



Metropolitan Hilarion: Political correctness mania destroys Europe

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, speaks at a time difficult for the Church about the tendency to reject traditional morality and Russia's special way, as well as the film 'Conductor' and the meaning of life in an interview to Olga Lipich of RIA Novosti news agency.

Q. Many believers see the ban against the wearing of an underwear cross at working hours in Great Britain as a vivid example of growing xenophobia in Europe in recent years. It is known that the British citizens who were sacked for demonstrating their religious symbols have appealed to the Strasbourg Court. What are the developments now, and what do you think about it?

A. The stand taken by the British government for justifying an employer's ban to wear an underwear cross at a work place is set forth in a position paper sent to the European Court of Human Rights. This position paper was sent in response to a suit brought by several British citizens who have already been prohibited from wearing crosses at different times. Among them is well-known Nadia Eweida whose case was made public when a few years ago she was dismissed from British Airways for her refusal to take off the cross she wore over her uniform. Later nurse Shirley Chaplin, who had worked in a hospital for 30 years, was dismissed for wearing a cross. And a few more persons who refused to register same-sex unions as marriages.

The position paper unknown to us states, according to the mass media, that employers have the right to prohibit the wearing of crosses. And British lawyers make their case using some provisions of the British law as well such religious arguments as a Christian is not obliged to wear a cross.

The debate on this problem involved Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, who said that for many a cross became a trinket nowadays. Among those who disagreed with this attitude was the previous archbishop, Lord Carey.

In general, this problem is being debated now in Great Britain. But the most important thing, it seems to

me, is the very posing of the question whether an employer can prohibit his employees from wearing religious symbols, especially a cross. I think it points to a very serious moral decline and a conscious rejection of the country's Christian roots on the part of British leaders.

I believe the only parallel that can be drawn here as it naturally comes to one's mind is the Soviet Union in which this very thing, the wearing of crosses was forbidden and a cross could be torn away from one's neck if noticed. I myself was a schoolboy; I wore a cross and I remember the teacher, having noticed the chain, took the cross out and tore it away... If Great Britain becomes like the Soviet Union in its ideological diktat characteristic of militant secularism, then it will not be the most beneficial comparison for a country which claims to be a democracy.

Q. What do you attribute such cases to, as they have been registered one after another in recent year?

A. I think in many countries in the West, in particular in Great Britain, a kind of political correctness mania has appeared to develop with a speed of manic psychosis. This political correctness lies in this: God forbid that out of all people we, Christians, or we as representatives of a particular Western country, should in any way offend Muslims, Jews or Hindu or representatives of other religions. And to prevent religious conflicts, they propose this solution: let us remove religion from public space altogether and remove religious symbols from the life of society. Then peace and love between confessions will presumably prevail.

But we know that the religious symbols of one confession in the most cases do not cause any irritation among the people of other confessions. On the contrary, they arouse sympathy. Actually, it is among atheists and people of secular worldview that religious symbols provoke irritation. It is not accidental that among fighters against crosses we see first of all militant atheists.

Q. Can one say that a lobby of high-ranking people has been formed in European countries, who ardently support the legalization of same-sex unions and euthanasia, seeking to lift as many as possible bans which have existed in society for centuries? Tentatively speaking, there is a certain conspiracy, not just anti-Christians, aimed against all traditional religions?

A. Of course, for these people Christianity, cross and other Christian symbols are like a red rag for a bull. It is not accidental that they are irritated by these symbols: Christianity has a very unambiguous

attitude to all these problems.

We have repeatedly stated, though, that in a number of Christian churches, in particular in the Church of England, these traditional notions of moral values themselves are being obliterated today. The moral doctrine fixed in Holy Scriptures, in the New Testament, in the Gospels and apostolic epistles and patristic works is being replaced by new liberal standards which get incorporated in a particular Church's teaching on morality, modifying these moral postulates to conform to the modern secular standards.

I remember it very well because I studied in Great Britain in the period from 1993 to 1995. Before my very eyes I could see within so short a period of time the English society's and the mass media's gradual sliding down into the abyss of this secularism.

For instance, I remember a case when in a popular TV talk-show, it seems to be 'Hard Talk', the question was posed, 'Should a priest believe in God?' (in fact, the whole talk-show was called so). The subject was this: an Anglican priest by name of Anthony Freeman wrote a book in which he argued that God as a personal being did not exist and that God was a notion invented by people for the purpose of their moral improvement. When the book was considered by the church authorities, its author was given this punishment: he was given a year for reflection and advised to review his stand. That is to say, within that year he continued to act as Anglican priest and continued to perform sacred actions without believing in God.

There were such things already at that time, in the 90s, in England. And this process is being only aggravating.

Q. What prospects do you see then? How probable is it that this process will grow into severe persecution against the Church in the next decades, not only in England but in Russia as well? Indeed, we can see the growth of anticlerical sentiments in our society, too. There is this much-talked-of action of young women in the Church of Christ the Saviour; there is this fuss around the Primate's flat in the House on the Embankment; there are these letters written by Berezovsky to the Patriarch – all this has grown into one big campaign.

A. We should say straightforwardly that it is not anticlericalism but anti-church-minded people who arrange these campaigns in both our own and Western societies.

But if we still move back to the West, it seems to me that this process cannot continue endlessly, at least

because it is suicidal for the whole Western society. It will lead either to the physical elimination of European nations or the leaders of these states will think about it and begin to reconsider their attitude.

Why am I saying about physical elimination? Because, for instance, this godless liberal ideology, which has prevailed in many Western countries today, delivers a blow not only to religions but first of all to such foundations of human existence as family and family values.

Indeed, what does homosexuality lead to? It leads to creating an increasing number of same-sex unions who claim to be marriages, while it goes without saying that such union do not produce posterity. The destruction of traditional family ideals leads to a considerable decrease in the number of extended families. An extended family in Western countries today, just as in Russia, is a great rarity. Extended are the families of Muslims, not Christians, even less, atheists.

That is to say, the population crisis that has spread through Western countries, has already led to a population decrease. And it will continue decreasing if these liberal standards continue lying in the basis of legislation, forming the public opinion propagated by the mass media.

If someday the powers that be realize that it is a suicidal way and begin to take measures to change the situation, then a reversal may begin. But if they do not realize this and insist all the way, then, I would say, the Western empire is to expect the fate of many great empires which used to exist and which died due to, first of all, a moral decay as was the case with the Roman Empire.

Q. How can it affect Russia? Indeed, Russia is partly Europe, and all these trends do come to us, even if weakened and a few years later?

A. I think Russia should not be afraid of following her own path. Throughout centuries beginning from the time of Peter the First, we have sought to be integrated in the Western culture, the Western society, the Western mentality. We succeed in some things as in some things we have already become part of the Western society. But still we have managed to preserve our own identity.

Without entering in conflict relations with the West, without artificially opposing the Western world, we can and must preserve and develop our cultural, national and spiritual identity. Indeed, Russia is a country in which most of the population confess the Orthodox faith and in which people of other faiths have lived together with the Orthodox for centuries.

I think every believer in our country should be concerned first of all for the life according to his faith and

commandments which his Church or religious confession teaches him in order to ensure that his affiliation with a particular confession may not be just a cultural fact but that it may influence his everyday life.

If, for instance, a religion teaches that the family is a union of man and woman, it means this is how a believer should understand it, not in any other way. If a religion teaches that a married couple should have as many children as God will bless it with, not as many as they plan (it is Christian, Jewish and Islamic teaching), it means they should live up this commandment.

We will be viable as much as we seriously take the moral commandments given by our religious traditions.

Muslim countries or regions where the traditional idea of the family has been preserved are places where we can see a stable growth of the population. And there where this idea is lost or distorted, we can see a decreasing population, a demographic crisis. This is a very simple and clear indicator.

Q. We place a great responsibility on political leaders and legislators. What else can ordinary Christians in Europe do to save the native population of the continent from extinction? And how can the Russian Orthodox Church help?

A. First, we should keep unshakable the basic doctrine and basic moral teaching we have inherited from Christ Himself, the apostles and the early Church who have preserved them for centuries even at the price of martyrdom. I think the power of the Orthodox Church lies precisely in her ability not to yield to the trends of time, to preserve both her doctrine and moral teaching without changing them to please secular liberal standards.

It concerns however the Orthodox Church as, say, an organization. If we talk about concrete believers, we should state an obvious fact: not at all every parishioner lives according to the commandments of Christ. And not all who claim to be Orthodox Christians are parishioners of our churches who participate in the life of the Church and her Sacraments. And the most important thing is that not at all for all the Orthodox the teaching of the Church is guidance for action in their everyday life.

When we learn to build our everyday life on lofty moral foundations preached by religious traditions, then we will be able to say that we take religion seriously.

Q. In the context of aggravated opposition between liberal and religious worldviews, of

special importance becomes your and art director Pavel Lungin's joint project – the film 'Conductor' which has been recently released. How was this project conceived, and what are its aims?

A. I met Pavel Lungin five or six years ago, soon after he made his film 'Island', which made a very positive impression on me, and soon after I composed my oratorio 'Passions According to Matthews'. I gave him a disk with the recorded premier performance, which was attended by the late Patriarch Alexy II and the present Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, His Holiness Kirill (then the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations). The orchestra was conducted by Vladimir Fedoseyev. Lungin liked the music, and we began considering how this music could be reinforced by a video picture.

My ideas were quite simple – to illustrate the music with old frescoes, say, Byzantine, Macedonian, Serbian, with the scenes of the Passions of Christ as related in the Gospel and presented in the oratorio. Lungin said straight away it was not interesting for him because he made documentaries, not live-action films and suggested that we combine the music with some action. Then he began working on a scenario. It took rather a long time (enough for me to become chairman of the Department for External Church Relations and later a metropolitan). I know there were several versions of the scenario, and at some point there appeared a scenario which pleased him.

I did not participate in the shooting process. I was only present one time at the shooting of an episode in which the conductor comes out to the stage and the orchestra begins to play my music.

As a result, what has come out is a product, in my mind, of a successful creative union. The music proved to be not merely a soundtrack of the film but one of its protagonists. Moreover, some episodes were made to fit in particular musical numbers of the oratorio.

Q. What should church music combined with film art give to the modern man? How close can they bring him to God, making him better, more moral and profound?

A. I think such films are important because, though not directly, but still they proclaim some religious ideas or values. They make viewers think over the meaning of life and responsibility for their actions.

Strictly speaking, there is no religious morality whatsoever in this film. That is to say, the film does not

ends in the conductor coming for confession and receiving absolution or in all the characters coming to church together for communion.

Lungin is an art director who, as he himself says, loves to work in half-tones. He does not like to take the plot to the end. In this film, no by-plot culminates. We simply become participants in a certain drama which unfolds for several days, but we do now know what preceded it and what will follow it.

Nevertheless, it is a film about very important and perpetual themes, such as relationships between fathers and children, between husband and wife. And it is a film about the fact that some of our actions may be irreversible, for instance, this conductor's attitude to his son whom he did not accept, whom he ignored. He changed his attitude only after his son left this life irreversibly.

Q. Was it an unfulfilled parable about the prodigal son?

A. Yes, I think the film is important in that it shows the everyday life of ordinary people, a life stormed by a grief, problems and music. And this music gives a special colour to the whole action.

Q. Can one say that the characters of this film experience the crucial moments, passions, pain, fear, grief and doubt that can be compared to the passions of Christ and that it should prompt to a reflecting viewer a way to church?

A. In one stage of one of the scenarios, there was an idea to link the plot about the characters' life with a plot about the passions of Christ, that is, to develop two parallel by-plots. Finally, the passions of Christ as a by-plot were not presented in the film, with the most of the time taken by plots about the characters' lives.

Nevertheless, it seems this by-plot as a story about the passion of Christ can be traced in the film, though not directly. It can be traced through the music, through the Gospel's passages read in it. And it can be traced through the relation of a human drama unfolding in the film with Jerusalem, the place where two thousand years ago another human drama unfolded. Eventually, all these dramas take us to the theme of relations between man and God.

Q. Your Eminence, you spoke about the meaning of life. Is there some universal meaning of life which you could reveal to everyone who comes to you with such a question?

A. It would be very difficult to formulate the universal meaning of life. Had it been possible, it would have been done long ago. But I think for us as Christians there is nothing higher than the meaning formulated and the task given by Jesus Christ: seek first the Kingdom of God and the rest will be given you.

It is not easy to explain to every person what the Kingdom of God is, because usually people, even believers, image the Kingdom of God as something accessible after death and something having no direct bearing on our life. Meanwhile, we as practicing Christians can say that the Kingdom of God may be present already in our life on earth, if we wish it.

In the Church, we come in touch with the Kingdom of God, which becomes a reality of our life through our devotional experience, through our participation in the sacraments, first of all, in the sacrament of the Eucharist (Communion), when we not merely communicate with God but get united with Him spiritually and physically.

This presence of the Kingdom of God, which we experience most fully in church, can and must penetrate our life. If we make this experience of participation in the Kingdom of God our priority, the rest is built around it, the rest comes with it. I can testify from experience of at least my own life. I can testify to it from the experience of many other people as well, whom I know, my friends, my parishioners, my mother, not to speak of people of the previous generations, the saints who could live up this commandment more fully than we do.

Q. And how is the commandment to seek the Kingdom of God expressed in a person's behaviour, apart from his going to church? What is his inner feeling – the love of God, his neighbours, life or something else?

A. Again, there is no model of behaviour to be prescribed to a person for fulfilling this commandment. Each person finds for himself some specific ways of living up this commandment if he really wants to live according to it.

For instance, St. Augustine is ascribed this remarkable utterance: 'Love God and you could do whatever you wish!'. It means that if a person really loves God, he does not need all other commandments because he will fulfil them anyway by virtue of his love of God. If he loves God, it means he will love the neighbour. If he loves God, it means he will not commit cardinal sins or even sinful thoughts, etc.

If a person puts the Kingdom of God above all, all the rest will come with it. A search for the Kingdom of God and its truth as commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ becomes the leitmotif of his life, not only religious but also private, family life and professional life.

How is it manifested? If you are an Orthodox Christian, you create a strong family, love your wife and children and have as many children as the Lord gives you. You are protector and breadwinner of your family. In professional work, you are also guided by Christian moral norms. For instance, if you are a businessman, you do not steal, refuse to be corrupted, avoid immoral actions for the sake of personal profit; you wear a cross under your clothes, even if it is contrary to the official dress code.

I am not saying now whether you should wear a cross under your clothes or on the outside; it is a secondary matter. I am saying that a person should have the right to be guided by Christian spiritual and moral norms in all the aspects of his life.

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