



Metropolitan Hilarion: Interreligious tension develops first of all because of ignorance

Beginning from this September, the Church and the World talk-show on Russia-24 channel will come out in a new format. Now a part of the program is allocated to a talk of Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Department for External Church relations, with guests.

On September 15, 2012, the Church and the World program involved as a guest Mr. N. Svanidze, a television journalist and historian, director of the Mass Media Institute of the Russian State Humanitarian University.

N. Svanidze: Thank you for the opportunity to ask you questions which interest our whole society and to listen to you opinion on them. I think we both will not be understood by our viewers if we do not begin our talk with what is going on in Russian schools today. In secondary schools, as is known, schoolchildren have begun to study Basics of Religious Cultures and the Secular Ethics. Many swords have been crossed around it, and I think many more will. It concerns both children and especially adults... The first question to arise concerning this topic is the quality of the teaching.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The quality of the teaching will to a great extent depend on the teachers themselves. Certainly, there is a great risk that the basics of a particular religious ethics will be taught by specialists not in this field but in a different one. I think this risk can be evaluated only after some time after we all including parents and students have realized how high the level on which this discipline is taught is. At the same time, it is very important that the textbooks should be of high quality.

N. Svanidze: Yes, Your Eminence, but you see the point... I myself is a teacher, though not in school but in university, and I think you will agree with me that textbooks and educational aids – yes, but children matter as well, especially small ones, as they look into their teacher’s eyes and listen to his or her voice and take him or her as a guide. Textbooks can vary, but if a poor teacher uses them to teach, it will cancel out any quality textbook. If a teacher is good, it will be more important than a poor textbook. This teacher can tell them all he or she knows, can teach small people to use their ideas of good and evil, and this is what is important. But what if he or she cannot do it, if he or she is a poor teacher?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Well, it is true for any academic discipline. We remember from our school years that the subjects which were taught in an exciting way attracted us to make our performance successful. However, if some subjects were taught boringly or if we did not like the teacher, our academic performance was poor. This is unavoidable.

Certainly, ideally the basics of a particular religion should be taught by its representatives. That is to say, if for instance, the basics of Orthodoxy are taught, a priest should come to the classroom. If the teacher is not a priest, it should be a lay person active in church life, who can share not only what he has read in a textbook but also his or her own experience, because religion cannot be taught in an abstract way.

This practice is used in many countries. For instance, I served in Austria for six years. If there are at least two Orthodox pupils in a school there, a teacher is invited at the state’s expense – an Orthodox clergyman who teaches these two children the basics of Orthodoxy throughout the school, that is, for eleven years. Why is it possible in secular Austria to invite an Orthodox priest to a secular school to teach Orthodoxy while the same is impossible in our country with its predominant Orthodox population?

N. Svanidze: Your Eminence, I am afraid a poor teaching level will affect the pupils’ attitude to the subject: they will see it as officialism, something that is imposed on them from above, something to obtain good marks on just on any other subject while they are not interested and reluctant... And since it is a very important subject ethically and vitally, such an attitude to it may affect the pupils’ attitude to life

as a whole.

Metropolitan Hilarion: This may happen but again it will to a great extent lie on the conscience of teachers themselves. It is important how responsible will be their attitude to the teaching of this subject; the more so that most of them will be specialists not in the Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics but in other fields. I think however that anyway this initiative should receive a positive assessment because our children will be able for the first time to receive some knowledge about religion within the school curriculum – the knowledge they may not receive elsewhere at all.

I remember well the kind of teaching in the Soviet time when the knowledge of religion was artificially suppressed, and children and youth had to ‘steal’ this knowledge from somewhere, be it a dictionary of atheism or some academic articles, in order to learn at least some grains about religion.

Nowadays an opportunity has appeared for our children to learn about their religion, the religions of other people, their classmates. Well, those who do not want to study religions can learn the basics of secular ethics, which in itself is not bad and beneficial as well.

N. Svanidze: Certainly. Aren’t you, Your Eminence, afraid that the same teachers, say, of history – as they will be teachers of humanitarian subjects indeed, not mathematics or biology – who once taught history from the point of view of Marxism-Leninism and later from some unknown positions because of a confusion in their heads and who used to state there was no God, will now assert zealously in classrooms that God does exist? All they now teach children will little agree with what they themselves think or feel, and children can well feel it.

Metropolitan Hilarion: This risk does exist, Nikolay, but we should not forget that this subject is called to show people that there is God. This subject should show how a particular religion teaches God, what its basic moral postulates are. Indeed, it is essentially is still a culturological subject, not a religion instruction.

The danger lies in something different: if a person who once taught scientific atheism will now undertake to teach theology, then even if he has changed or tried to change his worldview, the very methods he used and the very approach to the material will still impede this person. Therefore, in principle those who worked in the field of scientific atheism should not choose this path because it will be slippery for them. They themselves will be the first to trip on it.

N. Svanidze: There will be an inner split of personality similar to schizophrenia.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, there will be an inner split of personality. However, the Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics is a subject about culture, that is to say, it includes a story of some more or less objective things about the history of a particular religion, about the moral dimension. And here it is not necessary that a conflict should arise between the existence and non-existence of God as children themselves are to come to the conclusion. They will have an opportunity however, to receive some knowledge of religious confession, which in itself is good.

N. Svanidze: I absolutely sympathise with the message I hear from you. I believe it quite correct. There is also another question; it was outlined in the video that has been just shown. The mother a schoolboy says in the reel, 'I thought it would be a subject associated with tolerance'. In other words, it is important that Orthodox children from Orthodox families should learn things about Islam and Judaism and vice versa, so that they do not feel alienation from each other, so that they may be introduced to the culture of other nations. Then it will be a struggle against xenophobia and for the unity of society. Otherwise, there is a threat that children already in their early age will disperse to their different worldview 'apartments', to different corners, and it will rather aggravate relations between people different in appearance, language and faith...

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think we well to come to it someday. I hope that this subject will be taught not for only one year but there will be a broadening in both the time allocated to this subject and topics

treated under it. I hope that sooner or later this subject will include, for instance for an Orthodox child studying the basics of Orthodox culture, some elements introducing him to other religious cultures. It is hardly possible to do it however within the teaching time amounting to once in a week.

More often than not, the root of religious enmity lies in ignorance, when people treat the bearers of different religious ideas on the basis of distorted ideas of both their own and others' religion. It is no secret for anybody today that terrorism has developed on the grounds of radical Islam. The leaders of traditional Islam have always underscored that terrorists and radicals have nothing to do with the faith, that Islam is a peace-loving religion. It is important that this split of personality, this schizophrenia, should be overcome when representatives of a particular religion or those who claim to be its representatives distort their religion and substitute one for another and, instead of doing good to people, bring them evil and death. In our society, it is necessary to see to it that we all know our own history and treat the traditions of others with respect.

N. Svanidze: I absolutely agree with you, Your Eminence. I would like to continue this topic as there is a very high level of aggression in our society including that linked with religion, as aggression is there aimed against the bearers of particular beliefs. There is a confrontation between those who believe differently. In this connection, do you, Your Eminence, have any fears that the state of relations not defined to this day between the extent of closeness between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state may lead to negative consequences, and many will see in Orthodoxy something imposed from above, imposed as potato once was? And all that is thus imposed provokes rejection.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Any artificial imposition of a particular religion would be dangerous because religion then will turn into an ideology. Therefore, nobody should impose religious beliefs, much less the state. I believe however that we have every reason to state that the state does nothing of the kind. The level of relations between church and state achieved in Russia and in some other states in the post-Soviet time are optimal for today as it meets the aspirations of people and the call of the time.

On one hand, in our country there is separation between church and state. This principle has not existed always and in every place, but since it operates in our country, we proceed from it as something given.

The Church does not interfere in the affairs of the state. For instance, priests do not join political parties, nor do they participate in political struggle or sit in the chamber of deputies. They do not have the right to promote a particular candidate from the ambo and so on. And the state, in its turn, does not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church, that is, it does not dictate who is to be elected Patriarch, who is to be promoted to the episcopate, how to organize parish. There is this principle of mutual non-interference.

There is another principle however. It is the principle of co-work of the Church and the state in all fields in which this cooperation is possible and necessary. And here I speak of actually all the traditional religions.

Indeed, we seek to give an answer to a social significant problem. We do it not only on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Interreligious Council in Russia assembles to discuss this issue, to formulate a unanimous stand on it to be presented to the state. In this way partnership between the traditional religions is realized between them and the state. This partnership is necessary in the field of education, demographic policy, social policy and morality. There is a multitude of tasks we cannot do if we do not seek to do it together with the state, the Church, the mass media and the healthy forces of society.

N. Svanidze: I will explain, Your Eminence, what makes me to voice my fears concerning this issue. You are quite aware of purely historical parallels. In its time, the Orthodox Church in Russia was an official religion. The country was Orthodox and the passport had no indication of ethnicity but the indication of 'faith'. When the October Revolution happened in 1917, the power was seized by the Bolsheviks. They were those who broke the spine of the Orthodox Church. What they did to the Church was not done to her during the Mongol invasion when churches were destroyed and the clergy were killed. And the fact that the Church was the official one did not save her, nor did it help people, ordinary citizens, to protect the Church.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Church should not be the official one. It is not such and will not be such. I will repeat: the separation of the Church from the state does not mean that it is separated from society and should be seen as a purely private affair of the individual. The Church can and must have a social

stand. It has its own role to play in society, and it can cooperate with the state, not to turn it into the official religion but to carry out joint work on the basis of the two mentioned principles: non-interference and cooperation in those areas where it is possible.

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