



Metropolitan Hilarion: There is the genocide of Christians in the Middle East

On March 29, 2015, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, who hosts the Church and the World program on Russia-24 TV network, had as his guest the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Commissioner For Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law, Constantine Dolgov.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good afternoon, dear brothers and sisters! You are watching the Church and the World program. Today we will again discuss the Middle East and the situation of Christian minorities. My guest today is the Russian Foreign Ministry Commissioner for Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law, Constantine Dolgov. Good afternoon, Constantine Constantinovich.

C. Dolgov: Good afternoon, your Eminence.

This is a really pressing problem. Regrettably, the situation in the Middle East, in which once very numerous Christian communities have found themselves, raises the most serious concern. The region as a whole is going through a turbulent time and certain waves of internal instability raised by the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Of course, there are still various conflicts, including old and unresolved. First of all, it is the Arab-Israeli conflict. The armed conflict continues in Syria. There is a threat of international terrorism. We all can see perfectly well the Islamic State militants overstepping the limits in various countries of the region. Not least of all their victims are precisely Christians. There are flagrant violations of human rights, first of all, the fundamental right to life.

Metropolitan Hilarion: In the recent years, the Russian diplomacy has exerted special efforts to improve the situation in the Middle East. The Russian Orthodox Church, primarily in the person of the Patriarch, keeps raising the alarm. We speak of this problem in each place possible, such as international platforms and the mass media, because until recently this problem was hushed up as if non-existent; it was simply ignored. Only after the ISIS militants began terrible mass executions of Christians the world community began speaking about this problem out loud. It happened only after the number of Christians in Iraq decreased by times and almost no Christians remained in Lybia and after the Christian community in Egypt had a hard time. The world community has at last begun speaking out against the background of general instability and uncertainty, against the background of the Arab Spring developments, against the background of what is going on now in Syria, where militants in the occupied territories are systematically eliminating Christians and Christian shrines.

The question arises inevitably here: why the so-called Christian West, at least in the eyes of many

Muslims, supports these destructive forces and the so-called opposition in Syria? Why did the West support and actually initiate the overthrow of the regime in Iraq? Yes, we understand that the regime that existed in Iraq could be viewed differently and could hardly be regarded as model. But when a regime that somehow or other keeps the whole country from a disaster is overthrown an utter chaos comes in and a civil war begins, for the overthrow of a dictatorship does not at all mean that it will be surely replaced by a democracy. And those who did it now wash their hands saying: We have nothing to do with this; we have done our work; now let them themselves sort it all out. And how they can sort it all out on their own when the whole infrastructure of the country, political and economic, is destroyed and the interreligious and inter-ethnic balances, which existed for centuries, are violated?

Now we have found ourselves in a situation when the whole Middle East is affected by this blight of terrorism, when the fire of civil war and inter-ethnic confrontation is blazing, when Christians are methodically eliminated, that is, when the genocide of Christians is raging. Let us call things by their proper names. True, the western society has paid attention to it at last. Thanks God, they have started speaking about this problem even in the UN. But is it not late?

C. Dolgov: You are absolutely right in analyzing the actions of western countries, in the first place, the United States of America, as regards a number of countries in the region. Of course, what happened in Iraq (we repeatedly gave our assessment to it) was a glaring violation of international law. Of course, the military operation was undertaken bypassing the UN Security Council, without its sanction. The consequences of these illegal and wrong actions are such as they are.

Really, in Iraq – and I would add Lybia – there was a violation of international law by the coalition of states led by the USA and NATO. Again, we see a situation which is not just far from being ideal in the human rights area but constitutes a glaring violation of the principle of supremacy of law. Of course, it is civilians who suffer in the first place. Regrettably, not least suffering is the Christian population. I agree with your assessment of the situation as genocide. Indeed, many actions including the mass murder of Copts in Egypt confirm it. Not long ago, another terrible incident took place when several dozen Coptic Christians were brutally killed. And certainly, the murder of Christians in Syria can be viewed as genocide in the sense of the 1948 Convention.

Metropolitan Hilarion: We should add Nigeria to the countries you have mentioned as, again, a terrorist group there, who have fully associated themselves with the so-called Islamic State, have massacred the Christian population. They attack villages, burn churches, kill people. And this epidemic is spreading. In this connection, the question arises: Why the civilized world community cannot stop this process?

C. Dolgov: Because certain geopolitical and military-political interests primarily of the West are pursued

in what concerns military campaigns and certain conflicts in the Middle East. Hostages to these interests are very many important fundamental problems, including the problems of preservation of inter-confessional peace.

In western countries – Western Europe, USA and other countries – there is a growth of various religious phobias and growing oppression and persecution of Christians as they are pressed to reject their beliefs or not to show their commitment to the Christian faith. There are growing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

All these are serious and profoundly systemic problems in the West. It is a very disturbing alarm for the governments of these countries, and we hope that they will still continue taking an active part in the international efforts in this area.

As for extremists and all kinds of terrorists, particularly the Islamic State, in my view, to rock this boar of inter-confessional stability is one of the shortest ways to destabilization of the situation. Apparently, this factor works not only because they may feel hatred towards Christians, though it also the case, but they simply seek to rock the situation in a multi-confessional country, such as Syria. And one of the shortest ways to their goal is the fomenting of hatred among confessions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: There is a serious mistake, even a totality of mistakes in the approach taken by western countries and governments, first, to the very phenomenon of religion and, secondly, to the situation in the Middle East, especially to the interreligious situation. The attitude to the phenomenon of religion lies in this: religion is believed to bear an explosive potential, and in order to make people of different faiths live together without conflicts, the religious factor has to be removed altogether from the domain of public life. In other words, Christians should not wear little crosses, Muslims should not wear yashmak, and there must be no religious symbols in public places; any mention of God should be removed from constitutions; oaths should not be made on the Bible. That is, there must be a whole complex of measures for banishing God and any signs of religion from human life. These democratic institutions believe that in this way the potential for interreligious conflict will be reduced to zero.

But this view is wrong because people are constituted differently: they are ready to defend their religious beliefs; many are ready even to die for them. If we take the Middle East, it is a region in which religious feelings has always been heightened, in which people take their religious affiliation seriously.

From the point of view of human rights, there are both pluses and minuses in this attitude. Minuses lie in that it is a conflict-prone region, and if there is no restrain – the secular authority which keeps all from confrontation – then this powder keg blows up. From the point of view of a religious person, however, there are great pluses in this attitude because people are ready to defend their shrines, to die for their

faith.

The Middle East was always a place of bloody tragedies, such as we see today. Thanks God, for over ten centuries, Muslims and Christians have co-existed in the Middle East. For centuries people of different faiths have lived side by side. We remember the pictures of peaceful Syria and peaceful Lybia. I remember Syria well. I have been to that country many times. When you walk on one street, you see a mosque, and further on a Christian church of one confession, then a Christian church of another confession, then shops in which Christians and Muslims are engaged in trade together.

It used to be an absolutely peaceful country. And all of a sudden some external forces decided to put it in 'order'. And what result do we see? I believe, the so-call civilized community bears direct responsibility for this chaos in the Middle East. It means that it should take measures to stop all this devilish orgy that is held under religious slogans.

C. Dolgov: I fully agree with you. Some members of the international community bear special responsibility for the critical situation that has developed in various spheres in the Middle East, including in the sphere of persecution of Christians. Indeed, the Middle East is the cradle of several religions. For millennia and centuries, people of various confessions used to live peacefully and to work together in Syria and not only there. Unfortunately, it is a nourishing soil for extremist actions, for enkindling hatred. It is exactly what internal and external forces have used for their narrowly understood and interpreted national and group interests. It is certainly a very dangerous phenomenon.

I would like to pay tribute to the active and productive actions of the Russian Orthodox Church, with which we actively cooperate in this area. The growth of international attention shown to this problem by the UN and OCSE is a result of our common efforts. No doubt, we have many allies. These are countries in which the Christian religion is dominant and many Arab and Muslim countries which share our concern. The recent statement, which was voiced on behalf of 65 states in Geneva, is devoted to this problem of the need to stop the persecution of Christians and people of other confessions and religious communities, first of all in the Middle East.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I would like to remind our viewers that the resolution you have mentioned is signed by 65 countries, but it was initiated by three countries – Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon. It is symbolic in its own way because Russia plays a leading role in the struggle against terrorism. Making a sensible assessment of the situation in the Middle East, Russia keeps attracting the world community's attention to this problem. The Vatican is our ally in this endeavour.

Lebanon is a country of the Middle East in which an inter-confessional balance has been preserved, though it is surrounded by other countries already caught in the flare of conflict. For this reason we are

concerned for the fate of Lebanon.

Symbolically, these three countries united to come out together, and I would like to hope that the world community will hear this call and take real measures to settle the situation in the Middle East. I would like to believe that it is not too late and we will manage to preserve Christians in the places where they used to live for centuries, to stop their mass exodus from these lands and, most importantly, to create or re-create acceptable conditions for the life of all people who have lived in the countries of this region from time immemorial.

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