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KRIKŠČIONIŠKOJI IR ISLAMIŠKOJI KULTŪRINĖS TRADICIJOS APIE ŽMOGŲ IR ŽMOGAUS LAISVĘ

Understanding of Human Being and Human Freedom
in Christian and Islamic Cultural Traditions¹

SUMMARY

The article is a comparative analysis of the philosophical and anthropological ideas inherent to Christianity and Islam. The researcher considers Christianity and Islam as cultural traditions sharing specific features since the early Middle Ages. The author argues that their philosophical conceptions of the human being's relation to God brings these religions much closer together. On the basis of texts of the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers, the article traces the formation of such fundamental ideas as human freedom and Divine predestination, deification and achievement of spiritual freedom, in particular, through the *Uncreated Light*. The author compares the concepts of Eastern Christian Church Fathers mostly with the postulates of the traditional theology of Islam (Kalam).

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje lyginamosios analizės kontekste nagrinėjamos krikščionybei ir islamui būdingos filosofinės ir antropologinės idėjos. Krikščionybė ir islamas analizuojami ne tik kaip atskiros religijos, bet ir kaip kultūros tradicijos, kurios jau nuo ankstyvųjų viduramžių turi bendrų specifinių bruožų. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad žmogaus panašus filosofinis mąstymas apie Dievą tiek krikščionybėje, tiek islame suartina šias dvi religijas. Remiantis graikų Bizantijos Bažnyčios Tėvų tekstais, straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip atsirado ir plėtojosi tokios pagrindinės Rytų krikščionybės idėjos, kaip žmogaus laisvė ir dieviškoji lemtis, dieviškumo ir dvasinės laisvės pasiekimas, kylantys iš *Dieviškosios šviesos*. Straipsnyje lyginamos Rytų krikščionių Bažnyčios Tėvų koncepcijos su tradicinės islamo teologijos (Kalamas) postulatais.

RAKTAŽODIAI: religijos filosofija, krikščionybė, islamas, žmogus, Dievas, krikščionybės ir islamo kultūrinės tradicijos.
KEY WORDS: philosophy of religion, christianity, islam, human being, God, cultural traditions of christianity and islam.

INTRODUCTION

This article shall argue religion as a social phenomenon that is based on the ideas of moral and spiritual relationships among people about their comprehension of God. In the philosophical context, religion has an anthropological essence since it is aimed at man, created for man, and offers the human being certain ideas and concepts for the realization of personal relations with the Absolute. Besides, religion also performs a communicative function because thanks to inter-religious relationships social and ethno-cultural differences among people and even societies may be removed.

Due to its anthropological and communicative essence, religion transmits to society sacred ideas, moral norms, moral principles of existence, thereby offering an absolute image of the relationship between man and God, as well as between various groups of people. The profound Spanish thinker D. Miguel de Unamuno wrote that God is an idea that avails people to universalize all the existence and to conceive their own lives (Unamuno 2005). God penetrates the sensible world and unites it with the transcendent, absolute one through Love. According to Unamuno, love is the basis for peoples' relationships. 'Love is a contradiction if there is no God' (Unamuno 2005: 81).

Theologies of the world religions share some common ideas in the justification of relationships between man and God, expressed in a specific theology. The personal desire in one way or another to comprehend God in Islam and

Christianity has always been justified not only theologically but also philosophically, using anthropology. As a result, these religions have developed religious concepts of understanding a person as well as methods, means, and categories that an individual should master on the way to knowing God. The result of knowing God in Christianity is cherished by any Christian goal – it is the achievement of a special spiritual state of unity of an individual with the Creator. In Christianity this task is well shown in the teachings of the Eastern and Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers of the 4th – 7th and 11th – 12th centuries. This aim was also described in Islam by Sufis of the classical era of the 11th – 12th centuries. Justifying spiritual and anthropological goals, Christian theologians and Muslim preachers have developed holistic moral doctrines using the philosophical categorical apparatus, developed mainly by the thinkers of Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Stanciene 2018). Compassion, love for man and God, mercy, pity, understanding, repentance, and prayer are among their fundamental concepts. Yet, the concepts of love and compassion still dominate in these religious systems and define the relationships between an individual and God.

The philosophical and religious description of the relationships between an individual and God regularly produces the need to develop moral imperatives, axiological and anthropological concepts and ideas that could justify not only a rea-

sonable and cognitive attitude of an individual to the Lord but also could explain the basics of interaction between people and communities on the principles of religious morality and spirituality.

For certain, there will always be moral principles and dominants in the substantiation of the man-God relationship, functioning as special communicators, carrying the principles of the ultimate morality and behavior. These principles, once elaborated in the Middle Ages, remain relevant because any society requires spiritual and moral harmony. This largely depends on the understanding and conceptual justification of the position and purpose of human beings in the world, their link with God, the possibilities of knowing God and self-knowledge, and predestination (Darginaviciene 2019).

Of course, a researcher, carrying out the comparison of Christianity and Is-

lam, shall always take into account the historical and cultural context of the advent of these religions and review their relevance to contemporary societies (Stanciene 2019). The Russian researchers of the medieval Arab-Muslim tradition and modern Islam (Al-Janabi and Kirabaev 2017: 43) note in this regard:

Comparison of the world of Islam with the world of Christianity shows that the problems solved in the Muslim and Christian culture arose in a concrete historical context. Consequently, each of them has a special cultural face. It is the Arab-Muslim culture, on the one hand, that allows us to talk about the tradition of continuity of pre-Islamic culture, and, on the other hand, to consider it as a result of cross-cultural interaction.

Now let us consider some of the fundamental philosophical and anthropological ideas and concepts of Islam and Christianity.

AN INDIVIDUAL IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: PREDESTINATION AND FREEDOM

I contend that Christianity and Islam share some of the religious-philosophical ideas, having an anthropological essence. These points include the relations between man and God with a peculiar understanding of a place of man as a pinnacle of Divine creation in the Universe, with substantiating the eschatological prospects of his life. Also, a reflection of human freedom is under consideration of both religions' thinkers and theologians. We are discussing some philosophical ideas of Christianity and Islam stressing their anthropological meanings rather than theological ones.

Deification and Human Spiritual Freedom in the Context of Christian Soteriology

The Christian doctrine of salvation is anthropological because it indicates the path of an individual to achieve eternal spiritual life in the divine world. It is vital to emphasize that Soteriology, being theological teaching about salvation, is more focused on the earthly personal life than on the "life" after death. Already early Christian thinkers outlined the opportunities, moral imperatives, and principles – through which a person can

improve themselves by fulfilling – gradually reaching a state of righteousness and going back to God. “Meeting” with God, or spiritual unity with the Creator, is the cherished salvation and the ultimate sense of spiritual freedom for those who seek it and take the path of perception of the best divine qualities, i.e. the path of deification.

The Christian doctrine elaborated the path of deification, i.e. accepting the highest divine features that allow attaining spiritual unity with the Absolute (Climacus 1908). At the same time, the Christian doctrine of salvation also reveals the duality and contradictions of human nature, which may lead people away from the Creator, if they interpret the freedom, given by God, for subjective purposes, rejecting the elevating way of deification. The Christian anthropology suggested a concept of human being’s duality retained over the personal life.

The Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers of the 4th – 7th centuries also justified such essential questions as the correlation between freedom of man and the divine predestination, the freedom of choice and destiny, and the possibility of achieving spiritual freedom by the context of soteriology. The Church Fathers revealed the “secrets” of the salvation of each person in the eternal spiritual life after death on the way of self-improvement, self-knowledge, and deification, where the cherished spiritual unity with the Creator was expected at the end of the difficult path. The author of “Theology: The Basics” McGrath (2017) describes the complex Christian concept of *deification*:

Salvation is here understood as “deification” – “becoming divine” or “being made divine”. It echoes ideas found in the New Testament (...). Thus the redeeming work of Christ – or (...) the Incarnation of the Word – is seen as directly related to the ultimate goal of creatures: to know union with God. If this union has been accomplished in the divine person of the Son, who is God become man, it is necessary that each human person should in turn become god by grace.

In the Patristic literature, often created specifically for monks and cenobites, the ideals of asceticism prevailed. In such works, the desired spiritual unity with God is shown to be the apex of deification that can be achieved *during a lifetime*. This meant revealing the essence of the concept of salvation.

The Christian concept of salvation makes sense both to justify spiritual immortality and to achieve personal freedom. Salvation has always been interpreted as an ultimate goal of moral and religious aspirations and, of course, as the highest gift of the Creator. For example, according to Gregory of Nissa (2016), the main meaning of salvation is for an individual to recover the likeness of God lost because of the original sin and to achieve the practically perfect freedom since the way to it is connected with the rejection of dependence on the imperfect earthly world. Salvation completely overcomes the alienation and unfreedom of an individual, and enslavement to sin in the perishable mundane world (Zozulak and Valco 2018). From a moral standpoint, the concept of salvation in the works of the Church Fathers has an *apophatic* meaning because the ideals of salvation deny death, the perishable human nature, the

very possibility of sin, imperfection, and unrighteousness that exists in the mortal world. Christian soteriological ideals lead to the world of spiritual unity with the Creator and the feeling of complete freedom which is connected with the world of the Divine and is possible only in the Heavenly world.

Ways and means of achieving spiritual freedom depend on the concepts developed in Christianity throughout different eras, mainly during the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and during the early Middle Ages.

Freedom and Freedom of Will in Eastern and Western Patristics' Traditions

I should emphasize that there is some difference in the understanding of human freedom and divine predestination which has historically developed in Eastern, i.e., Greek-Byzantine, and Western, i.e., Latin, Patristics during the formation of the Christian faith from the 4th to 7th centuries.

In Eastern Patristics, the understanding of human freedom is directly related to the ability of an individual to achieve salvation by consciously taking the path of self-improvement and deification. Surely, the phenomenon of God-man which eliminated the sinfulness of human nature, thus erasing the contradiction between the earthly and divine worlds, played a huge role here. Church Fathers put stress on the idea that the God-man – Jesus Christ – by His coming to the mortal world helped all mankind to achieve salvation and spiritual immortality. Each person with the help of their

will could thus achieve a state of spiritual freedom, free from the sensual and material dependence, i.e. that which takes a person away from God. Gregory of Nazianzus, a representative of Eastern Patristics, emphasized that the theological solution to the problem of salvation through the justification of the incarnation of God also meant the solution to the question of human freedom and an individual's freedom of the will. Jesus Christ restored the holistic and universal human nature, including freedom of will and choice. St. Gregory argued that after the Incarnation a person was able to act freely and independently to achieve salvation (Nazianzus 1994: 35). Freedom of will and action, however, doesn't preclude further help by the grace of God.

In general, in Eastern Patristics, unlike in the Western view, a person is understood to be an active and free being who, through their volitional actions, could achieve the ends at which those actions were aimed. In this regard, Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) set the direction for Western Patristics. Augustine's understanding of freedom of will and human freedom correlates with the explanation of the contradictions of human nature itself. Freedom of the will was originally granted to man by God but in the lifetime one may abuse freedom, which deepens the contradictions of his essence (Augustine 1998: 320).

Augustine's understanding of free will is linked to his consideration of the doctrine of divine grace and predestination. He believed, that actions and behavior were beyond one's will after the Fall. True freedom can only be obtained as a gift from God. Therefore, according

to the Western Church Father, the salvation of every individual and mankind as a whole is possible only with the action of God. A person, in his efforts without God's help, cannot achieve deification and salvation (Augustine 1998: 30–31). The human will is an instrument of God's action, and it depends only on divine arbitrariness, but not on a human being. Therefore, following Augustine, in Western Christianity the idea prevailed that salvation was necessarily conditioned by divine predestination because a person was completely dependent on the grace of the Creator. Yet, philosophically, the will as such is shown by Augustine to be the most important factor in supporting the human being's quest for spiritual unity with God and leading them through life to God (Augustine 1998: 401).

It should be emphasized that Eastern Patristics also didn't deny the work of God's Grace. But in the tradition of Eastern Christianity, it is shown as an auxiliary force on the way to eternal spiritual life. God's predestination meant not only foreseeing man's actions but also recognizing the role of an individual in achieving freedom and salvation.

The concepts of Christian Patristics on man, created in God's image and after His likeness – having been elaborated, for example, by Basil of Caesarea (1991) and Gregory of Nyssa (2016) – aimed at the knowledge of the highest absolute values, the creation of good and the implementation of noble deeds, the achievement of spiritual connection with the Creator. They are largely similar to Islam, including the justification of the position and purpose of man in the earthly world.

The State of Man in the Islamic Cultural Tradition: Peculiarity and Common Grounds with Christianity

In Islam an individual makes the virtuous result of the Divine creation but, as well as in Christianity, a person is considered *dual in nature*. The human being is contradictory and therefore embodies both light and darkness, good and evil. A person chooses their way of life according to the freedom granted by Allah. According to both religions, the freedom of choice imposes on man the responsibility for his earthly path and for what awaits after death in eternal spiritual life.

In my opinion, the anthropological views of Christianity and Islam can be interpreted in an axiological manner as intercultural bases uniting people with different religious identities. These common values stem from the justification of an individual's attitude towards God, which in turn determines the special mission and purpose of man in this world.

In the traditional theology of Islam (Kalam), the main purpose of human creation is shown as the creation of Allah's *viceroy* in a mortal sensual world. The phenomenon of the viceroyalty, representation, comes from Allah, therefore this position potentially exalts every individual (Sayed 2008) and makes it an *acme* of everything created, a model for everything that exists in the world. As in Christianity, the creation of man in God's image, in Islam is revealed as a special gift and mercy of Allah. However, this idea has the opposite side. Let us refer here to S. Zaman, a Pakistani researcher of Islamic anthropology, who believes that the creation of man in the image of

God and the viceroyalty of God in the material world imposes a great responsibility on each person and subordinates his life to one fundamental rule – to be a sincere and obedient *servant* of Allah. The scholar points out that ‘man is not only judged as the master-piece of the Creator of this universe; he is also His vicegerent on the earth’ (Zaman 1986: 327).

It is exactly *viceroyalty* that makes the human being the pinnacle of divine creation in Islam. The fundamental but contradictory nature of one’s attitude towards the Creator through *viceroyalty* is revealed through the Arab concept of *Abd*. It is almost impossible to find the adequate semantic equivalent of this term in the linguistic space of world languages. In its essence, *Abd* is an attribute of *Ubudiyyah*, i.e. the concept that reveals the essence of human nature. *Ubudiyyah* shows that man surpasses everything created and is the crown of divine creation but at the same time man is in constant service and worship of Allah. Zaman emphasizes in this regard that if an individual for some reason drops themselves from the height of the state of *Ubudiyyah*, they instantly lose the superiority over other creatures on Earth. ‘When he dethrones himself from the exalted station of *Ubudiyyah*, he is shorn of his title to the crown of the universe’ (Zaman 1986: 327).

The concept of *Ubudiyyah* determines the relationship between an individual and the Creator in Islam. If a person reasonably treats their supreme position of Allah’s viceroy on Earth, then they are bound to give the Almighty a proper answer, which is conscious worship and service throughout life. Through *Ubudiyyah* and *Ibadah* (*Ibadah* means worship,

expressed in the observance of religious rituals and rites) an individual perceives God, makes His omnipotence their own. The unique concept of *Ibadah* means the search for a meeting with the Creator, the possibility of spiritual unity with Him.

Here again, we may trace common ideas of understanding a person in Islam with a Christian awareness of an individual. In both religions, the purpose of man is described as the way of knowing God to find spiritual unity and fellowship with God. In Christian thinking it is a way of deification allowing a person to feel their belonging to the Creator. To clarify that goal, various concepts were created, for example, the conception of asceticism and divine ascent to God of Saint John Climacus (1908) and the Symeon the New Theologian’s doctrine of knowing God through the Uncreated Light (Symeon 2011).

Thus, Symeon the New Theologian (11th century) described in his works the spiritual path of monks, following which a person could achieve a state of *light-bearing* or *spiritual unity* with God. The divine light is immaterial and therefore is comprehended in a special, spiritual and mystical way. Perception of light occurs simultaneously as supersensible and superintellectual comprehension of the Trinity, as a dialogue between an individual and the Savior who came to deliver him. Symeon the New Theologian’s researcher C. Tsakiridou highlights a deeply personal, individualistic nature of the Uncreated Light (the divine light). As Tsakiridou (2011: 171) indicates:

The divine light is simple, but its simplicity should not be understood abstractly as unity or unicity. It is hypostatic, personal. Symeon identifies it with Christ

(...). Its continuous, unifying and vivifying energy fills every aspect of one's being.

According to St. Symeon, the divine light, being "visible" only by a special inner vision, raises the human being to the level of knowledge of God. Man is one with the Creator only in light but only if light allows to know themselves. Symeon, who had many years of monastic experience of seeing the divine light, describes it as a dialogue with Christ, but Christ is also the Trinity God. Symeon (2011) in the Hymn XXV depicts his own personal and mystical union with God through the Uncreated Light:

You appeared to me as light, illuminating
all of me with all
Your light,
And I become light in the night, though
I was in the middle of darkness (...)
Now, listen, I tell you the awesome things
of the double God,
and the things that happened to me as to
a double person!
He took up my flesh, and gave to me his
Spirit,
And even I myself have become God by
divine grace,
Moreover I am a son of God by adoption.
Oh what dignity!
Oh the glory!

Having united in light with God, an ascetic achieves perfection in spirit and transforms himself by perceiving the Uncreated Light. Tsakiridou (2011: 172) writes:

The divine light transforms the intellect (*nous*) but its activity is not restricted there. It brings the ascetic to a state of ontological perfection, to a fullness of humanity and life.

In Islam such a refined concept exists in the works of the Persian Sufi philoso-

pher of the Middle Ages Al-Ghazali who described such a mystical state of encounter with God through the concept of *Fana*, which is the pinnacle of God's knowledge and the dissolution of a Sufi in the Deity (Chistyakova, al-Janabi and Kirabaev 2019).

In general, in Islam the concept of *Ibadah* reveals the meaning of the profound spiritual service of an individual to Allah throughout the life, which can also be seen as a way to comprehend the Creator only by some special means, different from those in Christianity. *Ibadah* not only shows the role and purpose of man in the mundane world but also glorifies him and makes him a participant in the Divine Glory which he was bestowed by Allah as His viceroy on Earth.

We witness here a commonality of views between the Eastern Christian and Islamic visions of the predestination of man and their desire to know God as much as it is possible for a human being. Nevertheless, despite the resemblance of some anthropological ideas and the explicit theocentrism of Christianity and Islam, there are clear differences in their philosophical and anthropological standpoints. These differences concern, first of all, the ideological foundations in the Christian teachings of monasticism and asceticism. As the author of the article earlier stressed (Chistyakova 2018: 1449):

There is no monasticism in Islam in the Christian form. The concept of *Ibadah* interprets asceticism as constant worship to Allah and a strive of a Muslim to achieve the highest spiritual position, which determines the relationship between the Creator and a person. The ideals of *Ibadah* show that (...) a Muslim

shall lead a social life, but wherever he is, he should remember to worship and serve God, to fulfill the will of the Creator, to follow the rituals, and then the all-embracing faith and love for God will help to reach the heights of *Ibadah*.

I should also stress that the complex concept of *Ubudiyyah* with the spiritual and ritual practice of *Ibadah* appear heavy to practice just as the Christian adherence to ascetic and monastic ideals. Performing these practices in both cases

allows a person to constantly feel the presence of God and His help. And for both a Christian and a Muslim the common goal is to achieve a special spiritual state, when God is a part of a believer's life, and when an individual begins to realize and at the same time feel God as his unalienable spiritual *self*. This spiritual state is achieved through self-improvement and self-knowledge, which is also the way of knowing God, both in Christianity and Islam.

CONCLUSION

The considered conceptual provisions of Islam and Christianity, despite their differences, offer something common – namely, the ideas developed within the framework of these religions of human desire for unity with God and spiritual ways, following which a Christian or a Muslim may achieve a super-intelligent and supersensible state of unity with the Creator.

In Christianity, an individual may achieve the highest state of feeling unity with God in many ways – through the Uncreated Light and symbolic and figurative comprehension of the sacred world, through asceticism and monasticism, as well as through apophatic and cataphatic theology. However, the basis of all these means is the unifying idea of deification or the perception of the best Divine qualities that lead to salvation and spiritual immortality.

In Islam, for such a way of perfection and ascent of an individual to the Creator, there are special epistemological concepts – *Ubudiyyah* and *Ibadah* as well as 99 Beautiful Names of Allah. In our opinion, all these concepts directly re-

late a person to God. These concepts can also be considered as moral and cognitive stages, passing through which a Muslim is purified and moves to the Almighty. In our view, through 99 Beautiful Names of Allah, a personal *Self* is connected to the Creator by the names-imperatives that a Muslim should comprehend throughout his life. Traditional Islamic theology (*Kalam*) and the Gnosis of the Sufis show the significance of these Names through the revelation of Allah to the world and each person. As Al-Janabi and Kirabaev (2017) indicate, Sufism offers a special mystical way of ascension to God through the achievement of a special spiritual state of *Fana* in which a Sufi's *Self* dissolves, merging with the Deity. In the highest state of *Fana*, the transformed Sufi reaches the level of the highest, Divine, knowledge.

Understanding a person in the relationship with God, as well as the diverse paths leading to God, developed in Islam and Christianity, presuppose a common goal – spiritual and moral ascent to the unity of an individual with the Creator

through the acquisition of the highest transcendental values, of the self-improvement and self-knowledge, of attaining the true spiritual freedom. I believe that the anthropological ideas of

the two described religions can be considered as interreligious, intercultural and even inter-civilizational because they bear universal values and sacral meanings on a global scale.

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Endnotes

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