



## **Patriarch Kirill meets with UNESCO director general Irina Bokova**

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On September 28, 2010, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church met with UNESCO director general Irina Bokova at his residence in Chisty Pereulok, Moscow.

Participating in the meeting were Hegumen Philip Ryabykh, vice-chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, Rev. Sergiy Zvonarev, DECR secretary for far-abroad countries, and V. Kipshidze, DECR staff member. Present from UNESCO were Dendev Badarch, director of the UNESCO Moscow office, Ms Veselina Ivanova, Ms Krista Pikkat and Andrey Shevelv. The Russian Foreign Ministry was represented by Mr. E. Mitrofanova, Russia's permanent delegate to UNESCO, Mr. G. Ordzhonikidze, executive secretary of the Commission for UNESCO, A. Vdovin, Russia's special envoy, V. Kenyaikin, director of the Russian Foreign Office's department for relations with the Parliament and socio-political organizations, and A. Listov of the Commission for UNESCO secretariat. Among the participants was also V. Alekseyev, president of the International Foundation of Orthodox Nations.

In his talk with Ms Bokova, His Holiness pointed to the topicality of the problem of international relations system in today's situation and generally the problem of a social system in which the religious factor plays an essential role. 'Religion is one of the very important ways of supporting the moral principle in human beings. Whatever people's attitude to religion may be, it is quite clear that the absence of the moral principle involves the corrosion of laws, growing crime, personal and family tragedies, a great many problems on the level of family and society as well as international relations. That is why we believe that whatever the attitude to religion may be, it is very important to respect the religious factor. That is why we are concerned over the tendencies existing in certain states to force out the religious factor exclusively into the sphere of a person's private life', he said.

He also stressed that with all due respect for personal religious or non-religious choice, it is very important that people's right to confess their faith and not to be ashamed of doing it both privately and publicly should be defended.

'It seems to me that out of all the international organization, UNESCO should have a special attitude to the sphere of religion for the reason that religion is closely bound up with human culture. Depending on one's worldview, religion for some people is the foundation in the building of culture, while for others it is

one of the important dimensions of culture. Speaking of religion, we normally mean people's historical heritage, though the modern manifestations of culture are also taken into account. If one's wishes to familiarize oneself with the culture of Russia or Bulgaria, one would study in the first place the old architecture, churches, iconography, music because the cultural heritage carries a certain national code, forming the identity of a nation, and religion certainly plays an enormous role in it. That is why we believe that there must be very intensive mutually beneficial relations between UNESCO and religious organizations', the patriarch said.

Patriarch Kirill also noted that some time ago, a number of religious leaders, aware of the peacemaking potential of religion and the importance of the religious factor in today's world and in international relations, came out with a proposal for a high-level religious experts group in the UN system that would help the world community in settling today's problems associated in this or that way with the religious factor. 'If we look at hotbeds in the world, especially those in which the religious factor is present, we will easily see that so far no problem involving the religious has not been successfully settled', His Holiness continued. Among the problems which need settlement, he pointed to that of the Middle East and some alarming processes in Europe.

Why all the power of international cooperation, international law and vigorous armed interventions cannot achieve a lasting settlement of all these problem? – 'To resolve these problems, a comprehensive approach is needed including an analysis of the religious component. Sometimes this analysis is made by secular experts. Each person has the right to have his or her own point of view but to ignore the self-awareness of religious communities means to make a gross mistake', he answered.

'In the past, one of the problems in the area of international relations was that one religion studied another not on the basis of its authentic witness but rather on the basis of its own interpretation of it. Sometimes this presentation of comparative religious doctrines stimulated aggressiveness and led to conflicts', Patriarch Kirill said, adding that something similar has happened today too when an analysis and assessment of the self-awareness of a particular community are made especially in a context of conflict from a secular viewpoint. 'That is why the idea emerged that religious leaders need to be asked as experts to make an authentic presentation of a particular religious viewpoint, also for a study of developments in various hotbeds', he said.

The patriarch underscored that there are many other themes in which a high religious expertise could be beneficial. 'If we speak of real, not formal dialogue sometimes held on various international platforms where people meet only to fix in a communiqué the fact of dialogue, it is necessary to introduce in it real bearers of religious consciousness capable of presenting their point of view adequately and open to dialogue. Much has been done in the area of interreligious and intercultural dialogue but, unfortunately, there were also many expensive and very ineffective steps made'.

'I remember', he continued, 'how after the tragic events of September 2001 there was a whole series of interreligious and intercultural meetings. At that time I was professionally engaged in this theme and studied their final documents and asked myself: What really these meetings produce; do they really help to resolve problems? And I answered myself: they have produced nothing, no vivid and strong messages, except for calls to be friends. This is a good and important witness, but not sufficient. It can be easily ensured in a circle of like-minded people by gathering people of certain worldview related to Islamic and Christian culture, having them sit at a table and then drafting a final document which will please them. But it does not mean that these people will reflect the opinion of all Muslims or all Christians'.

Interreligious dialogue should be brought out of the state politically correct, flexible and at the same time ineffective, unable to convey real intellectual messages, Patriarch Kirill said. One of the first attempts to do so was done when a large group of religious leaders proposed a high-level group of experts at the UN, but the implementation of this idea was impeded by some UN internal provisions. Another step was made in a discussion with UNESCO secretary general Mr. Matsuura concerning a possibility for establishing such relations with his organization as part of the UN system and close in spirit to the religious theme. 'Such a group could be organized in the framework of relations between religions and UNESCO', His Holiness said.

The idea of setting up the group was first voiced at the 2006 Moscow Religious Summit held on the eve of the G8 Summit. There were also religious summits before G8 Summits in 2008 in Sapporo and in 2009 in Rome. Each of them insisted on the need for such dialogue with the UN system, especially UNESCO. The latest summit which spoke on this subject took place this year in Baku.

Addressing the UNESCO secretary general, Patriarch Kirill remarked, 'During the meeting in Baku, we considered your initiative for a UNESCO High Panel on Peace and Dialogue Between Cultures. It is a good idea, but we would like to know how it can be united with the initiative to set up an expert religious group at UNESCO which was approved by your predecessor'.

His Holiness also reminded that as a follow-up of the theme of cooperation with UNESCO, wishes were expressed that the headquarters of this organization should have a special coordinator who could maintain contacts between UNESCO and major religious families.

Ms Bokova thanked Patriarch Kirill for the opportunity to meet saying, 'I would like to thank you for the opinion you have expressed and for the analysis of the developments taking place in the globalizing world today'.

She spoke about the significance of tasks of UNESCO in the UN system and underlined the need to re-

think the development in the world. Speaking about the problems faced by today's society, she mentioned in particular the lack of mutual understanding between people. She noted that it was her aim to begin together with member states a discussion on the urgent problems of modern society and to try to assess them.

In her opinion, the global economic crisis made many think over the fact that to make their life full people need not only material but also other values. 'For me, this crisis is not only economic but also moral... We need a new approach, a new view on problems we encounter', she said.

Ms. Bokova also spoke about the need for mutually respectful interreligious dialogue, emphasizing the importance of the religious component of this dialogue.

The sides deemed it necessary to hold talks on a practical mechanism for dialogue with religious leaders in partnership with UNESCO.

*DECR Communication Service*

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