Metropolitan Hilarion: Christianity is the core of our civilization code

On September 26, 2015, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, anchorman of the Church and the World talk-show on Russia-24 TV network, hosted film director Andrei S. Konchalovsky.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good evening, dear brothers and sisters. You are tuned to the Church and the World talk-show.

In these days, the Church celebrates the Elevation, the triumph of the Our Lord's Cross. This feast takes us back to the events of the 4th century when the excavations, undertaken by the Byzantine Empress Helena, were a success as the Cross on which Christ had been crucified was discovered in Jerusalem and erected for universal veneration.

If the essence of the Christian teaching is to be expressed in one word, this word will be 'Gospel'. If it is to be put in one symbol, this symbol will be Cross. The Cross has always been in the center of the Christian preaching to the world and the Gospel's message to the nations. Since Constantine and Helena, the Cross has become the symbol of the Christian civilization.

Today we will speak about what the term 'Christian civilization' means. Is our Russian civilization Christian? What is the civilization code and what is the human genome? My guest today is a man who has invented the formula 'cultural genome', Andrei Sergeyevich Konchalovsky, our famous film director. Good evening, Andrei Sergeyevich!

A. Konchalovsky: Good evening! I am flattered by your recollection of this formula. Some look at it as though I wish to change the genetics of the Russian.

The point is that, from the viewpoint of physiology, biology and science, the human genome is studied very actively, and there is already a major progress. Science in this sense is certainly accumulative, as it collects all pieces of knowledge and we also grow in it. Unlike science, ethics is not accumulative and for this reason can collapse any moment. I mean the society as a whole. It was not without reason that empires used to collapse and disintegrate. In this sense, the belief that progress improves ethics is a profound delusion. I do not speak of the last century, but in the 21st century it has been proved that a human being can degrade and very quickly turn into an animal.

Therefore, thinking over how the human being can be helped to be more sustainable from the ethical point of view, we come to the notion of the cultural core of every nation. It is the very ground that causes many human actions. These actions are determined by tradition, the very culture that has been developing in our country for over one thousand years. For the last thousand years, it is certainly developing under the enormous impact of Christianity.

You said that if Christianity were to be defined by one word, this word would be 'Gospel', but I would choose 'salvation'.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I agree that 'salvation' is a term that lies in the core of the Christian message. However, can't we say that 'love' too is a code word by which Christians are or at least should be discerned in this world. Indeed, Christ Himself said, *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another* (Jn. 13:35).

Of course, we can conditionally operate with particular words and symbols, but the content we put in the notion of the cultural genome of our people and our homeland is really inseparable from Christianity. And whether we want it or not, it is a historical fact.

Two years ago you wrote a polemical article 'Which God does the Russian believe in?' and I responded to it.

A. Konchalovsky: I have read your response.

Metropolitan Hilarion: By the way, I have noticed that since that time you seem to have somewhat evolved, and in today's talk about the role of Christianity in the life of our people I can hear new accents

you make, which were not there in that article.
When we speak about our cultural code, civilization code and cultural genome, we see that Christianity is really its core beginning from 'The Tale of the Host of Igor', 'The Word about Law and Grace', our Old Russian manuscripts, to the film 'Andrey Rublev', for which you wrote the script. This film came out a year after I was born. I saw it when I was a schoolboy. In spite of the fact that the film was half-banned, it was a great event in the cinema world and made a strong impression on the Soviet viewer. Indeed, it was almost the first to present the spiritual, religious aspect of medieval Rus'.
A. Konchalovsky: Yes, it's true.
You mentioned my evolution. I believe that all thinking people evolve because they in a way keep learning all the time and one who gains some inner spiritual experience certainly evolves and changes one's point of view.
Perhaps you are right and what you said is really so. Now it seems to me that my appearances should not be so frequent since I have already said everything. I like to listen to the breath of history, cosmos, which can be heard when it is very quiet.
When I was shooting 'The Postman's White Nights' (about the life of a real village postman), I spent about four months at lakes in the Arkhangelsk province. Most of the parts in the film were played by local people. I was struck by many things in them. These people evolve very slowly. They live by laws which defy any decree or resolution or even, as they say, trends. This breath of Russian mentality is very slow and stable. Any attempt to influence or reform it has failed so far, for we are not fully aware of this core, this cultural code.
The West does not understand us at all in this sense. It seems to it that the sanctions can change something in the awareness of our man or he will bring himself to say: Please, give us a certain product. No, the Russian man is humble, and this is his strength. As Dostoyevsky said, humbleness is the greatest power in the world. Humbleness and patience are laid in the cultural code. Well, if anyone is to be given an opportunity to do business today, very few will want to do it.
Metropolitan Hilarion: You have remembered Dostoyevsky, and I can't help responding to this name. I see in Dostoyevsky a 'mirror of the Russian soul' in a sense. And if we are to search for our cultural genome, we should first of all look into the works of this writer.
What has always struck me in Dostoyevsky is that he was not just a deeply Christian writer, but in his every novel and in many of his literary characters he re-discovered and re-enacted for himself and for the readers the image of Christ. Indeed, Christ-like images he creates, be it Count Myshkin or Alyosha Karamazov, Starets Zosima and a whole number of others, all this is an attempt to touch the mystery of Christ and, through a personal experience, to pass on this mystery hidden in the Gospel, which is also revealed through the experience of the Church's life.
Dostoyevsky had a very tragic experience. He, unlike Tolstoy, came to Christ not as some intellectual conviction.
Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were to a certain extent antipodes. Tolstoy did not experience the living Christ at all, as he was rather interested in some moral teaching alone. He loved and valued the Gospel in his own way, but chose morality alone from it, while giving it his own interpretation.
For Dostoyevsky, it was not the word but the image that he believed to be the most important thing in the Gospel. The writer takes Christ from the Gospel, building the rest around His personality. It is not accidental at all that he said, 'If anyone could prove to me that **Christ** is outside the **truth**, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth'.
A. Konchalovsky: It's true.
Certainly, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are two different philosophers. Tolstoy almost always verified the concept of good, the concept of victim, against the philosophical understanding of good.
In my view, Dostoyevsky cannot be labelled as philosopher at all, but rather as a sensual person. He was always guided by passion. That is why he could say that he would stay with Christ and did not need the truth. It is a very Russian point of view, even archaic, I would say. In this respect it is the archaic that speaks in Dostoyevsky, that is, the feeling of the Russian man which is essentially binary.
If we speak about a three-part or a two-part nature of the human being, then in Dostoyevsky's works it is

purely two-part nature: you are with us or you are against us. This binary – either evil or good – is inherent in the Russian cultural code. Tolstoy would put it through the middle part, in fact, through the human being. In this sense, for me he has a three-part being.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I can't agree with what you have said about Dostoyevsky, First, I am sure that his personal attitude to Christ was not motivated by his passionate nature. Secondly, there was no archaic element in it whatsoever. It was exactly a profoundly personal and much-endured conviction, even not just a conviction but a firm existential attitude that Christ is the truth, that there cannot be truth outside Christ. That is exactly why he says that if Christ is not the truth, then it is better to be with Christ. Tolstoy just passed this core by. He saw some shell, some secondary product, if you want, important but secondary.

A. Konchalovsky: He preached love, exactly what you spoke of.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, but to preach love is one thing and another is to existentially share in the love that comes from the Source of love, which is God Himself; He communicates this love to us through Christ.

A. Konchalovsky: But that is why Tolstoy said that truth can be outside Christ as well. He was even carried away by Buddhism. He said that all people, even non-Christians, walk under God. And this is what for me the important difference between the two greatest Russian geniuses and at the same time religious persons. You must admit that they were tragic figures.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, each in his own way.

A. Konchalovsky: Disagreement between Tolstoy's moral, religious and social views with the church teaching led to his break from the Church. Whereas Dostoyevsky's inner religious experience based on the teaching of Christ not always found its expression in the outer world. Don't you think that they are antipodes in this?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, their religious fates developed in directly opposite ways. Dostoyevsky came to God through a very hard struggle after he was accused of criminal freethinking and enthusiasm for socialism and was sentenced to be shot. He came to the true faith in Christ through penal servitude, through catharsis, through incredible suffering. Moreover, he came to Christ not as some intellectual truth but the existential truth, as the One Who can change life.

Tolstoy, on the contrary, departed from traditional Christianity, searching for God while comparing Christ with Buddha, removing from the Gospel what contradicted his own convictions. He departed from Christ and he departed from the Church. You know of course how his life ended. Having left his house, he went to the Optina Hermitage, but he never reached its starets. And his reconciliation with the Church, only a few steps away from him, was not to happen.

A. Konchalovsky: One can say that there are two peoples in Russia: a lesser people, as Plekhanov said, those post-Petrine people, that is, aristocracy, Russian Europeans who created a great culture, and a much greater people whose roots go back to St. Prince Vladimir. Dostoyevsky came from there, from 'within'. Just as Shukshin did, I suppose.

Leo Tolstoy was a European. He spoke French. He travelled around the world. He reasoned; he assimilated the ability to philosophize on this problem, but doing it 'from above'. Dostoyevsky proceeded from feeling. These are two parts of the Russian culture.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The contrast between Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy is striking; these antipodes are part of our cultural genome, part of the heritage to which we return every time when we try to know ourselves.

In the beginning of our talk you said that progress does not necessarily lead to moral improvement. It is a very important thought. Really, what can ensure the future of humanity is primarily a moral ground. This ground however cannot grow on an empty place. It must have a foundation, and it is my profound conviction that both for our homeland and the western civilizations this foundation lies in Christianity.

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