



# **THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF MODERN LIFE. Liberalism, Traditionalism and Moral Values of a Uniting Europe. An article by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad published by 'Nezavisimaya Gazeta' ('Independent Newspaper') and 'NG-Religions' on 26 May 1999**

## **THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF MODERN LIFE**

### **Liberalism, Traditionalism and Moral Values of a Uniting Europe**

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'Comprehend the circumstances of the time', - said Ignatius of Antioch, the holy martyr and God-Bearer. This commandment is especially topical now, on the threshold of the third millennium. What problems does the outgoing century pose before us? What is the challenge of our epoch?

There is a priority problem at the end of the century, and the future of the world community largely depends on its successful solution. I am deeply convinced that the fundamental challenge for humanity in the epoch, in which we were destined to live, is the necessity to elaborate such a model of civilisation of its existence in the 21st century which would envisage the utmost harmonisation of the dramatically different imperatives of neo-liberalism and traditionalism. East and West are facing the most difficult but by no means hopeless task of finding together the balance between progress in the sphere of safeguarding personal rights and the rights of the minorities on the one hand, and the preservation of national-cultural and religious identity of individual nations on the other.

Though the need for an adequate and solidary response to the civilisation challenge of our time has not been formulated so far in the proper socio-political and culturological terms, it is felt everywhere very acutely, because the implicit for many, but nevertheless real state of affairs in military-political, cultural-religious, national and other confrontations which we see in the post-communist epoch, is precisely the resistance of the conservative principle and traditionalistic world-outlook to the for the imposed and even forcible establishment of neo-liberal values. This is an intrinsic subject of the present ideological drama.

The 20th century has become an historical arena on which the pairs of irreconcilable rivals changed

each other in a brutal struggle: monarchy and republic, fascism and communism, totalitarianism and democracy. Two world wars and one 'cold war' were the bitter results of the ideological uncompromise in our century. In this context quite natural and understandable is the euphoria over the Soviet perestroika in the world which was tired of balancing the two superpowers on the brink of nuclear apocalypse.

The dominance of the ideologized consciousness, a fruit of pride and sophism of human mind, which often revealed its spiritual poverty and caused innumerable disasters to the nations, has been seriously shaken. But the rivalry of ideologies is being replaced by a new and hardly curable rivalry, namely, globalism and universalism as an expression of the principle of the general stand against conservatism and traditionalism as an expression of the principle of the individual and separate. Therefore today, as in the Biblical times, the principle which was so exhaustively formulated by the Spanish social thinker Jose Ortega y Gasset remains the corner-stone of human coexistence: 'Civilisation is first of all the will to coexistence'. But the will to coexistence presupposes, as a mandatory condition, the recognition of the others' right to life. Since the Divine truth is reflected in the concept of human rights and freedoms and in the principle of national and cultural identity, let us turn to history in order to trace the genesis of their confrontation which has become so topical at present. But first let us agree on the concept of the civilisation standard which we shall use to describe the liberal and traditionalistic complexes of philosophy and axiology.

It is known that liberal doctrine came into being in Europe in the 18th century when the Enlightenment was drawing to a close. In the next century this doctrine became stronger and began to become firmly established. The idea of the comprehensive liberation of an individual from the social, political, national, religious, legal and other limitations has often nourished the revolutionary movements which were opposing state structure in the countries of Western Europe and in Russia. The adherents of this trend postulated the existing non-freedom of an individual who was enslaved and suppressed by the structures and institutions of the state, the social order, the prevailing morals, prejudices and conventionalities as a fundamental problem of the epoch. Hence, an individual had to be liberated from the burden of the outer forces, since man 'by definition' is the absolute and ultimate value, and his good is the criterion of the just social order. On the eve of the Russian revolution this mythologem of liberal consciousness was expressed in the concentrated form by a classic of proletarian literature Maxim Gorky who, through one of his characters, declared: 'Man - this sounds proudly!' These words in the USSR were inscribed on the banner of the antireligious struggle, as in an atheistic state there could not be no other Name worth of devoting one's thoughts and works to it. It is not fortuitous that Holbach, Helvetius, Diderot and other philosophers of the Enlightenment persistently linked humanism with materialism and atheism.

So, God-like man as a measure of all things was put at the core of the anthropocentric universe.

Moreover, not simply man, but fallen sinful man, since, according to the teaching of the Church, 'man is created in the image and after the likeness of God, but sin has distorted the beauty of the image' (St. Basil the Great). Modern Western thought completely lacks this concept of the distorted nature of man. Triumphant in it is the set of ideas of pagan origin which began to become firmly established in West Europe during the Renaissance. It was with the authority of the Renaissance that the concept of the anthropocentricity of the universe was sanctified in which an individual was the centre of being and social milieu. Thus, along with the return to classical culture during the Renaissance there took place a spiritual involution of the European social thought. It was going backwards from the values of Christianity to the regressive pagan ethics and pagan world-outlook. Using the expression with which Arnold Toynbee often operates in his fundamental work 'The Comprehension of History', we have all reasons to speak about the triumph of 'idolatry in its most vicious form of man's worshipping himself'.

As far as Western Christianity is concerned, it did not denounce this process, but, having accepted a postulate of the freedom of man as the highest value of his earthly being, as a social and cultural given, sanctified the union of the neo-pagan doctrine with Christian ethics. For instance, Christian and pagan principles were combined (through Catholicism and Protestantism) in the process of the formation of the liberal standard. A certain influence was exerted by Judaic theological thought, which was considerably influential in the universities of Western Europe. From the Spanish culture and through the Jewish emigration it came to Holland and the neighbouring countries (Maimonides, Crescas, Ibn Ezra). It is not surprising that most demanded in the process of formation of the liberal worldview were ideas of those free-thinkers, atheists and pantheists who broke away from the traditional Judaism, such as Baruch Spinoza and partly Uriel Acosta. The whole complex of notions of the liberal standard of existence was formed in the 19th century. It was first constituted in the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' of the French Revolution and finally confirmed in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' in 1948.

It is unfortunate that Russia had the chance to join the discussion about correlation of the liberal and traditional principles only recently. In the old days the USSR was rather active in the elaboration of the modern version of the liberal standard of relations among states and of human rights. But in doing so it was guided by pragmatic considerations, such as to disavow the accusations by the West of totalitarian methods of control and management and, with the first opportunity, to turn this double-edged propandagist weapon against its ideological adversaries. It seemed at that time that all violations of human rights would be hidden from the world behind the iron curtain for ever, and it was possible to allow an advantageous compromise with the West in order to enhance the liking for socialism without any real changes in life at home. The USSR disintegrated, and only one super-power has been left on the world scene. Paradoxically, it inherited not only the former Soviet empire, but also the politics of double standards concerning human rights. How otherwise can it be explained that the pretext for aggression against Yugoslavia was the problem of Kosovo, whereas the similar problem of Kurdistan is not considered at all as a reason for threatening action against Turkey?

Unfortunately, the Orthodox spiritual and cultural tradition was nowhere presented by the Soviet diplomacy for ideological and political reasons when the modern standards of relations among the states and of human rights were elaborated. As far as I can judge, this tradition was not emphasised by the diplomats of other countries who represented the East either. In other words, we can state that modern international standards are exclusively Western and liberal standards by their nature. This would not have caused particular concern were the problem one of foreign policy only, i.e. relations among states in which this standard proved itself sufficiently effective. Indeed, what would happen in the sphere of relations among states if the liberal standard, universal by its nature, was rejected? It is quite evident that this universal standard would have been replaced by a national standard which repeatedly provoked and legitimised wars in the past. Were such a replacement made in reality, an uncontrolled collapse of the whole world system could occur, because any of these standards, be it 'Wahhabist', 'Chinese', 'African', 'Catholic', 'Japanese', 'Hinduist' etc., if laid in the basis of structuring relations among states, would have been inevitably rejected by the adherents of other national-cultural and religious views. An attempt to build relations among states while ignoring certain principles common for all would have been very close to the universal catastrophe in which there is no room for joy left if one of these standards wins, even that adhered by you.

So, the crux of the problem seems to be the following. It is not that the liberal standard formulated on the level of international organisations is laid at the basis of international politics today. It is rather that this standard is suggested as mandatory for organising the internal life of countries and people, including those countries whose cultural, spiritual and religious traditions are not present in the formation of this standard in practice.

Particularly mentioned in this regard should be moral values of the uniting Europe. It is quite evident that these values are standardised on the basis of Western liberalism. When the frontiers of a united Europe were the same as the frontiers of Western Europe, this problem could be regarded as the 'inner' affair of the West and its own civilisation choice, the responsibility for which in religious and pastoral regard was born by Western Churches. Today the frontiers of the united Europe are being extended to the East, and it quite possible that in the foreseeable future it will include countries with an Orthodox population of many millions. What will be the meaning of life in accordance with the ethnic and value standards alien to these countries in terms of preserving their spiritual, cultural and religious identity? If Europe and, may be, the whole world will be standardised on the basis of a single cultural-civilisational norm, then it will be easier to govern them, but they will lack the beauty of plurality and happiness of people. Besides, it is apparent today that the expansion of liberalism cannot take place without conflicts, especially in those spheres of human life which tenaciously retain the values nurtured by the national spiritual and cultural traditions. This phenomenon is quite evident in the East and less evident in the West, but in reality it is present in both.

The most vivid example is given by the history to the adoption of the new Russian law 'On the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organisations'. Unprecedented political pressure was exerted on Russia. President Clinton and Chancellor Kohl sent President Yeltsin messages of protest. The Pope of Rome demanded that the Kremlin block the new law on the freedom of conscience. The American congressmen, in case of its approval, threatened Russia with economic sanctions. What happened, and why did no other internal Russian problem provoke such a negative, sharp and concerted reaction of the West? The reason is simple: our law on the freedom of conscience was regarded incongruous with the liberal standard in the sphere of religious human rights. Modestly staying away from this campaign against national legislation of a sovereign state were only those countries of the West in which the Church, unlike in Russia, enjoys state status or the formal registration of the exotic sects alien to the local cultural tradition is subject to much more conditions than in our country. As a matter of fact, Russia was given an ultimatum to bring its national legislation on the freedom of conscience into line with the international but actually liberal standards.

Such collisions show that the liberal standard is not perfect and reveal a possibility of manipulating it for political purposes. They are very significant and will occur even more frequently in future if we do not begin right now a serious discussion about the relationship between liberalism and traditionalism in the formation of viable standards which must meet the challenges of European as well as world integration.

From this it follows that far from the most liberal standard with regard to all sorts of human rights and freedoms, but only that which takes into account certain generally accepted principles and organically and unambiguously combines them with the national, cultural and religious values of those particular countries can claim the role of a generally recognised and genuine universal character. The moral duty of the postcommunist Russia and other countries which belong to the spiritual and cultural tradition of Orthodox Christianity is to present their own vision of the problem to the world community and to call it to resume the discussion under the changed historical circumstances. There is a lot of difficult work to do for formulating one's own position and defending it before the world's public at the UN and other international organisations. The efforts of the Orthodox Churches can play an invaluable role first of all in the dialogue with other Churches, denominations and religions.

In this regard I would like to say some words about ecumenism. I am deeply convinced that the reason for the crisis of modern ecumenism is largely connected with its inability to comprehend the fundamental meaning of the Apostolic tradition as the norm of faith. This norm, which like a golden thread runs through universal history and connects the Apostolic age with our time, comprehensively determines the ways of life and salvation of Christians. The preservation and affirmation of the inviolate norm of faith is the mission of Orthodox Christianity in the world, since the rejection of the Tradition in fact means an involuntary recognition of the notion that man is permitted to do everything. As a matter of fact, the

agreement of certain denominations female ordination or the blessing of homosexual marriages is nothing but the practical realisation of the liberal standard of human rights and unlimited religious freedom. This is one of many cases of the consistent and purposeful ousting of the apostolic norm of faith from the life of contemporary society and its replacement with the liberal standard.

The tragedy of modern Protestantism is in the acceptance of this replacement and participation in it with the prospect of losing confessional self-consciousness up to its complete dissolving in the system of values of the secular world. It is in the ecumenical movement, and first of all in the World Council of Churches, that this trend has become apparent for the Orthodox. The protest of the Orthodox against female ordination and recognition of homosexual marriages is a protest against the very idea of certain priority of the liberal standard (which, as is known, has not only Christian roots) over the norm of the Tradition of the Church. The crisis of ecumenism has clearly revealed an aspiration of the Protestant majority to use the liberal idea as the fundamental idea, which in many respects defines ecumenical ethics and practice while being insensitive to the theme of Tradition. This has brought about a situation that in spite of some success in achieving dogmatical consensus, the Orthodox and the Protestant are facing new divisions caused by a certain 'absolutisation' of liberal standards by Protestant theology.

Yet, these serious disagreements and contradictions should not be perceived as a reason for the discontinuation of dialogue, and moreover, as a cause for religious confrontation with the West. On the contrary, the Russian Orthodox Church, which has raised the question of the crisis of modern ecumenism publicly and in the spirit of fraternal openness, regards the continuation of dialogue among Christians as an opportunity to witness to divided Christianity the fundamental meaning of the norm of faith revealed in the Apostolic Tradition. Quite fruitful in this regard could be dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, which recognises Tradition as the norm of faith.

The monotheistic religions devoted to the idea of faithfulness to their religious identity staunchly defend the rights of their believers. That is eloquently testified by the relevant articles in the legislations of Israel and Muslim countries. The monotheistic religions could also become allies of the Orthodox in the dialogue with those who put the value of Tradition in doubt. By their nature different national and religious standards, using the words of Karl Popper, are not 'enemies of the open society', as they are presented sometimes. On the contrary, they could be an effective factor of its stability and viability.

At the moment we are faced with a dilemma: either Orthodoxy 'changes', or it will be rejected by the 'world community', often under the pseudonym of which we can see one of many existing cultures, namely, the Western culture, or, to be more precise, the liberal one. It is being persistently affirmed as the most 'progressive', 'humanistic' and 'modern'. At the same time, Orthodox Christianity and sometimes other monotheistic religions as well are set off against the liberal anthropocentric system of values which is declared the norm for individuals and human societies. The Churches and religious

communities must adequately respond to the positive and obviously negative aspects of the current process of globalisation. We want to understand others, but we also want to be heard and understood.

We come from the theocentric spiritual tradition which perceives the anthropocentric humanism as an alien world-view, and we are prepared to treat it with respect, but we shall never accept it as the absolute and unconditional positive value. Also, we proceed from the notion that the standards, which voluntarily or involuntarily facilitate the destruction of the national-cultural and religious identity of people, will inevitably deplete the fullness of God's world, will lead to its unification and finally to its destruction.

Europe with its traditions of a manifold cultural structure, tolerance and openness could make a decisive contribution to the process of global harmonisation of religious, cultural and sociopolitical traditions. An important place in it must belong to Christians. I believe that through our combined efforts we shall be able to lay the foundation for a truly diverse community based on the standards which will secure the rights and freedoms of people and at the same time preserve, rather than destroy, the values rooted in their spiritual, cultural and religious traditions. Only this world order is able to become the real alternative to suspicion, enmity and the right of force in the relations among nations.

'... that we may live, and not die, both we, and thou, and also our little ones' (Gen.43:8).

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