



THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
Department for External Church Relations

"Freedom and Responsibility as Viewed by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill". Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk (International Hellenic University online seminar, 16th February 2021)



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Your Eminence and Your Graces,
All-honourable fathers, brothers and sisters,

I wholeheartedly greet all of you, the organisers and participants of the inter-Orthodox online seminar held under the aegis of the International Hellenic University. Before getting down to my address I would like to thank the University's leadership for inviting me to speak at the seminar.

In its essential aspects my paper raises the most important topics of human life, such as values, individual liberty, rights, moral choice and ensuing responsibility for its consequences.

Inasmuch as the contemporary society has different ways to conceptualize and interpret these

fundamental categories, in my address I would like to present the views of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia on the nature of human rights and freedoms in their relation to responsibility, moral choice and dignity. Over the years of his church ministry, His Holiness has systematically explored these issues in his homilies, speeches, lectures and written works. The majority of those who constitute the Russian Orthodox Church's flock have historically lived in Europe and belong to the European civilisation. Therefore, as the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church His Holiness Patriarch Kirill devotes particular attention to the human rights issues, as well as to the value system in the modern-day European society and in the social, legal and philosophical thought.

Values hold an important place in the life of the individual and society. A value system orients people in the world and motivates them to take concrete conscious steps and actions. Values embody ideals and meanings for which human beings can live and even sacrifice their lives. Values determine social development models and the course of world history, playing a decisive role at turning points of human life. Among the fundamental values of importance for the entire humanity we should mention faith, morality, truth, mercy, justice, peace, life, freedom, unity, human dignity, responsibility, self-sacrifice, mutual help, and solidarity. Of course, this is by no means the full list of the values common to all nations of the planet.

Looking at the universal values through the lens of religious worldview, we come to the conclusion that they are of supernatural origin and originate from God. Surely, there are those who tend to explain the origin and development of these values in terms of evolution, first and foremost, the social and legal one and even the evolution of morality. The reason behind it is that many present-day postulates, especially those pertaining to human rights and freedoms, took their final shape in the Modern Age, quite often as a direct response to social injustice and inequality. However, what kind of evolution can account for human religiousness and conscientiousness, human striving for truth and justice, love and mercy? As to their flourishing or degradation these qualities of human soul never depended on historical eras, political and social environment or national, cultural and linguistic differences. They are God's gift to the humankind as His creation, an integral element of the inward life of the person created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26).

The European civilisation developed under the inspiring influence of Christian worldview. However, no one is inclined to idealise the past and deny the mistakes, abuses and even crimes committed under the banner of Christianity. In his article "The Worth of Christianity and the Unworthiness of Christians" the renowned Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev says: "In the course of history there has been a triple betrayal of Christianity by Christendom. Christians first of all deformed their religion, then separated themselves from it, and finally... began to blame it for the evils which they had themselves created... Man perverts Christianity in some respect and then turns upon both the perversion and the real thing". Such was Berdyaev's response to those who would frequently reproach Christians for the divergence between the Christian history and the loftiness of the Christian moral teaching.

This philosopher wrote much about the free moral choice of the individual as a fundamental value proclaimed by Christianity. Since our childhood, we all have been able to tell right from wrong, the truth from a lie with regard to ourselves and those around us. An ability to make a conscious choice in favour of goodness and truth elevates the human being, making him/her moral.

As Christians we are bearers of Christian morality—the Gospel truth commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ. On every occasion we strive to comply with the Gospel morality and fulfil the divine commandments related to the Lord and our neighbours. Such was the life of the European society for many centuries, starting from the moment when the peoples of the European continent were illumined by the light of Christ's faith and ending with the Modern Era, the period of humanism, the dawn of a new liberal teaching. The Primate of the Russian Church rightly noted that this teaching had its genesis in the

Age of Enlightenment: “As it is known, the liberal doctrine originated in Europe in the 18th century, at the very end of the Age of Enlightenment, and in the subsequent century it grew much stronger... An idea of the overarching liberation of the individual from the social, national, religious, legal and other constraints was what often nourished the revolutionary movements which were in opposition to the politics of the time in the Western European countries and in Russia” .

By striving to exalt the value of human life and affirming the lawfulness of human interests and inalienability of rights and freedoms, humanism at the same time engendered an idea of anthropocentricity as opposed to the religious outlook. God’s place was taken by a human being. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill writes: “In the Modern Age a conviction arose that the main factor determining human life and therefore the life of society was man himself. Undoubtedly, it is a heresy, no less dangerous than Arianism. Before that, people used to believe that God ruled over the world by means of the laws created by Him, and over the human society based on the moral law that He had revealed in His word and mirrored in human conscience” . Gradually developing and becoming anti-religious, humanism gave rise to secularism—the tendency which ousts religious dimension from the life of the individual and society and leads to the propagation of atheism. In the public sphere, humanism produces nihilism and social apathy, and creates an atmosphere of discontent and revolt. The ideology of liberalism began to lay claim to universality and fight against the tradition.

Patriarch Kirill draws public attention to the problem of correlation and conflict between traditional and liberal values, to the necessity for seeking such ways of humanity’s development that would take into account the experience of preceding generations and today’s demands: “It is my deeply held belief that the fundamental challenge of the time, in which we all happen to be living, lies in the need for humankind to work out such civilizational model of its existence in the 21st century that would imply global harmonisation of dramatically opposing imperatives of neo-liberalism and traditionalism” .

The raised topic provoked a heated public discussion. It was stimulated, first of all, by the widely spread opinion that the person’s religiousness must not go beyond the church fence. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill disagreed with this opinion, emphasising that faith and religious choice must not be just a private affair unrelated to the life around. “It is impossible at the same time to be a Christian behind the doors of one’s home, in one’s family or in the solitude of one’s cell and not to be a Christian while mounting the academic rostrum, sitting in front of a TV camera, voting in parliament and even starting a scientific experiment. Christian motivation must be present in all the areas of interest vital to a believer,” the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church noted .

In many of his speeches and homilies His Holiness focuses on the problem of defending traditional values from attacks by aggressive secularism. It is one of the major topics in the dialogue with statesmen and public leaders, as well as in the interaction with other religious communities. As far back as the end of the previous century, Patriarch Kirill saw in representatives of other religions potential allies against the liberal standard which is being enforced on society: “Monotheistic religions, committed to their religious identity and firmly defending their believers’ rights, as is clearly indicated by the relevant articles in the laws of Israel and the Muslim countries, can also be Orthodox Christians’ allies in the dialogue with those who cast doubt on the importance of tradition” .

Today’s world has begun to forget that the European civilisation owes its development to Christianity and that the Gospel commandments laid the foundation for the moral law by which those living on this continent were guided. Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, once said that Europe had started on three hills: the Acropolis, which gave it values of freedom, philosophy and democracy, the Capitol, which gave Roman law and social structure, and the Golgotha, i.e. Christianity .

Exploring the issue of human value, rights and freedoms without any reference to Christianity, the contemporary society gives them entirely different meaning which is generally linked with the ideology of all-permissiveness and consumerism. As a result, being within this system of shifted moral guidelines, people cannot find their place in the rapidly changing environment. Nor can they find peace by constantly indulging and satisfying their passions. At the deep mental level, the conception of human nature and its relationship with God and outside world is getting distorted, and rights and freedoms are becoming identifiers for human beings. To ensure freedom is becoming an obsession, without any serious deliberations on its consequences for personality and society as a whole, or on people's responsibility for their actions.

In 2010, in one of his addresses His Holiness Patriarch Kirill put forward an entirely different model of human interaction with outside world. He said: "I believe that Christianity, like no other religion, can offer the most convincing worldview to people today. Indeed, if the highest value for a man of our time is freedom, it is in the person of the God-Man Jesus Christ that human nature has attained its highest freedom—the freedom from evil and sin. Christianity offers a much loftier vision of freedom than just a negative concept of freedom 'from' something—from exploitation, violence and restrictions. With Jesus Christ, man can attain freedom 'for' something—for complete self-fulfilment in love for God and one's neighbours. It is in this harmonious interaction (synergy) between God and man, as taught by Christianity and implemented in the lives of the saints and zealots of the Church, that everyone can find the answer to the issues concerning freedom, meaning of life and public service" .

Developing the idea expressed by the Primate of the Russian Church, we should note that the outlook based on the Gospel teaching cannot be subjected to revision with the view of adjusting it to ideologies or political preferences of certain groups of people. We ought to admit that rights cannot exist without a solid moral foundation. Human rights must comply with the law of God, thus affirming human dignity and taking the side of creativeness, instead of destruction and death. Otherwise humanity will face degradation and degeneration and from "the force of law" the legal system will drift into "the rule of force."

The Russian Orthodox Church has attempted to formulate its own views on the nature of human rights, freedom and dignity. In 2008 it adopted The Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights. Shown forth in the document is the Orthodox attitude towards these topics. The reason for producing this document is described in its preamble: "Christians have found themselves in a situation where public and state structures can force and often have already forced them to think and act contrary to God's commandments, thus obstructing their way towards the most important goal in human life, which is deliverance from sin and finding salvation. In this situation the Church, on the basis of Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition, is called to remind people about the basic provisions of the Christian teaching on the human person and to assess the theory of human rights and the way it is being implemented" .

Human rights, freedoms and especially dignity are associated in the public sphere with justice, first of all, social justice. Justice is not just a philosophical, juridical or political term; it is determined by morality. Striving for justice helps achieve social harmony and equality and give concrete meaning to the political, as well as socioeconomic rights of every human person. In one of his speeches addressed to our country's parliamentarians His Holiness clearly pointed out the necessity of achieving justice in society for ensuring human rights and freedoms: "The ideal of equal opportunities for all people needs to and must be fulfilled not only within a Christian community, not only within a church. The ideal of social justice must be a guiding principle in the life of the state and in legislative activities. In this I see one of the most important goals of any state's existence. Rephrasing a well-known expression of the Blessed Augustine, we can say that justice is a kind of criterion for defining moral legitimacy of power. Losing faith in justice seriously complicates the society's development, dispirits people, and undermines the very foundations of public order and civil accord" .

Our country's history distinctly confirms what I have said. For many centuries the unfree society, divided into classes, into masters and bondmen, was cultivating in people discontent with the established order, with the injustice of economic wealth distribution. The 1917 socialist revolution promised to ensure social justice: to eliminate class divisions and establish fair distribution of work products. "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," a slogan of that time read. However, the idea of justice was discredited by the means used to achieve this welfare, namely, by repudiating religion, destroying the Church, eradicating faith in people's consciousness, by violence and murders. And where is this atheist regime today? It collapsed, while faith revived. So, in the post-Soviet countries churches and monasteries are being restored, welcoming more and more faithful.

So, what can the Church offer in response to these present-day destructive phenomena? Its living faith in the indisputable Gospel teaching about the meaning and purposes of human existence. And the Church's creative contribution to the organisation of human community based on truth, goodness, justice, love and mercy is bound to gain appreciation. Human soul, which is, according to the Christian author Tertullian, in its very nature Christian, strives after the eternal truths proclaimed by the Church.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sees his vocation in serving peace, rendering aid to those who suffer from enmity and violence, and strengthening neighbourly relations between people, along with the moral ideals that help human beings build up their private and family life and ultimately the life of society.

Thank you for your attention. I am ready to answer your questions.

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