The Role of Secular and Christian Values in Contemporary Multicultural European Society

Presentation by the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the International Forum on 'Religious and Cultural Pluralism: The Challenges for the Christian Churches of Europe' (2 - 6 June 2014).

Esteemed participants of the forum!

I greet all those gathered to discuss the problems of religious and cultural pluralism - phenomena which evoke a complex reaction in many communities and deserve examination from a Christian position.

The discussion on pluralism poses many questions, in particular on whether there ever existed homogeneity in the cultural and religious life, complete unity in the society in which Christianity was formed and developed? Moreover, did the ecclesiastical environment ever show such signs?

From the moment of its formation the ancient Christian community was multicultural and multi-ethnic. Great meaning was given by the first Christians to the idea that there is a place for each nationality in the Church in which there is 'neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all' (Col. 3: 11). Thus, national and social diversity has been from the very beginning an integral feature of Christ's Church.

Throughout the Church's existence a vast amount of material has accumulated so that we can analyze the attitude of Christian communities towards the phenomena of religious and cultural diversity.

However, within the framework of this presentation it would be appropriate to examine primarily the forms of expression of pluralism in our times and the consequences of its contemporary reading.

If we turn to Church tradition, then we come to the conclusion that it was never reduced to a general or total homogeneity in both the realm of doctrine and the cultural life of the community. St. Paul says: 'For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you' (1 Cor. 11: 19). It is in this way that there has been established the norm of what we today call 'inner church discussion'. At all times there have been intellectual challenges, dangers and mistakes, of which it was necessary to warn the Church's children. This is why we find among the works of the holy fathers polemical works, for in taking their faith with zeal they could not but leave unattended the challenges and temptations of their time. In their struggle with those things the spread of which in the ecclesiastical

environment would pose to a greater or lesser degree a threat for the spiritual state of the faithful, those who were gifted with the word came forward and as a result of constructive dialogue the Church body would adopt a certain position and all others would be rejected.

In our time the Russian Orthodox Church has created a special mechanism which is called upon to activate inner church discussion. After his election His Holiness Patriarch Kirill created the Inter-Conciliar Conference which guarantees the right and chance for the hierarchs, clerics and laity to express their opinion on relevant questions of both theological and ecclesiastical-social content. As a result the opinions expressed are consolidated into a common position, which is then later presented to the conciliar organs of the Russian Church for confirmation.

In this process we apply the principle of 'in the main things - unity, in the secondary things - freedom, and in all things - love'. This formula, attributed to St. Vincent of Lerins, is the best way of reflecting the conciliar form of discussion and the adopting of decisions in the Orthodox tradition.

The inner ecclesiastical heterogeneity of views enables the affirmation of truth and the rejection of falsehoods, the mistaken nature of which is proven openly. It is in this context that the encouragement of inner ecclesiastical pluralism can be viewed as a means of 'preventative medicine' against heresies. Indeed, the history of the Church knows many instances when, under the influence of the divine aid of grace and thanks to the arguments of conciliar wisdom, people who were in error in their convictions came to the truth.

Even more varied is the ritualistic side of the life of the Christian community. Differences in rituals and customs may seem to some to be not so important, but they are an organic part of church life.

Within the church community there have always been various views on the ordering of church life. The faithful may have differing views on the boundaries between the relationship of the Church with the state and the political world, the degree of the Church's involvement in public affairs and the media. Within the Church there may be supporters of conservative or liberal positions in all the aforementioned problems. Differences in opinion, just as in political, media and cultural preferences, do not stop us from preserving inner church unity, supported by sincere love of neighbour.

The Church's missionary activity would be unimaginable without an understanding of cultural diversity. The outstanding twentieth-century Russian missionary St. Nicholas of Japan, who preached Christ in the Land of the Rising Sun, attempted to find a way to the hearts of the local people by reference to Japanese culture. The Samurai, for whom the notions of friendship, honour and sacrifice had great meaning, were open to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ which had brought victory over sin and death for humanity.

In labeling religious and cultural pluralism a challenge, we are called upon to bear in mind that the Church historically appeared and developed in conditions of pluralism, that she, by her inner structure and nature, is not and cannot be a totalitarian organization with the unification of everything and all things.

Speaking before one of the sessions of the Supreme Church Council, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus said: 'The Church continues to be falsely accused of being against freedom of speech, that church tradition excludes differences of opinion. This in no way corresponds to the real situation. Without freedom of speech the Orthodox Church would be much poorer by hundreds of theological works, without the freedom of creative self-expression there would no great diversity in iconography and church architecture.'

Throughout the history of the Church there were periods when the state used violence to combat dissent both within society and inside the Church. It is not surprising that not all such attempts ended successfully and at times caused the Church wounds which have not healed to this day. By way of example we can cite the Old Believer schism in the Russian Church in the seventeenth century, the consequences of which we are still experiencing today. Yet, in spite of all the mistakes of the past, our guide remains the apostles who formed the foundation of the earthly Church through their labours and preaching which they brought to all of the then existing world as well as their successors - the Apostolic Fathers and holy fathers and preachers of the Church.

When we speak of cultural heterogeneity, we have to admit that in our time the cultural currents are so varied that it is hardly possible to evaluate them definitely. Moreover, the Church cannot take on the role of arbiter on all questions of culture which is become all the more secularized. On the other hand one of the Church's important tasks is to preserve moral authority and she is obliged to express her position on various questions.

In modern-day conditions, at least, for European culture, the themes of the Gospel still remain relevant. This is natural if we bear in mind that there simply is no generally understood non-religious language of communication. That is why films on Gospel topics remain a noticeable element of the film industry.

Unfortunately, there is the reverse side of the coin, since this approach turns Christian culture into a commodity for easy consumption according to the principle of that which is good is that which sells. And the feelings of the faithful, which are inevitably ignored during its realization, in reality concern practically no one.

Cultural pluralism is inseparable from freedom of creativity, while freedom is inseparable from

responsibility. The true challenge for the Christian consciousness is the fact that in our time the moral dimension of freedom is negated altogether, and the freedom to create in particular. From the liberal perspective all art deserves approval and equal legal protection. The Church and society, in this manner, are denied the right to evaluate ethically works of art, including those which clearly touch upon the feelings of believers.

It is this content that is concretely fortified in the concept of 'cultural pluralism', which is reduced to the simple diversity of the numerous forms of creative self-expression, whereas their content should not be bracketed.

If we take this idea to the absurd, then from the formal perspective the performance of one scandalous artist, who chopped up icons on a public square in Moscow ought to have the same legal defense as St. Andrei Rublev's Trinity icon. Or a Procession of the Cross, from the point of view of self-expression, should be on the same level as that of gay parades.

In this sense cultural pluralism turns into an element of dominant ideology in essence little different from, for example, the socialist realism to which all manifestations of culture had to conform in Soviet times. Indeed, imposed homogeneity is just as bad as imposed heterogeneity.

We believe that to remove the moral dimension from European culture would mean to deprive Europeans of culture itself. At the same time, we see before our very eyes the self-destruction of European Christian culture being replaced by a pseudo-culture, which is morally neural and in many instances openly and demonstratively immoral.

That which is happening calls forth protests not only among Christians but also among all reasonably thinking people. At the same time we must not turn into witch hunters in the cultural sphere. The image of God is within every artist, and the Church must find a response in his heart, for the human person by nature is a creator, a maker, a builder of life, and therefore the thirst to create must not die out in him. We recall well how as a whole generation of admirers of informal culture, which was persecuted in Soviet times, came to Christ, as their human searches were not limited merely to material things. Christians are called to testify to the fact that genuine beauty and harmony in literature, music and art is none other than the expression of an eternal creative principle which transforms the human person and the one who is turned to the triumphant Kingdom of God.

Religious pluralism - if we mean by this term the multiplicity of religions - is the reality of the world we live in. It cannot be denied or reviewed, but it must be taken into account when building up relationships with representatives of other faiths. At the same time, the idea of equating sectarian movements, who often trample upon human dignity, with the religions of the majority, is wrong and unjustified.

Religious freedom, like any other freedom, cannot be the basis of encouraging openly misanthropic views. If we approach the question formally, then both Satanism, as a worldview, is entitled to the same legal defense as Christianity. The attempts of a number of ideologists to fill the concept of religious pluralism with such content evokes a sense of danger.

The supporters of the liberal approach want to force society into a state of competition of incompatible ideas. The concept of truth in society is blurred and substituted by ideological, in this case religious-ideological pluralism, the main value of which is not in its content but in its diversity. Yet shall we allow such an experiment to be carried out against people?

True religious pluralism is an atmosphere which unites people belonging to various religious traditions, yet at the same time sharing similar ethical concepts. There can be no unity among those who fight against sin and those who encourage and support it. The attempts to create conditions for the peaceful development of such a divided society are beforehand doomed to failure. They create the pretexts for the growth of social conflict, the worsening of social and other problems. Unfortunately, in Europe we encounter a growing pressure upon Christians who adhere to traditional values, for example in the sphere of the family and marriage. To this pressure will be subjected the representatives of all traditional religions who attempt to publically give a moral evaluation to these social phenomena.

Religious pluralism makes it ever the more essential to build a dialogue between representatives of the traditional world religions. The Russian Orthodox Church, which has for many centuries been neighbours with non-Christian religions, is ready to make her contribution to the development of this interaction.

Another, more sensitive problem for Europe's Christians is the fact that 'inner-Christian pluralism' in recent years has encountered the same problems as secular pluralism. The re-evaluation of Christian moral teaching by a number of Protestant denominations and the blessing of same-sex unions has led to us Christians being unable to speak about our moral unity in the same way that we were able to do so thirty years ago. These attitudes in the Protestant world make difficult communication between the various Christian confessions and naturally force us to seek dialogue where it is bolstered by consensus.

We have to testify that differentiation within the Christian Churches on matters of ethics leads to their greatest ever alienation between each other in history and makes difficult joint vindication of the common rights and interests of the faithful before an ever secularized society.

In this situation co-operation between Orthodox and Catholics in the cause of defending traditional

Christian morality acquires a special importance. There is no Eucharistic communion between us, we take differing approaches to a number of dogmatic issues, we have a different ecclesiology, but we share common views on the fundamental moral issues. Our common duty is to bear witness to the permanent significance of these ethical principles which were established by Christ and sanctified by the authority of the centuries-old tradition of the Church.

One of the distinguishing features of Christianity is its ability to overcome cultural barriers, and we are called upon to unite in the cause of returning religious pluralism to its concepts and forms created by European civilization with the direct participation of the Christian Churches of the continent. It is precisely Christianity, which in Europe still is the religion of the majority, that can create the conditions for genuine freedom in the realm of culture and make the continent a hospitable home for peoples of all cultures and religions.

Thank you for your attention.

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