So the conflict in Kosovo feeds the conflict in Macedonia.

I was in Nigeria three weeks ago, and people told me that there was strife between Christians and Muslims, who were telling each other, “You are killing our people in Indonesia.” There were people in Nigeria avenging their brothers and sisters in Indonesia. There has never been a solidarity between Nigerian and Indonesian Christians, or Muslims in Nigeria and Indonesia. This has nothing to do with solidarity. It has to do with a perception of what conflicts are. If you perceive a conflict as a conflict between a global reality called “Christianity” and a global reality called “Islam,” then it is bound to happen anywhere, and if you have a conflict in some remote part of the world, it will reproduce itself somewhere else. In your local situation, you will have the enemy image confirmed and transmitted to you from another place. In this way, a conflict that has its actual causes *outside* religion becomes a conflict elsewhere *about* religion. This is this process of the spilling over of violence.

Implicit to this is the idea of collective punishment, that you are responsible for those who are your brothers and sisters in faith, that you are responsible for their crimes. Let me end with two examples of this: one from my own country, Lebanon, and one from the United States after September 11th. During the war in Bosnia, the Orthodox University of Balamand in Lebanon hosted a commission of international dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. We had various representatives of different Orthodox churches: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch,

Jerusalem, Greece, etc. and two bishops were supposed to come from Serbia. They did not come. We also had a Catholic delegation. On the last day of the meeting, a bus took members of the commission, including Catholic cardinals and Orthodox metropolitans, to a reception hosted by the Orthodox Metropolitan of Tripoli. As we were driving, we heard an explosion. We found out later that four young people had tried to plant a bomb on the road to kill us, but they themselves were killed as they were planting the bomb. Three of them were killed and the fourth lost his sight. On behalf of our church, I had to go to the tribunal and suggest that we did not want to take them to court, we were not pressing charges – but as it was a criminal offense the court case goes on anyway.

The youth who survived, who is now totally blind and in prison, comes from a Muslim village near the monastery at Balamand and his parents are peasants who work on the monastery’s land. The relationship between the monastery and the village has been extremely good for three or four centuries. The people in this village love the monastery, they venerate the Theotokos, they have icons in their houses – they are Muslims, but they love our Church. This was the boy’s background. When he was asked by the judge, “Why did you do this to your neighbors?” he said, “Because they had Serbs with them and the Serbs are killing Muslims in Bosnia.” So, he held us responsible for the crime that he accuses Serbs of committing against Muslims in Bosnia. The remote reality in Bosnia has affected the local reality between the monastery and a small Lebanese village.

The second example is that after September 11th the famous American boxer, Muhammed Ali Clay, visited “Ground Zero,” as they now call the site of the destroyed Twin Towers, and one American journalist asked in an interview, “What does it feel like when you know that people with whom you share a religion have committed an abominable crime?” He asked this in a very aggressive manner, and Muhammed Ali replied, “It is exactly the same as if I were Christian when Timothy McVeigh planted his bomb in Oklahoma.” In other words, Muhammed Ali was saying, “What do I have to do?” If there are Muslim criminals behind September 11th, am I responsible?

We asked the same question in Lebanon when we talked to the young man from this village “What do we have to do? No one is doing this in our name. Those who are killing Muslims in Bosnia are not doing this in the name of the Orthodox Church. Why do we have to be punished for a crime they have committed?”

So, this is the kind of world in which we live. We must avoid the pitfalls I have suggested, and use the resources that are within our faith: it is on purpose that I have used gospel metaphors to suggest a way out of those pitfalls.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Is the Church a gift of love to the world, or a tribe whose duty it is to protect and support its members?

DR. MITRI: You have raised a very difficult question: “Is the Church a gift of love to the world, or a tribe?” Because if it is a tribe, tribes have unconditional solidarity. If a member of a tribe commits a crime in a tribe, then the tribe defends him. There is no personal responsibility. In Christianity there is personal responsibility; responsibility is not collective. I believe that in the hierarchy of values, universal justice is higher than confessional solidarity, although I agree with you that this is a very difficult problem because there is a tension between our natural solidarity with our brothers and sisters in faith and our adherence to the universal principles of justice.

Let me give you another example from my own country of Lebanon. During the war Christians fought with Moslems. Then, at some point Christians began fighting each other. One of the Lebanese Catholic bishops, in his Sunday sermon asked, “What are you doing to your brother?” and he quoted Genesis, “Cain, what did you do to your brother?” Two days later I was invited to speak on television with this same bishop, and I said to him, “You know, I liked very much your reference to Genesis, but I am surprised that you waited until Christians started fighting each other to use this as a call to be guardians of our brothers. Muslims also are our brothers in humanity, in Adam. Adam represents the pact of humanity that binds people together.

So, the Orthodox in Bosnia are my brothers and sisters, that is true, but also the Muslims in Bosnia are my brothers and sisters, and I need to be a guardian of them all. This is very difficult, I know. It is a great tension for us to be in solidarity with those with whom we are bound by ties of religion, while at the same time we have an obligation to be in solidarity with those to whom we are bound by ties of humanity.

How do we practice this? We can correct natural solidarity with conscience. On a personal level we can interact socially with the “other,” we can

remember that “people are better than their religion.” But we also have to know that while we can protect our relationship with our neighbor against all odds, still, we may lose.

QUESTION: When you spoke of the danger of global perceptions, I thought of how in the parables Our Lord rarely spoke in abstract general terms about humanity. He almost always spoke “locally”...about one’s neighbor and how he must be treated. Perhaps there is something in this we can use this as a model of how to view local realities without distortion.

It also occurred to me that in teachings about interior prayer, good Orthodox spiritual fathers say, “Don’t use your imagination. Don’t try to create something out of your own mind or pick something up from other people’s experiences or ideas. Just pray.” Have you found that there is something built into these fundamental Orthodox attitudes that is an antidote to globalizing perceptions?

DR. MITRI: Thank you for what you have said. These things you have pointed out might well be a spiritual resource for us Orthodox to avoid the pitfalls that I described in my presentation. At the same time I am painfully aware of the fact that many of us Orthodox have a propensity to reactivate historical memories, and then to look at the present and the future through the eyes of the past.

We need to use the spiritual resources that you have invited us to use, that of prayer, not as an act of commemoration, but as something novel, something that we do anew. Praying is a way of influencing reality anew and I think that this is extremely important for people who are tempted – sometimes in the name of tradition, sometimes in the name of faithfulness, there are many pretexts – to see the present as just a repetition of the past. Prayer, in no matter what form, must be a constant reminder to us that we cannot reproduce the past, we create the future. ✚