

## A SCHISM

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Mohammed II<sup>1</sup> was a very great man — at least, that is what I heard said when I was studying at University. I still remember that he conquered Constantinople and that he beheaded a woman whom he had loved. That is all the University taught me about him. Since that time, I have remembered a story about him that delights me.

This great man, thereafter, had taken Constantinople. Now there was in that city a religion that had been called the Greek religion; that religion was indeed admirable since it was independent. It had broken all its links with a bishop of Rome who wanted to subject it: it mocked his bulls and declared itself sovereign to his face. Moreover, nothing matched the liberty it enjoyed. Were its patriarch to die? Immediately the emperor would call the bishops together in his own palace, so much did he esteem them, and enjoin them to elect a supreme pastor who could teach him his duty and lead him to the imperial palace in Paradise. The bishops were amazed at the piety of the emperor; it was a family gift as imperishable as the empire, a genuine tradition coming in direct line from Constantine the Great. Modestly, the prince withdrew knowing that praise corrupts virtue. Subsequently, the bishops knelt down, implored the Holy Spirit who comes from the Father through the Son, but who does not proceed from one and the other, as everyone can know. And suddenly, there arrived from heaven a chamberlain, telling them: My Lords, the emperor is pleased with the choice you wish to make of so-and-so, and piously offers him his support. The bishops stood up and intoned a Greek *Te Deum*; they thanked God for having given them so Christian an emperor and a patriarch elected in such liberty, in conformity with the canons of Sardis<sup>2</sup>.

As for the independence of discussions, you had to witness that Church to get an idea of what freedom of discussion was like. . . in a monarchy, of course. One could learn, for instance, that the monks of Mount Athos, while gazing at their navel, had seen a light. In other countries, the police would have quashed such a report, likely to alarm the imagination of the people. In Constantinople, that would have been impossible. The entire body of bishops would have risen up, rather, and would have brought the Bosphorus very close to its downfall. A council was called so as to consider what this light could be, whether it was created or uncreated; there were no obstacles to impede the assembly. Assemblies were held fifty years in a row without civil authority daring to find mismanagement in this. In other words, there was no other liberty like this one.

When Mohammed II was master of Constantinople, he used to go directly to Santa Sophia for prayers, as an observant Muslim, and forthwith converted it into a mosque. That was a wonderful moment for the Greek religion, as it was very much aware; it had been profoundly anxious to learn by what act of strength it would maintain its freedom over its new masters.

Mohammed II relieved its anxiety with a generosity worthy of being celebrated in any century. He summoned all the bishops along with the most important priests to the former imperial palace, now his own residence; this beginning of freedom pleasantly surprised them. Things deteriorated when Mohammed declared that he would in no way disturb their conscience, that they could proceed to elect a patriarch as in the past; and that for him, in his Muslim faith, he could see no better choice for them than the senator Georgios Scolarios.<sup>3</sup> The Greek Church was completely astonished; for a moment, it wondered whether Mohammed was not a disguised successor of Constantine. It profoundly admired the clemency of God, Who had deigned to preserve from slavery the foremost Church of the world.

Georgios Scolarios was elected unanimously. So that there not be any flaw in his duty, nor with the former liberty, Mohammed, in person, wanted to invest him with episcopal rank, in imitation of the Greek emperors. On the day chosen for the ceremony, Mohammed ascended his throne, surrounded by his entire court. The patriarch having been brought into his sublime presence, the Muslim handed him the pastoral staff while giving this admirable speech: “The Holy Trinity, which has given me the Empire, makes you, by the authority which I received from It, archbishop of the new Rome and ecumenical patriarch.” Then, what is really a marvel, he himself led the patriarch to the palace door and had him mount a white horse — I do not lie — while ordering the pashas and the viziers to accompany him on foot to the church of the Twelve Apostles. The patriarch had to be satisfied with this, given the unavailability of Santa Sophia.

I had great respect for Mohammed II before learning of this tale, but I confess that it edified me greatly and that it helped me understand certain things that I see today under my very eyes. I only regret that some of those honorable Greek priests had not requested of such an excellent man to destroy the bishops and the patriarch so as to become even more free. They never entertained the thought.

It appears that the thought came in France, in the year of grace 1830, to some priests, delightfully affected by the good fortune of a purely civil dependency, and who aspired to rest from their Catholic hardships in the bosom of the State. But there has to be an end to things. Unending revolutions, ultramontanes, popes!, and a clergy so badly paid for all those tribulations! Could we not finally end it, once and for all, conforming ourselves to the ideas and the passions of a world that does not change — which is and will always remain the world — so as to establish a second Anglican Church, rich and powerful? Indeed, where faith is lacking there is need for money. The State knows this well: confession would be forbidden, marriage of priests allowed. Everyone would win; by these small reciprocal sacrifices, the Church would merge into the State in a peaceful union.

This is the dream! The Cranmers are ready; only a Henry VIII is missing.

Besides, we have nothing to say to those men, whether to enlighten them or to move them with shame. They lie in an area impervious to remorse, even beneath schism. They lack conviction, talent, fear, even disapprobation, which cannot overtake them. One day, they will no doubt rise above it all.

We have sought only to unmask their secret intrigues, lest the name of freedom — which they toss to and fro — seduce some souls. Then they will learn what kind of liberty leads to schism, and what benefit a Church gains by choosing the prince as Pope.

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*ENDNOTES*

1. Mohammed II, the Conqueror (reigned 1432-1481). - Trans.
2. Sardis: ancient capital of Lydia (Middle East). - Trans.
3. Georgios Scolarios (c. 1400 to c. 1473); AKA: Gennadius II. Patriarch of Constantinople (1454-1464); philosopher and theologian. - Trans.
4. See *Le Continueur* (publication) by Fleury, in 1453.

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