Peacemaking Mission of Religion in the Modern World

*Address by the DECR chairman Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the **3d meeting of the Russian Orthodox Church and Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs working group**.*

Distinguished Participants in the meeting:

I am glad to welcome to Moscow the members of the Russian Orthodox Church and Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs working group. I would like to convey to all the participants a message of greetings from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, who is out of the city at present.

The dialogue between our religious communities, which has been developing for over five years now, has, in my view, a great potential. Our countries are situated on the border between West and East; we have accumulated a considerable experience of internal and external peacemaking. At present the peoples of Russia and Turkey are living through a renaissance of religious life, and an exchange of opinions and peace work will be very useful for us.

As His Holiness Patriarch Kirill stressed during his meeting with the head of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs Mr. Mehmet Görmez in December 2014, 'it is very important for us to think together over what is happening to the human civilization… Religious values have almost disappeared from the public space. Laws are adopted running contrary to God's commandments and traditional morality… We should respond to what does not correspond with our religious convictions'.

Today's meeting shows that our nations have a mutual desire for and interest in cooperation. This time our talks are devoted to the topic of conflicts and ways of the co-work of religious organization in overcoming them. For Russia and Turkey, it is a problem of special relevance. The relations between our countries have gone through various stages, but today we together are facing the treat of extremism and terrorism. This phenomenon clothed in various forms has directly affected the peoples of Russia and Turkey. Each time we have grieved over reports of terror action committed in Turkey resulting in the death of innocent people. Our hearts echoed with special pain when the Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrey Karlov was assassinated in a terrorist's attack unprecedented in its insolence and meanness.

Extremism and terrorism constitute today the most dangerous challenges to public peace and accord. It is even more dangerous that extremists exploit people's religious feelings. Nowadays the mass media bring down on people a torrent of propaganda of amoral way of life, bringing in the ideology of egoism and consumerism, which generates a reaction. Precisely for this reason the faithful or those who are in a

religious search have become very vulnerable to the propaganda of extremism offering seductive and easy ways of opposing the global amoral standard. Recruiters exploit people's lack of religious experience and knowledge, especially among the youth, regardless of their confession.

Many are convinced that militants, who are acting villainously in the Middle East and in some other regions of the world, commit their outrages out of religious motives. However, according to Russian orientalist Geogiy Mirsky, who has recently passed away, Islam is a religion and way of life, the foundation of a whole civilization and an element of identity for hundreds of millions, generating solidarity in the world Muslim community. As for the extremism under Islamic slogans, it is a political movement based on particular Islamic provisions pulled out of the context, distorted and adapted to justify violence and terror.

Extremists trample upon the values fundamental for all the traditional religions. There is no and cannot be either Islamic or any other terrorism in the name of religion. At every international and domestic event we have always stressed that none of the religions teaches to kill people and to spill the blood of the innocent.

Both Christian and Muslim religious leaders unanimously attest to it. High-ranking representatives of the Al Azhar Islamic University and Islamic Cooperation Organization have repeatedly come out in defense of Christians in the Middle East. Extremists' actions have also been condemned by the head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs Dr. Mehmet Görmez, and for this we ask our Turkish partners in the dialogue to convey him our gratitude. In Muslim countries, conferences have been held on a search for ways of peaceful Christian-Muslim co-existence in the situation of the threat of extremism. It should be noted that Russian Muslim leaders, too, have firmly condemned extremism under religious slogans and come out with words of solidarity and support for Christians who are subjected to persecution in the Middle East and Africa.

The threat of extremism, alas, will stay for long despite the physical liquidation of major terrorist formations. Even children have fallen under the influence of extremism: they are taught to make and set off bombs, to kill and execute people.

It is necessary to bring together to people as publicly as possible the word of peace, to show the falsity of extremist ideology, to oppose attempts to identify terrorism and religion. Special responsibility in opposing terrorism lies on religious leaders, who, by the example of their own life and respectful attitude to the faithful of other religions, must assert the values of goodness and love of peace. Believers throughout the world should know that terrorists, whatever religious affiliation they may claim, are servant of the Satan.

The phenomenon of extremism compels traditional religious organizations to engage in closer cooperation with the aim to establish a lasting peace with justice for all in the world. To solve the problem of extremism, political and religious leaders should set aside the existing difference and rally in coalition against the common enemy. There is simply no other way for eradicating this evil.

The Russian Orthodox Church has exerted every possible effort to maintain international accord inside and outside Russia. In Russia, there are no interreligious conflicts, since the tradition of good neighborliness among various religions and ethnic religious groups constitutes the essential historical heritage of our Motherland. Speaking about specific examples, I can say that we have very good relations with leading Russian Muslim organizations with which we have maintain close cooperation in a wide range of issues.

A unique platform for dialogue between religious organizations and for their interaction with the state power has been provided by the Interreligious Council in Russia (ICR), which will soon celebrate its 20th anniversary. As part of its work, constructive discussions are held on the most acute problem of religious-public and church-state relations and programs are realized for defending the values of mutual aid, justice and charity, for a healthy moral climate.

We share our experience with other countries, speaking about it at international events. The age-long history of interreligious accord in Russia has enabled us to develop the principle of building a healthy atmosphere of social relations. This principle lies in creating such conditions as are consonant with the ideas of justice upheld by the faithful of different communities.

Today the Russian Orthodox Church together with other Christian confessions and Muslim organizations is engaged in giving humanitarian aid to the Syrian population suffering from military hostilities. The aid is designated and distributed regardless of one's religious affiliation because we know only too well that war affects all: bomb and shells do not choose victims as to their faith.

Peacemaking is a basic function of the Church in foreign political and international matters. The Moscow Patriarchate finds in the Russian foreign policy department support for its peace initiatives. The Russian Church, supported by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has made a contribution to the development of dialogue between religious organizations and in particular with UNESCO. This work has as its aim to establish mutual understanding between the civilizations and cultures. There are high-quality working relations established between the Church and the Ministry. It is expressed in the work of a joint working group, in meetings of experts and working contacts making it possible to solve problems of mutual concern.

The Moscow Patriarchate is always open for cooperation with all those who sincerely seek peace

among religions and nations. It is my deep conviction that our interaction can meet with a considerable response and has a considerable influence on the settlement of the existing conflicts and differences. Our open, equitable and mutually respectful dialogue should become a response to the challenge that extremists have thrown to our countries.

Thank you for your attention.

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