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DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS: HUMAN RIGHTS, MORAL VALUES, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

March 13 - 14, 2007, Paris

*presented to UNESCO¹ by Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk
and Kaliningrad, Chairman of the Department for
External Church Relations, Moscow Patriarchate*

Mr. Moderator, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Brothers and Sisters:

I would like, first of all, to thank the organizers who have made it possible for the representatives of various religious communities and political and public institutions to come together in Paris to discuss the important topic of human rights. I particularly appreciate the opportunity to speak today before this respected international assembly, concerned as it is with science, education, and world culture, and representing the greater United Nations structure. Keeping within UNESCO's scope, I will consider our topic within the framework of culture.

¹ UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Opposite: Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad

As is well known, culture may be interpreted in both broad and narrow terms. In the narrow meaning of the word, culture is understood as a specific form of self-expression based on the aesthetic dimension of human nature. In a broader sense, culture is the totality of value orientations guiding the life of both the individual and society. Culture, therefore, exerts considerable influence on the political, social, and economic life of society.

It is well known that there is great diversity among today's established world cultures with their various religions and historical experiences. This pluralistic world naturally faces problems of mutual understanding because cultural differences may not only lead to cooperation, but also to conflict. The danger of conflict, however, is not only from diverse cultures, each with its own geographical territory, but is also enhanced by globalization, which is bringing about a one-world culture. International organizations are the bearers of norms developed by this global culture. Global culture should not be aimed at subjecting different cultures and civilizations to its own standards; rather it should provide a bridge between them. Unfortunately, rather than fulfilling this purpose, we are witnessing a visible, ever-increasing tension between what are commonly called "universal values," and individual cultures.

Human rights are recognized today as such a universal value. From its inception, the concept of human rights was expressly developed as a secular value that could be understood and accepted by all people, regardless of their worldview. In turn, the secular nature of this concept gave grounds to some interest groups to assert that not only should religion abstain from influencing human rights policy, but that religion itself should observe its norms. I can state with certainty that many of the world's religious traditions are in favor of secular language remaining the language of human rights. However, the religious worldview, just as any other worldview, has a full right to influence the development and implementation of a code of human rights. In speaking of a human rights code, I mean a set of concrete rights and freedoms. As we know, this list of rights has been developing gradually, beginning with civil and political rights, and it continues to do so.

The corpus of rights and freedom should not be dogmatic. If we repeat the mistake of the Marxists and dogmatize political doctrines, labeling all who do not agree as revisionists, this will not promote mutual understanding in society. The doctrine of human rights has emerged in Western Europe under certain historical conditions and can and should evolve together with

the changing world. It is also important to know how human rights legislation will be put to use. For instance, the freedom to possess guns can be used for self-defense, but it can also be used to break into a school and shoot and kill one's own classmates. In other words, human rights offer opportunities, but their use depends on one's view of what is good and what is bad.

Asserting that religious organizations can and should influence the codification and implementation of human rights, I would like to clarify the direction and means of this influence. Last year, the problem of human rights began to be actively discussed in Russia. In April, the 10th World Russian People's Council was held in Moscow to discuss human rights. I should note in passing that the World Russian People's Council is an international organization with consultative status to the ECOSOC.² The Council provides a framework to discuss topical problems in social development from the perspective of Russian culture. Attending its annual events are representatives of traditional religions, of Russian government and society, and of the Russian diaspora around the world. The Council is headed by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia. The discussion initiated by the Council has spread throughout Russian society and continues to be very much alive today.

The Russian Orthodox Church begins its reflection on human rights from the standpoint of personal freedom. Therefore, to assert, as some do, that the Russian Church attempts to eradicate or curtail human rights, or to develop a new interpretation of these rights, is not true. Freedom cannot be curtailed as it is an attribute of human nature, created by God. If the Russian Church were to teach otherwise, it would contradict God's teaching. However, our Church and the elements of society supporting it strongly believe that human rights should come together with traditional moral values in society. The question arises here: What are these values? How do they manifest themselves in society? Are these values only a matter of social contract or can they have a universal significance?

The World Russian People's Council has offered an answer to these questions, stating in its declaration that there are common moral values which are supported by most of the world's religious traditions and many secular schools of thought. To compare its conclusions with those of other nations and religious traditions, the Russian Church held a series of consultations last year, including a May talk with the Roman Catholic Church which proved that the two churches share a common vision on many pertinent

² ECOSOC: United Nations Economic and Social Council

problems. In July 2006, an International Summit of Religious Leaders was held in Moscow, attended by representatives of traditional religions from forty-nine countries. The Council of Europe has also shown concern about the discussion initiated by the Russian Church, and sponsored subsequent conferences in Nizhniy Novgorod and in Strasbourg.

From these conferences and discussions we clearly see that most of the world's religious traditions and some secular schools of thought converge in defining the outline of moral values. What is to be done if there are others who disagree with the traditional morality shared by the majority of the world's people? Indeed, democracy is highly sensitive in its efforts to avoid any discrimination against people with different views. How can society be organized so that the majority can fully live its values without subjecting a minority to discrimination? These questions lead us to consider the Moscow Patriarchate's vision of a mechanism whereby religions can influence the development of national and international norms and values.

Regrettably, the development of modern international law has sometimes taken the path of imposing the views of various minorities on the majority of the world's population. In this, we see a dangerous tendency that threatens the principles of democracy. In order to ensure freedom and, at the same time, to take into account the values of the majority, it is necessary, in our view, to determine which sphere of society – public or private – should be influenced by majority and minority values.

In the private sphere, the freedom of moral choice should be as full as possible. The individual can make a moral choice here at his own discretion, even if his choice runs contrary to public morality. In other words, the individual should not be subjected to discrimination if, for instance, he is unfaithful to his wife. This is consistent with St. Paul's words: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:4). The only thing to be restricted in the public sphere is the moral choice which inflicts damage on another member of society. In the public sphere of any state, only those values should be allowed and supported which are shared by the majority of the people.

The modern democratic state does recognize this principle. For instance, a number of democracies have prohibited Nazi parties. At the same time, such bans are not allowed in the sphere of personal conviction. The individual himself can adhere to Nazi convictions, but he cannot propagate them in society. The possibility of introducing restrictions in the exercise of

human rights was recognized as far back as the beginning of international law in this field. Thus, Paragraph 2, Article 29 of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights states: "In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the *just requirements of morality*, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society." Thus, the declaration establishes the idea that human rights cannot be an absolute measure but should conform to a number of parameters.

In a normal democratic state, a particular value system is consolidated by discussion, in which various groups with differing worldviews should participate without restriction. These groups represent their own point of view and the majority either accepts or rejects it. Today, we often witness a distortion of this principle, especially on the level of international organizations. People whose private points of view are shared by a minority seek to impose their worldview on the majority through national and international mechanisms. In many cases when a period of struggle has arisen over the rights of minorities, what is at stake is not a real threat to the life or happiness of these people, but their desire to impose their own way of life and thought upon the majority.

In this connection, I would like to outline some problems common to many secular countries in which the majority is part of a Christian culture. Under the pressure of religious minorities or secular groups, Christian symbols have been removed from public places. Some of these minorities do not like to see Christmas trees, Christmas Nativity scenes, tablets with the Ten Commandments, or even crosses on the flags of many European countries. Others want to ban the teaching of religious disciplines in school, not because this teaching is compulsory, but because they are irritated that many people are interested in studying their religious culture voluntarily. Likewise, some minority groups are indignant at government officials meeting with Christian leaders, or religious leaders in general. The state, which is called to protect the cultural and spiritual heritage of its country, can easily abandon efforts to please a minority that has long ceased to suffer constraint or coercion, but continues to invent ever-new excuses for struggling with imaginary discrimination.

A similar situation has developed in regard to such moral problems as the unrestrained propagandizing of amoral lifestyles. Of course, people of non-

traditional sexual orientation should not be subject to insults and attacks, but a positive attitude towards homosexual relations should not be imposed through school or mass media. Likewise, these people should not be allowed to adopt children and to teach because rights concerning adoption and teaching belong not only to homosexuals but also to those children who are being adopted and taught. In recent times, associations engaged in protecting the rights of sexual minorities have become increasingly aggressive in their slogans. Why is it that today, gay parades, which are contrary to the morality of most people, are imposed on them in almost every major European city? What next? Already waiting its turn is the demand to permit pedophilia. In Holland there is a political party demanding such a freedom.

The Orthodox Church today proposes to return to the understanding of human rights in society as it was laid down in 1948. Moral norms can work as real parameters or boundaries in implementing human rights in public life. These boundaries should be clear and understandable for all of society. When they are not clear we face the current situation where pastors speaking out against the propaganda of homosexuality are put in prison. To work out such boundaries, a dialogue should be held with religious organizations as advocates of traditional morality on both national and international levels. Religious organizations have often been denied even this basic democratic right. Sometimes this denial happens on quite plausible pretexts. One of the ways to do so is to reduce the subject of dialogue to a discussion of interreligious relations, which has become a practice after September 11, 2001. This leads to intercultural tension being presented as the inability of religious traditions to live in peace and maintain good-neighbourly relations. Many mediators turn up, often from among those who are far from faith, but who are very willing to offer recipes for the coexistence of various religions. These ideas are basically reducible to the demand that the influence of religion in the public sphere should be minimized, and that it should be deprived of the right to speak out in public discussions because of the multicultural nature of the modern world. To representatives of religious traditions, such conclusions appear to be ideological methods aimed at justifying the claim that religious traditions should be denied the right to equitable dialogue in the development of international legal norms.

Modern international organizations should take a serious step towards openness, not only to the secular civil society, but also to religious organizations. Within the UN, such steps could include the establishment of an

interreligious council or assembly where representatives of major world religious communities could discuss concerns of values and socio-political issues. Such a body is needed to prevent imposing a minority morality on the majority of the world's population through international institutions; otherwise traditional religious communities may be further alienated from the secular interpretation of human rights.

All of this testifies to the fact that a dialogue among civilizations is more than general discussion, more than just a beautiful phrase. It is a complex affair that cannot be reduced to teaching religious people the norms of a common life. If the secular world would abandon its paternalistic approach to inter-religious dialogue and its right to judge religions, all participants in this discussion could meet on equal terms and engage in real dialogue. In the absence of this real exchange, conditions for a safe and just global community cannot be built. ✚