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## *The Fall of Constantinople:*

### *Orthodox Prejudices Towards the Muslim World*

*Orthodox Christians have never forgotten the fall of Constantinople. The city founded by Constantine the Great in 324 has been for them more than a capital of the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople became the heart of the Orthodox tradition, the place where patriarchs and emperors together ruled a Christian state.*

*Therefore, the fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453 turned into a tragedy that still influences the relationship between the Orthodox and Muslim worlds. Coming from Eastern Europe, a space called "Byzantium after Byzantium," we realize that we have to overcome the prejudices created by this sad event if we want to improve our relationship with our Muslim neighbours. We have to analyze the historical events and to understand the concrete circumstances.*

#### THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

At the beginning of the XV<sup>th</sup> century, the Byzantine Empire was already a shadow, a world weakened by wars and plots. The Turks were already settled into Asia Minor after two major victories against the imperial army: in Mantzikert in 1071 and in Myriokephalon in 1176.

The crusaders in 1204 obliterated the last efforts of reorganization, and Michael VIII Paleologos re-established in 1261 an ephemeral state. Osman I became Sultan of the Turks in 1290, and step by step his successors conquered vast territories in Serbia in 1389 and in Bulgaria between 1393 and 1396.

Adrianopolis became the capital of the sultans in 1365, and from 1371 on the Byzantines had to pay tribute to the conquerors. The total collapse in the year 1453 was just a logical consequence, and Mahomet II Fatih was carried out an unavoidable verdict.

It was just the end of an empire, like many others, but something was different: the religious perspective. Emperors like Constantine the Great (306–337), Theodosius I (379–395) and Justinian (527–565) succeeded in turning Christianity into a Byzantine citizenship, a common denominator of the Eastern world.

The problem was not the fall of the city, but the fall of the Byzantine symphony: the close cooperation between Church and state. The religious partner remained alone and had to coexist with a state which got "married" to another religion.

#### THE REIGN OF MAHOMET II

At the beginning of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, we have to look at these past events from another perspective: we must separate the political events from the religious ones. The fall of Constantinople was an event during a medieval war that happened to be between people of different religions.

If we take a closer look at the historical proofs, the Turks behaved much better than the crusaders did in 1204. The Eastern world forgot the sack of the city done by the Western knights, but remembered and condemned the one done by the Muslims.

Why? Because they mixed politics and religion in a mistaken and dangerous way. At the end of the fourth crusade, the Latins became the rulers of the former Byzantine territories; the Venetians got this way a huge

amount of the Byzantine land; the Orthodox Patriarch had to take refuge in Nicea, and Toma MOROSINI became the new Latin Patriarch.

Mahomet II was much more tolerant and accepted Gennadios II as an Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul. The Sultan was in fact an admirer of the old Greek and Roman civilisation and he was able to speak the languages of Aristotle and Caesar.

He wanted to be a successor of the great Eastern emperors and kept many Byzantine customs. He developed a good relationship with Gennadios, who was appointed according to the old Orthodox tradition.

The patriarch received the title of "Milet Besi" (the equivalent of minister) and became the spiritual and political ruler of the Christians who lived in the new Ottoman Empire. He had the right to interfere in the administration of justice and was exonerated from public taxes, a privilege obtained by the whole Christian clergy.

The Orthodox Church had the right to organize herself through councils and to celebrate religious feasts. In 1461, Mahomet II gave these rights to the Armenian Catholics and to the Jewish Rabbi as well.

If we make a sincere evaluation, the attitude of the sultan seems to be very liberal and open-minded for a period of the Middle Ages in a post-war situation. The sultan manifested this tolerant attitude towards the Christian churches, too.

It is true that many of them became mosques, but the edifices remained in this way respected places of worship. The historians recorded the moment when Mahomet reproved a soldier who started to destroy the beautiful mosaics of Hagia Sophia:

"I allowed you to sack the city and to enslave the inhabitants. Is that not enough for you? The buildings, the monuments, the public edifices are mine. You are not allowed to damage them."

These words prove, of course, the diplomacy of Mahomet II as well, who wanted to save the monuments. He was an educated person who admired the masterpieces of Greek architecture beyond the religious differences.

The Christians were able to keep their churches in the district of Fanar, where the headquarters of the Patriarchate moved in 1602. Mahomet II also showed an interest in Christianity, because he wanted to understand better the customs and the mentality of his Christian subjects. Gennadios was asked to write for the sultan an account of faith, and the patriarch wrote the treatise *The Way of Redemption for Humankind*.

#### DESTRUCTIVE INNER CONFLICTS

We also have to acknowledge that the Byzantine Empire was not always a holy place. The state of Constantine the Great collapsed first of all because of its corruption and because of the inner conflicts.

The imperial army and the political structures were used to transform religious debates into civil wars. This was the case during the iconoclast crisis (717–843), and the empire lost important oriental territories during such conflicts.

Several times, candidates for the imperial throne used external support in order to fulfil their purposes. In 1201

Alexios IV used this strategy to fight against his uncle, Isaac III Angelos (1195–1205), who seized power after he had blinded his brother, Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195).

Thus the conflicts led to the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders. History repeated herself and in 1590, John II asked the sultan Beyazid I (1589–1405) to support him against the future emperor Manuel II Paleologos (1591–1425).

From this perspective, the fall of the “Great City” sixty-three years later becomes a logical consequence. The Byzantine corruption created problems after 1453, too. The Church suffered because candidates for the Patriarchate started to offer money to the sultan in order to achieve this important position.

Even though the Orthodox hierarchy had been exonerated from all taxes since the time of Mahomet II, Simeon of Trapezunt (1466–1467 and 1472–1474) paid one thousand ducats for his position.

The Turks exploited this “Byzantine” idea and the amount of money doubled in the middle of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, while the patriarchs started to succeed each other quite often. The Church in this way faced great economic problems.

#### OPENING THE CITY GATE TO THE FUTURE

We should not try to excuse the abuses of the Turkish administration, but we have to acknowledge the mistakes of Christians, too. We should analyze all these events from an objective perspective, avoiding extremism and exaggerations.

Our attempt is not to excuse the crimes committed in 1453 or later, in Constantinople or elsewhere. Crimes

must be always condemned, whether they are committed by Christians, Muslims or people of any other faith.

We would like to stress the idea, however, that we have to overcome the prejudices and pains that come from the past. Historical events must teach us how to prevent future mistakes and should not create greater conflicts.

If we want to avoid suffering, we must understand the context that led to that suffering in the past. As Christians and as citizens of a new united Europe, we have to change our attitudes in many fields.

If we still perceive the Muslim world in a “crusader style,” we will never be able to build up new relationships. The fall of Constantinople must remain a historical event that is understood in its context, and should not be any longer a reason for tensions between us.

The city that unites Europe and Asia should rather play the role of a bridge. It should remain a sacred and holy place for both Muslims and Christians, and to be an Eastern capital of a new Europe.

#### Suggested Reading

- KARLIN-HAYTER Patricia, *Studies in Byzantine Political History. Sources and Controversies*. London, 1981.  
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#### Editorial Board of Confronti

### *Examples of Day-to-Day Interreligious Work:*

#### *The Confronti Experience*

*“Confronti” (an Italian word meaning “face to face dialogue” or “comparison,” not “confrontation”) is an interfaith ministry and magazine based in Rome. It started in the 1970s when two grassroots magazines, one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant, joined together to form as one of the first ecumenical magazines in Italy. In 1989 Confronti was founded, following and preserving this heritage while adding an interfaith dimension.*

#### FACE TO FACE DIALOGUE

Following its mission statement “to promote dialogue among the communities of faith in order to produce common actions for peace, justice and the integrity of creation,” Confronti represents a day-to-day dialogue and co-operation between different religions, as it is composed of Christians of different denominations, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and also secular people who are interested in focusing on the role of religion in society.

In a society becoming more and more pluralistic in its cultures and faiths, dialogue can become the catalyst to knock down the walls of fear, mistrust and fundamentalism and to build bridges of true mutual understanding and respect. But what is dialogue? It can take on various forms.



Over the years, Confronti has sponsored a series of initiatives events alongside the publication of its magazine, such as interfaith conventions and forums, international peace education projects and travel study seminars, for both adults and students.

Confronti promotes and supports dialogue and peace projects for the Middle East, such as an exchange programme between Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli educators who are invited to Italy (“Seeds of Peace”).

Also, a series of summer camps held in Italy for Israeli and Palestinian children (“Flowers of Peace”); or peace pilgrimages which allow Christians to visit the Holy Land and to meet with the different religious and cultural entities in a spirit of dialogue and service to peace.

#### THIS YEAR IN JERUSALEM, PEACE

At the beginning of 2004, Confronti promoted a peace delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories to visit different places like hospitals, settlements, refugee camps, peace centres, schools and kibbutzim; and to meet with politicians, intellectuals, moderates, extremists,

