

Oxford Interfaith Forum: Patriarch Athenagoras: An Orthodox Dialogue with Islam.

The recent English publication of Olivier Clément's *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras*, first published in French in 1969, brings one of Clément's major works, perhaps his masterpiece, to the English-language reader. In his Foreword, Archbishop Elpidophoros, Greek Archdiocese of America, describes the book as “the key that unlocks the treasure chest of Orthodox Christianity, an experiential faith that unfolds through engagement with other people by embracing through love and understanding the diversity of the world.” The Dialogues are a deep meditation on the Church in the modern world, on the nakedness of modern man, on hell, on paradise, on world religions, on communion.

In 1968, Athenagoras, Patriarch of Constantinople invited the French theologian, Olivier Clément, to Istanbul, to explain the student uprisings and social turmoil of May 1968. Clément was invited to spend several weeks at the patriarch's side, in constant conversation. He wrote the *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* on his return to France, and they were first published in 1969. Out of print in France since 1975 and never translated into English, the Dialogues take you into the heart of the Church's relationship with the world, to the heart of what it means to be a Christian in today's world.

I would like to focus on one aspect, the interaction of Christianity with Islam, as presented by the Patriarch, Athenagoras, and the Professor, Olivier Clément. This offers a view of Islam that we rarely see in the Orthodox world. The freshness and openness of this approach is all the more striking because elsewhere in his writing, Clément displays an inability to get beyond his view of Islam as a religion of the inaccessible Monad. And this despite the fact that in one of his earliest 'go to' sources on the prayer of the Philokalia, the *Petite philocalie de la prière du coeur*, (1953) Clément would have been able to read one of the many Islamic prayers in which Allah is closer to the worshipper than her own skin: Allah sees me, Allah is present close to me, *Allahu nazhiri, Allahu hadhiri*.

In his book of dialogue with Islam, *Un Respect Têtu* (1989), Clément evokes Athenagoras' assessment of Islam as "a rebirth of the faith of the forefathers and patriarchs—Islam not only precedes the Incarnation, it precedes the Law of Moses," and he presents Islam's challenge: "The message of Mohammed is a challenge to a Christianity that is at once established, divided and

closed off. Against Christianity's claims to have captured, to possess and to monopolise grace; against the (Orthodox) temptation to almost magically objectify the divine 'energies' and to imprison the Holy Spirit in a kind of 'church-olatry'; Islam summons us to the *mysterium tremendum* of the Inaccessible One, the imminence of the judgment, the eschatological nature of the feast to which we are invited.”

Yet, Clément never fully rejected his early characterisation of Judaism and Islam. In *Transfiguring Time* (1959) he wrote: "In today's Islam and Judaism, the religions of Abraham, God's personal reality is revealed, but this personal God is, as it were, enclosed within his transcendent sovereignty." (Clément, 2019, p.76)

At a time when the West is constantly tempted by a complacent Islamophobia, we should listen carefully to Athenagoras' words. The passages from the *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras* take us from the Patriarch's childhood village in Epirus, Northern Greece, to his early work as an archdeacon in Monastir, Macedonia, (now called Bitola) and into his dialogues with Olivier Clément in 1968. We then hear from Clément himself as he contemplates the empty spaces of Hagia Sophia.

Page 33. Childhood, Tsaraplana, Epirus, Northern Greece – the Patriarch is speaking. He was born in 1886. His father, the first of his family to go to university, was doctor to the village. His uncles and cousins still reared sheep in the region.

“A whole diverse civilization was looking for a means of expression. The Turks had fallen onto us like snow: but under the snow, we felt warm. The region where I was born was occupied by the Turks a whole century before Constantinople. There were Christians and Muslims in Tsaraplana and everyone lived peacefully together. The one Turkish policeman—I remember his name, Ali Bey—had nothing to do. There were no quarrels, no fights, no lawsuits. Christian and Muslim children played together. The Christian family would invite their Muslim friends to a baptism, and the Muslims would invite us for their child's circumcision. In this biblical existence we all felt ourselves to be the children of Abraham. On the feast

day of Ibrahim—that is to say, Abraham—the Muslims would roast a ram. The Christians would roast a lamb for their Paschal feast. On the great feast day of St. George—the church close to our house was dedicated to St. George and had an ancient icon of the saint – we would go up into the hills before dawn to see the sun rise, and then, after liturgy, there was dancing. But this same day was the Muslim feast day of Al Khidr, the servant of God and spiritual guide—in Jewish tradition he is identified with Elijah, and in Christian tradition with the forerunner, John the Baptist. That at least is what the Muslim holy men, the dervishes, told us. The children would play on the swings: If you played on the swings on this feast day, it would bring good luck for the whole year.”

The Dervish fraternities played an important role in the Ottoman Empire. They were the guardians of Sufi mysticism. Each fraternity had its special way of invoking the divine name. There seems to be a hidden history of deep encounter between the hesychasts, the Christian practitioners of the Jesus prayer, and these masters of the holy name. Some of them gave special reverence to the breath of Jesus, the *nefes-Issa*. Muslim or non-Muslim, everyone would seek out the dervishes, for advice, for consolation, even for a cure.

“The dervishes were very good men, very open to Christianity, often true spiritual masters. Their communities were called *tekkes*. There were many dervishes in Epirus. They looked like Orthodox monks—the same long black robes, the same headgear—except that some of them cut their hair.”

“There was a dervish in our village. His name was Iamil. He often came to our house and shared our meals. My mother and sister loved him and nothing was kept secret from him. He knew their secrets of the heart better than the village priest!”

p.46 As Archdeacon in Monastir, Macedonia (during the First World War)

At that time, Macedonia was a crossroads for the great mystics of the Abrahamic religions. On Mount Athos, hesychasts practiced the prayer of the heart, in order to find the ‘uncreated light’ that shines from the face of the resurrected Christ. In Thessaloniki, the last of the cabbalists, whose ancestors had come from Spain, pored over the secrets of the Bible, in order to set the Shekinah, the divine Presence, free from its exile. All around, the dervishes sought to lose themselves in the invocation of the Name, so that Allah alone would make himself known through them.

In Macedonia, there were important *tekkes* of the Mevlevi and the Bektashi fraternities. Archdeacon Athenagoras befriended the dervishes. And in a very rare gesture, the Mevlevi invited him to take part in their spiritual observances. Was not Djedal-Eddin, the founder of the fraternity, surnamed Rumi, the Roman, that is to say, of Byzantium? Was he not a friend of Christians, whose spiritual brother was a Greek monk, near whom he wished to be buried at Konya?

And then we move inside the prayer house

The guests are seated on narrow couches around the walls of the prayer house. The musicians take their place on the stage. Some have tambourines, some have flutes. The bronze tambourines give the rhythm a dull, dark beat: the flutes have a plaintive nasal wail, that penetrates and awakens the soul. The sheikh chants a verse of the Mevlana, the words of the Master, Djedal-Eddini-i Rumi....

And then the dervishes stand. The rhythm gets faster, and they each begin to turn on the spot, turning faster and faster. The bodies spin, the world turns, but the soul becomes the still point, the immobile axis. The soul is freed from thought and becomes anchored in silence and peace. “They turn in a kind of ecstasy,” the Patriarch told me, “and their faces! Their expressions! The face of inwardness, infinitely peaceful and filled with light.”

This apprenticeship in the encounter of peoples and religions profoundly marked the future patriarch.

Page 126. The Patriarch and the Professor are talking about Islam, in 1968

Patriarch We have co-existed with Islam for thirteen hundred years,

ever since the Muslims conquered Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, in the seventh century.

There are many points of contact, but it is hard to assess their impact. Even though real debates took place, especially towards the end of the Byzantine era, these intellectual interactions are the least interesting. Each side tried to convince, or rather overwhelm, the other side, without any real attempt at understanding.

But in the life of the people, in that Old Testament atmosphere that I knew as a child, there was a real interchange. At the spiritual level, one can discern even deeper relationships. There is a remarkable convergence in the practice of the invocation of the divine name, and some of the dervishes had a real respect for the name of Jesus. There was an encounter. But it's not that someone copied someone else—people of prayer have their own way of communicating and it leaves no trace behind.

Professor The scholars of comparative religion have labored long and

hard to show that the hesychast 'method' is borrowed from the Muslim

dhikr. But the 'method' existed long before the birth of Islam! If you consider

the respect that the early Muslims had for the Christian monks, it

is more likely that the borrowing was in the opposite direction. The truth

is that the invocation of the divine name, using the rhythms of breathing

and the heart, can be found everywhere—in India and in Japan. From

the beginning, the human body was created to become the temple of the

Holy Spirit.

Patriarch The holy fool in Islam and the fool for Christ in our tradition

show the same feigned madness and self-abasement. They become

the object of people's derision in order to free themselves. And we find

they have the same gift of prophecy, the same spiritual clairvoyance, to

which they abruptly bear witness.

Professor Today, first of all, we want to understand. And the mystery

of Islam causes us to stumble: this revelation that comes many centuries after the fullness of the Christian revelation, that acknowledges both the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Jesus. We cannot simply resolve this by calling Islam a Christian heresy, as St. John of Damascus did. But in that case, what is Islam?

Patriarch Perhaps we can say that Mohammed is a prophet of the Old Covenant. He himself refers to Abraham as “the first Muslim.” Islam is like a rebirth of the faith of the forefathers and patriarchs—it not only precedes the Incarnation, it precedes the Law of Moses. For many peoples, Islam made possible the passage, from a worn-out, idolatrous paganism, to the faith of Abraham.

Professor And Islam also encountered Judaism and Christianity. The Koran recognizes both Moses and Jesus.

Patriarch And many Muslims live in expectation of Jesus. He will come at the end of time as Mahdi and judge... Islam affirms that Jesus was already born, of a virgin birth. Jesus is the “seal of holiness,” just as Mohammed is the “seal of prophecy.”

p.152 Olivier Clément is speaking, about one evening in Istanbul, in 1968. At this time Hagia Sophia was a museum. Since 2020, it is again a mosque.

Earlier, I had been strolling in the Courtyard of the Janissaries, in front of the Church of Hagia Eirene, the ancient church dedicated to Divine Peace that the Turks had ringed around with bronze cannons. Once more, the smell of the wind from the sea on the old stones made me think of my childhood home in the Languedoc, in France. And once more I remembered my adolescent despair at being bathed in the great light of the Mediterranean, but unable to reach to the core, to the heart, of my being I had to meet and welcome in this Child of silence and gold.

He had taken me into the temple of his wisdom, this temple of his mad love, so that this light would no longer be that unattainable beloved.

The inscription around the cupola reads: “God is the light of the heaven and the earth.”

Hagia Sophia is no longer a church. After becoming a mosque, it was made a museum. What a strange museum! It is so vast that it always seems almost deserted, an invitation to the solitary pilgrim. There is no longer an altar, and, from its time as a mosque, the platform of dark stone, oriented southwards towards Mecca, ‘disorients’ the apse.

But these changes have no real importance and perhaps, even reveal new hope and new meaning. You discover that Hagia Sophia is not centered on its altar. Unlike Western Cathedrals, with their long naves that lead towards and culminate in a sanctuary in which the divine presence is concentrated, Hagia Sophia is the divine presence, in the totality of its light-saturated space. It is not so much a sacramental space like that of other churches. It is an ‘apocalyptic’ space, the symbol of the New Jerusalem, in which there will be no sun and no altar, because God will be all in all. Islam’s harsh purification has transformed this temple of the Risen Christ into the temple of the Christ who will come again in the glory of the Holy Spirit.

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