Archbishop Hilarion's assessment of the 2009 State Department Religious Freedom Report

In his letter to US Ambassador to Russia, Mr John Beyrle, the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, makes an assessment of the section on Russia in the US State Department Religious Freedom Report 2009. Below is the text of the letter.

Dear Mr Beyrle,

The Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations has studied the section on Russia in the US State Department Religious Freedom Report 2009.

I would like to remark with satisfaction that this document has taken into account many remarks made on previous reports. In particular, it no longer refers to the status of the Russian Orthodox Church as 'status that approaches official', as was stated, for instance, in the 2005 Report. The 2009 review contains information about the acts of vandalism against Orthodox places of veneration, which was not highlighted before. It is important that the Report underlines the role of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in promoting religious freedom. It is gratifying that the 2009 Report was prepared with due consideration for information received during consultations with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. This practice cannot be but welcomed. It would be desirable that it should be broadened also in the future.

On the other hand, I would like to make some constructive remarks. Thus, considering church-state relations in Russia, the Report comes to the conclusion that the Russian Orthodox Church cooperates more closely with the Government than do other religious groups. In order to prove it, information is given about the Church's numerous cooperation agreements with governmental bodies. In this connection, it should be remarked that the Church's partnership relations with the state are called forth by real needs of Orthodox believers who are a majority in Russia. This cooperation is not carried out to the detriment of other religious communities. It does not contradict the law and is aimed at protecting the constitutional rights of believers.

An agreement is only a form in which relations of social partnership are shaped for the benefit of the whole society. Unfortunately, these relations were destroyed by the militant atheism in the Soviet time.

Now the time has come to be guided in Russia not by an ideology whatever it may be but the interests of every individual and society as a whole. The Russian Orthodox Church is convinced that partnership relations with the state are the most adequate response to this challenge. It would be right to finalize these relations legally. At present, appropriate work is carried out, which does not contradict the constitutional foundations of the Russian State. It is also important to bear in mind that our Church does not claim the role of the only partner of the estate. Nothing should prevent other religious communities in the country from establishing constructive relations with the authorities.

We are convinced that the state should have the right to choose partners among organizations representing the civil society in fulfilling its socially significant functions. This practice is popular in Europe and is quite applicable to the Russian reality. Naturally, partnership relations with a state presuppose some privileges which involve additional obligations and responsibilities. We believe this model of church-state relations has proved to be effective and does not deserve criticism.

The Report gives considerable attention to teaching the knowledge of religion in schools. This theme is considered in more detail than it was in previous reports. It is important that the authors no longer proceed from the false premise that the compulsory teaching of religious disciplines is possible in Russia. The Basic Orthodox Culture course advocated by our Church is not a religious but culturological discipline in the strict sense. Nevertheless, we stand for its unconditionally voluntary study.

It is planned in Russia today to regularize the teaching of religious culture and the President of the Russian Federation has made an appropriate decision concerning it. After this reform is completed, every student, not only Orthodox but also a Muslim, a Jew and a Buddhist, should have the officially guaranteed right to study his or her own religious culture in school. At the same time, the schoolchildren who wish to study secular ethics or a similar discipline by choice will also be given this opportunity. The description the Report gives to the President's new initiatives can hardly be called correct in spite of the fact that information about them has been widely publicized.

Discussing the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the army, hospitals and prisons, the authors make a quantitative comparison with the presence of other religious communities. In doing so, they ignore the fact that Orthodox believers in Russia, just as people of other traditional religions, have the right to spiritual support while serving in the army, being abroad or in hospital or being confined. Naturally, to meet the religious needs of the Orthodox majority, the Church needs more clergy than do other religious communities. The Church has to ensure this right using predominantly her own resources and means.

The Report deplores the restrictions imposed on some 'new religious movements'. Regrettably, the document fails to mention the facts that have prompted these restrictions. The Church has been

approached by many former followers of these movements, who have suffered psychological and moral traumas as victims of fraud. Church and secular rehabilitation centers have applied much energy to help these people to return to a normal life, to overcome suicidal inclinations and to restore family happiness. Therefore, what stands behind many restrictive measures of the state with regard to minority religious groups is more often its concern for the rights of citizens and the demands of citizens themselves. Moreover, in most countries in the world including the USA, there are public bodies who are critical of such groups and who consult all the sides concerned including the state. We know that some 'new religious movements' in the USA, which have recently acquired followers in Russia as well, have managed to put themselves in the focus of public attention and to entrust the American foreign policy department with a special concern for their interests. In Russia these organizations have not yet managed to enjoy a similar attention. Therefore, most of the Russian believers do not understand why so a disproportionally large part of the Report is devoted to the problems of these movements.

However, even taking into account complexities arising in the work of 'new religious movements', we reject the unfounded attempts to link the restrictive measures undertaken by the state with regard to them exclusively with the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church. Regrettably, there are examples of this approach in the Report.

The criticism of the struggle with extremism waged in Russia by competent bodies including courts appears somewhat strange. Religious extremism whatever mask it may put on is unanimously rejected by traditional religious communities in the world including Russian ones. It is extremism exploiting the inherent religious feeling that underlies international extremism and the struggle with it has cost the lives of many Russian and American servicemen. It is necessary to observe that the Interreligious Council in Russia has repeatedly made statements on extremism condemning the abuse of religious freedom and freedom of speech, be it anti-Semitism or publication of cartoons on the founder of Islam Mohammed or an anti-Christian exhibition in Moscow. In this context, the authors' concern for the rights of Satanists appears ambiguous, especially as their cult involves the defilement of religious holy places, a survey of which is given in the US State Department Report.

The document of the US State Department points out that before the 1917 Revolution most of the churches were owned by the Russian Orthodox Church which was then an official Church. In fact, this property had a complex legal status which deserves a separate study. The Church does not claim all the property it owned in this or that way before the revolution. However, it is strange to assert that the property intended for religious purposes, which was created mostly with the donations of believers, should be used for other than religious purposes or should be owned by those who have nothing to do with it. The total confiscation of church property by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution in no way can be called fair or legitimate and for this reason cannot be regarded as an adequate ground for the assumption that the Church has lost its right to it or has never had such rights altogether.

In addition, I will remind you, the Russian Federation after joining the Council of Europe has assumed the voluntary obligation to return the property of religious organization which had been confiscated by the communist regime and often used in ways that insulted the feelings of believers. Churches were turned into clubs, warehouses, stables and garages. And in Moscow today there are church buildings hosting pleasure joints. I believe this problem of the pre-revolutionary status of the church property and grounds for its return to believers should be studied by the authors of future reports in more detail and we are ready to give all possible assistance in this endeavour.

The work of the US State Department to prepare surveys on the freedom of conscience in the world and in Russia is important. I urge that the sources of information used to draft the report should be more diverse and the authors of the document should maintain more active contacts with representative of religious communities and the wide range of expert and non-governmental organizations, which would make this work more objective and ensure its reception by the Russian people.

Respectfully,

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Chairman

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