



Religious Factor in International Relations

On October 23, 2013, Metropolitan Hilarion read a lecture at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (university) (MGIMO) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before the lecture, he, in his capacity as rector of the Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate and Doctoral Studies, and Dr. A. Torkunov, MGIMO rector, signed a cooperation agreement between the two educational institutions.

Esteemed Anatoliy Vasilyevich,

Dear Friends:

Being in the walls of the country's leading diplomatic institute, I would like to share with you my thoughts about the place and role of the religious idea in Russian society, international relations and global processes. A hot, though not always sufficiently profound discussion, is being held on this subject. In our country, the debate is normally about the forms in which the Russian Orthodox Church, to which most of our compatriots belong one way or another, should be present in the life of the people. This discussion is also held in the educational sphere. The Church is criticized for allegedly seeking to impose the knowledge of religion on the younger generation beginning from school to university. In this dispute, there is a great deal of arguments which I will not cite now. But you as international workers to be are aware that religion plays an essential role not only on the national level but also in relations between states. Without the knowledge of this role it is impossible to speak of a valid education in the field of international relations.

I dare suggest that even in the period of the toughest efforts made in ideologizing the education system in the Soviet time, the Institute of International Relations was the university whose faculty considered the religious factor in international relations not to be an object of application of Soviet ideological clichés but rather a subject to be seriously studied.

Neither along practical or theoretical lines is it possible to speak of the development of inter-state relations in most of the regions in the world without the understanding and assessment of the role of religious ideas in forming the world outlook of peoples living in those regions.

Christianity became the value basis for the European civilization in all its diversity and complexity. It formed the essential principles of international intercourse, mutual understanding and good-neighbourly relations. The Church became the first body in the human history to unite people of different nationalities

and cultures through the faith in Jesus Christ.

The Church's most important mission was and still is to bear witness to the need to be guided in interpersonal relations by the moral law of truth, goodness and justice. It is this mission that dictates the church peace service, compassion for the weak and the work to protect them in face of the powerful of this world.

In the discussion on the significance of Christianity as an essential factor in the development of European nations, it is necessary to dwell on one of the developments which, having been born in Europe, has come to influence many modern global processes.

The consistent secularization of the European civilization going back to the Renaissance has acquired an unprecedented scale in our days. The rejection of moral principles in the order of societal life and universal Christian ideas as regulator of relations between people has led the Western world to oust religion from the public sphere.

Secular humanism, which used the Christian world outlook of most of the Europeans as the starting point of their development, in recent decades has more and more consistently and even aggressively turned into a self-sufficient force in the European society.

Humanism is believed to be a politically correct and neutral notion for the whole of Europe as it is believed to unite proponents of different ideas including religious ones. But this conception is being rapidly filled with a new content often unacceptable to believers. Being devoid of moral preferences and critical in its attitude to religious maxims, it renders the human personality absolute, substituting for God whose commandments were used to lie in the basis of relations between people.

"Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not" – this utterance ascribed to Protagoras can become one of the slogans of humanism. At the same time, the modern concept of human rights torn away from moral responsibility does not give an answer to the question of what kind of person should be assigned primary importance in surrounding reality. Does the wellbeing of virtuous or sinful man lie in the meaning of all socio-political constructions?

The ideas of human dignity and freedom, which for most of people in Europe are associated with the thinkers of the French Revolution time, are firmly rooted in the Christian teaching of man. Neither Voltaire nor Rousseau would have truly established themselves as thinkers if there had not been before them the ages-long tradition of Christian theology. Indeed, it exposed the teaching on the high value of man as created in the image and likeness of the Creator and therefore having dignity. The problem of the French humanists, just as all the subsequent ones, was that they rejected the idea of the corruption

of human nature by sin in the belief that to build a perfect society it is sufficient to have personal freedom and to have it respected by people around; whereas the notion of sin, which accounts for man's inclination for committing amoral, sinful actions, is ignored in the philosophical concepts of the Enlightenment and later ideals conceived by secular ideologists.

If the affirmation of the relativity of virtue and sin as personal choice is accepted, then the Church with its idea of the need to struggle against evil and to aspire after truth and goodness is a potential obstacle in personal life according to personal free will. Such a Church becomes unnecessary to a society of people who only seek to satisfy their own passions and egoistic desires. In such a society the Church is denied the right to bear witness to God's truth and to call people to struggle with evil and sin.

One cannot say that humanism which rejects the idea of sin as violation of the moral order established from above is essentially amoral. No, not at all. The point is that in humanism and in the liberal worldview it has generated, morality, just as all the public institutions surrounding man, are the subject of social contract. Free and devoid of religious and other "prejudices", people are capable of negotiating morality on their own. But if there are no guidelines for such a contract, then the human fantasy would not know of limits.

We all are witnesses to the fact that several European countries have legalized such vices as, for instance, prostitution and homosexuality. Recently we have witnessed thousands-strong rallies in Paris in which the French came out against making the traditional family legally equal to the partnership of people with non-traditional sexual orientation. Both the opponents and proponent of the legalization of same-sex unions appealed to human rights. Finally, a law giving homosexual couples the status and rights equal to those of traditional families was adopted by French legislators, with the ethical aspects of this problem fully ignored.

Therefore, we can state that the secular liberal ideology is turned into a self-sufficient force intolerant of dissent. To confirm this I will cite only one example. The mayor of the French small city of Arcangues, Jean-Michel Colo, who as a good Catholic refused to register a same-sex union, is threatened with imprisonment and a fine for discrimination. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that 20 thousand French mayors and their deputies, members of "Mayors for the Protection of Childhood", expressed solidarity with him.

The idea to reject Christian heritage as a moral guideline for the European civilization is also manifested in the European integration process. Most of the major Christian communities in the continent including the Russian Orthodox Church came out for the inclusion in the draft EU Constitution, which was discussed in the early 2000s, a reference to the contribution made by Christianity to the European civilization. However, it was rejected in the final draft. The Preamble mentions only "the cultural,

religious and humanistic heritage of Europe". This poses a very serious question concerning the values preference of the European integration.

The failure to recognize the contribution of Christianity to the European civilization in the EC Constitution and later in the Lisbon Treaty, which incorporated several provisions of the draft constitution, is an alarming sign. The motivation of those who oppose to the reference to Christianity is known; they speak of a poly-confessional Europe and prefer not to mention some religions to avoid offending others.

Thus, radical secularism apparently rejects the historical past of European nations and violates the rights of Christians in Europe. Recently a number of organizations have been established for European and American Christians to register the cases of violation of their rights in various areas of societal life. There is a great deal of such cases, but they are seldom mentioned in the European and world press because it would fit in the image of Europe and the USA as leaders in the field of human rights. The mass media presented the above-mentioned rallies of French citizens against homosexual unions as a crowd of marginal people. The world news agencies reported nothing about those who fell victim of a tear gas used to disperse these peaceful rallies while watching in rapture the developments in Russia around the notorious punk band who "expressed their opinion" by bursting into the Church of Christ the Saviour.

Militant secularism, denial of Christian moral values, absolutization of the freedom of choice at the detriment of public morality – all this has become the quasi-religion of the Western world preached in international relations. I consciously called it quasi-religion since it is religious consciousness that presuppose dogmatism. But if the immutability and irrefutability of religious dogmata is offset by their voluntary acceptance and fulfilment, the dogmata of secularism are imposed through the ramified system of control over the observance of human rights and economic and sometimes military sanctions. We all were witnesses to a number of military interventions which were explained to the public as violations of human rights. Now it is possible to make the conclusion that none of these forcible actions proved to be beneficial and in case of the Middle East they were harmful first of all for Christians who had to flee their native lands.

In our days it has become clear that the concept of secularized international space, which excludes the institutionalized presence of religion in international relations, does not meet the challenges of the time. It is unlikely that the model of public space in Western countries in which the remnants of religious ideas are eliminated will be attractive for the whole world. Moreover, this model is seriously challenged in the very countries which are dominated by secularism. The reduction of the population in European countries accompanied by an inflow of migrants who are normally guided by fairly strong religious motivation aggravates the problem of the presence of religion in the public space.

Distrust of the secular idea as a universal recipe for the wellbeing of human community is also linked with its failure to solve obvious problems in global economy and the environment and to promote peaceful relations of mutual respect between various nations.

The Russian Orthodox Church seeks to use every opportunity to ensure her presence in international relations. She has established her representations to some international organizations in the UN system including the UN Human Rights Council and European international organizations in Brussels and Strasburg. In the UN, the interests of our Church are represented by the World Russian People's Council headed by His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. Our representations at European international organizations, legally not diplomatic structures though, are de facto recognized by our dialogue partners.

The agenda of the Moscow Patriarchate's relations with international organizations is fairly large. We participate in the discussion on human rights and such topics as ecology, just world order, peacemaking, global economic crisis, dialogue of civilizations and many other themes.

The problems of religious freedom and church-state relations are increasingly shifting to the area of international legal regulation. Noteworthy is the participation of our Strasbourg Representation in the European Court of Human Rights' consideration of cases with the religious dimension. Significant in this respect was the UCHR's relatively recent ruling in the case of Lautsi versus Italy. As a result of coordinated efforts of several states and religious organizations the case was re-considered by the UCHR Great Chamber which reversed the initial court decision. Let me remind you that Ms Lautsi tried to persuade the European Court that the presence of crucifixes in public schools in Italy violated her and her children's right to secular education. The common sense prevailed and the Great Chamber recognized the sovereignty of Italy in matters concerning the preservation of Christian traditions.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also made efforts to promote the initiative to establish a mechanism of dialogue on the level of UNESCO. Our proposed program for establishing a Group of High-Ranking Religious Leaders in Partnership with UNESCO remains relevant for the purpose of further development of dialogue with this authoritative international organization.

Among the important formats of church participation in the discussion on pressing issues of the world development is the holding of world summits of religious leaders timed for G8 summits. This mechanism was launched through the efforts of the Russian Church and the Interreligious Council in Russia in 2006 when G8 was chaired by Russia. The Moscow Summit was attended by over 200 religious leaders from 50 countries. Subsequently, this initiative was followed up by major religious communities in countries who chaired G8 Summits, including Germany, Japan, France, the USA, Canada, Italy and Great Britain.

The Moscow Patriarchate continues maintaining its presence in international inter-Christian and interreligious organizations, such as the World Council of Churches, World Conference of Religions for Peace, European Council of Religious Leaders, etc.

Today the Russian Church gives special attention to protection of the rights of Christians living in various parts of the world. Regrettably, the problem of discrimination against Christians acquires ever larger scales to become one of the important issues on the international agenda.

As statistics has shown, Christians is the most persecuted religious community in the world. Over 100 million Christians are subjected to persecution today, and a Christian is killed for the faith every 5 minutes. This situation is connected to a large extent to the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, where the so-called Arab Spring has become the cause of the mass exodus of Christians. The number of the Christian community in Iraq has decreased many times. Christians are subjected to severe persecution and violence in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Sudan and a number of other countries. In connection with this situation, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church draw the public attention to the need to set up special mechanisms for protecting the rights of Christians in the world. Speaking at the UN General Assembly last autumn, I called upon the world community to take urgent measures to protect Christians.

The Russian Orthodox Church is especially pained and disturbed by the armed conflict in Syria. In the country, which is the cradle of Christianity, church and monasteries are being destroyed. Thousands of Christians have to leave their homes and seek asylum in other countries. The Russian Church cannot remain indifferent to these developments. For this reason she has made all possible efforts to help those who suffer and to promote a peaceful settlement of the civic confrontation in the country. To do this, the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, with the support of the Moscow Patriarchate, collected and sent humanitarian aid to Syria. In response to the appeal of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, all the churches of the Russian Church launched a fund-raising campaign and the collected aid was handed over to the Syrian population. Today we call the Russian state leaders, the authorities of the United States of America and leading European countries to do all that is possible to find a political solution for the armed conflict in Syria and to prevent a scenario of external military intervention which could entail ever greater civilian death toll. In this connection, the authorities of our Church welcomed Russia's proposal for a diplomatic settlement of the Syrian conflict and for control to be imposed by the international community over the chemical weapons in the country.

The active stand of the Russian Orthodox Church on international arena has actually shown that the role of religion on the global scale cannot be reduced to the private sphere. Not only the Moscow Patriarchate but also many other religious communities in the human communal life have helped to overcome conflicts and to defend the rights of the weak and persecuted.

You as young international workers will live and work in an era described already now by many philosophers as post-secular. Now there is a relevant question: Will Russia be able to build in her society and advocate in the global discussion her own model of the presence of religion in the public space?

It is my conviction that Russia's place in the world will also be determined by how far each of you will prove capable of advocating in dialogue with people of other cultures and beliefs the values of your own people safeguarded by your own ancestors.

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/52118/>