

ECUMENISM, EVANGELISATION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN RUSSIA AND THE  
FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS

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Allow me to greet you and to pass on to you the very best wishes of the head of our Church, His Holiness Patriarch Alexis of Moscow and all

Russia, of Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the chief of the department of external relations of our Church, and the Archpriest Vitaly Brorovoy who for reasons of health cannot be present and, therefore, has asked me to replace him.

I am a Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church. We belong to different churches, but each of us realizes that together we make up one Christian family which is spread over the whole earth. We understand that in spite of all the differences we have something in common which unites us. This is our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We live in a changing world in which people themselves are constantly changing. If peace and love are embodied in us, and if, according to the words of St. Paul, we will bear each others burdens with faith and sincere love, we will also come nearer to each other, in spite of our differences. But while these differences still exist, we must never forget that sincere brotherly love and sincere feeling of unity with our brothers must exist among us.

May I now continue by answering questions on the theme of your conference: that is ecumenism, evangelisation, and religious freedom, as I have been asked to do.

Ecumenism is a wide and important field. The approaches to ecumenism differ with various Christian groups. I will speak later on about this. But at the moment I will speak of evangelisation and religious freedom, and about evangelizing missionaries in our country.

Missionary work became possible in our country only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And there appeared new problems, one of which is nationalism.

Many leaders of socio-political movements of the former Soviet Union see in nationalism the power which will solve all problems. But, for some reason, they are not conscious of the fact that a nation itself needs a lengthy process of rebirth. Only by participating in the universal and divine does a nation lose its egotism and cease to be the source of enmity and conflicts.

The rebirth of the Russian national principle cannot be narrowly nationalistic. The nationalistic principle must be opposed by universalism of the Church. Every nation has its mission. One cannot invent and build a future for a nation with a plan which is foreign to its nature. A nation can only develop positively by attributes which were put into it. The inner laws of national life destroy any abstract schemes. This has already happened

with communism. And it will happen with any other doctrine which will pay attention to our historical experience, and to the traditional orthodox Russian spirit.

The religious rebirth of the Russian people does not consist only in rebuilding churches and monasteries, but in the joining of the people to their faith, to the life of their Church.

Religious revival means conscious acceptance of the moral ideal of the gospel and its realization in personal and social life. Religious rebirth means entering into genuine religious experience. Such a rebirth has little in common with fashions in religion, which we are now witnessing.

Our people still need to realize that the Church is not only hierarchy and priesthood--but the whole of God's people. Our people from generation to generation called themselves Orthodox. During the difficult period of state atheism which lasted for decades, the Russian Orthodox Church remained the only reality for our believers, opposing the state ideology. For this reason the whole ideological battle was concentrated on the Church.

In ecumenical relations with Christian Churches and communities abroad we felt the solidarity and support in our hard battle to have the right to be believers. Those ecumenical relations will always remain good memories for us. It is not necessary here to quote examples of the many good meetings and ecumenical contacts which took place. At these meetings principles were established according to which all Christians together must witness to Christ. We hoped and believed that when the possibility of such witnessing would come to our country, our ecumenical brothers abroad would help our people who traditionally belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church to hear the good news. Not to hear it with the purpose of going over to another denomination, but to affirm the truth of Christ's Gospel while at the same time remaining in their own Russian Orthodox Church.

However, this witness to Christ by our brothers abroad in post-soviet Russia has produced a great problem of relations for the Orthodox Church because of the nature of this witness. The Russian nation is traditionally Orthodox and considers itself as belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the years of state atheism our church was weakened. Soviet law only allowed the Church to carry out the religious cult. No system of teaching people about their faith was allowed. Talks with the believers on religious subjects were classified as propaganda and agitation, and were punished. The only possibility for a priest to teach his spiritual children was the carrying out of services and giving sermons in church. This was continued to be carried out. Church services were places of prayer and religious teaching for our believers. But distribution of religious literature was legally forbidden and punished. Teaching people could only take place in Church by word of mouth.

As soon as at the period of the Perestroika the law about freedom of religion was passed, this freedom at once lost its civilized character in Russia--freedom as it exists in all democratic states of the West. Russian people who were spiritually weakened by the seven-year-old atheistic battle, were unexpectedly confronted by numerous missionaries

from abroad. They were confronted not only by various Christian denominations and sects which were new to them, but also by new religions which were entirely foreign to Christianity, like Krishnaism, Buddhism and other oriental cults and philosophical and occult systems. Western civilized states do not allow such freedom which borders on chaos. According to the present law the Russian Orthodox Church is on the same level in our country as all other religions and confessions. In Russia the Orthodox Church does not now represent the main Church. But one cannot ignore the fact that the Russian Church consists of multi-millions of people, and that not so long ago, in 1988, these people solemnly kept the millennium of their acceptance of the Christian faith from Orthodox Byzantium, and commemorated the history of this spiritual confirmation in Orthodoxy, which remains its mentality until now. Just as the representatives of any religion take reasonable care of their spiritual flock, the Russian Church also shows this care for the many-million flock of her spiritual children. Such care is justified and legal. Chaos takes place through different preachers--not only Christians--who come to Russia with a lot of money, rent stadiums, theatrical halls, and other such places suitable for their purposes, and through advertisements invite people to meetings, services and sermons. Often no confessional aims are mentioned. Of course, not atheists and agnostics will come to these meetings, but mostly traditional Orthodox believers who are not competent to discern confessional questions. We know cases where after such services and sermons people were invited to newly accept baptism and to become members of a new religion. Such baptisms into a new faith of people who were already traditionally orthodox believers and had already been baptized but were theologically ignorant and did not understand what was happening to them, have taken place. Turning believers from one confession to another by such methods is called proselytism. The Russian Orthodox Church condemns proselytism and does not allow it in its own practice. Practice of proselytism is too far removed from mutual witness about Christ which was always spoken about at ecumenical meetings.

The Russian Church is not against our brother-evangelists from abroad witnessing to Christ, but they would like them to keep contact with Orthodox brothers, so as to witness to Christ to the Orthodox population by leaving those people within their own Orthodox Church, and not by leading them by artificial means into a new denomination.

If a man consciously and by deep conviction changes his confession, it is his right to do so. Such cases exist in Orthodox practice and in all other religions. But these are separate, personal cases of going over to another faith. This is not proselytism as described above, which destroys brotherly relations with the Orthodox.

Please preach, help our people to know Christ--but do leave our people in their native Orthodox Church!

On common ecumenical meetings we meet and pray together and each staying in their own confession, we keep brotherly relations. But as far as our approaches to the understanding of ecumenism differ, we will now try to expound the Orthodox understanding of ecumenism.

Correct thinking on problems of church unity nowadays, more than ever, depends on a clear understanding of that foundation on which each church is constructed. How does the Orthodox person understand ecumenism? In order to answer this question, let us look at its history.

The Russian Orthodox Church officially became a member of the World Council of Churches at their Assembly in New Delhi in 1961. However, the formation of ecumenical points of view of our Church were not simple. The 19th century was a period of intense ecumenical thought, which produced such leaders as the religious thinker Khomiakov, and the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev. The true value of this process, according to archpriest George Florovsky, "was in its keenest conception of Christian unity, a shared history, and the predestination of all Christianity, and in his firm conviction that the Church is Christianity in its complete fullness."

The first ecumenical relations often faced a complicated dilemma. It is characteristic that already in the first organizational steps of the ecumenical movement there appeared the wish in the dissenting circles to cooperate with the Russian Church. These hopes took shape in special invitations to the Russian Church to take part in the development of the emergent movement. The result was a very interesting correspondence which was both theologically and ecclesiastically important, and produced many differences of opinion. This correspondence revealed the very difficult dilemma of our position to original western anglican and protestant ecumenism. In this connection the letter of Patriarch Thikhon has a special value, in which he expresses good wishes and blessings to the first meetings of the movement which were entitled "Faith and Church Structure."

One must remember the names of such Russian theologians of the 20th century as archpriest Sergei Bulgakov, Professor Vladimir Lossky, Archpriest George Florovsky, Nicholas Berdyaev, L. Zander, N. Zernov, and A. Kartashov who, though not being official representatives of the Russian Church in the Ecumenical Movement of the West, were philosophers, theologians and historians of our Church, who were intensely interested in the subject. Many of them worked at the Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. They actively took part as religious thinkers in the development of ecumenical movements and in the conducting of a week of prayer for Christian Unity which took place once a year. They also took part in yearly meetings and conferences.

Correspondence and meetings between leaders of our Church and prominent representatives of ecumenical circles took place as early as 1945, that is before the formation of the World Council of Churches. Our Church seriously and thoughtfully approached the problem of its relations to the ecumenical movement, and to the question of membership of the World Council of Churches which was established at the Amsterdam Assembly of 1948.

At the conference in Moscow in 1948 of the heads of representatives of Orthodox Churches, the problem of the shape of the organization of the ecumenical movement was discussed, and a definite critical position to the invitation to take part in the work of the assembly and to become a member was expressed. This criticism represents a

characteristic example of caution and seriousness towards relations to the new ecumenical movement. Only the ensuing evolution and development of the activity of the organization towards more constructive and realistic relations to the problem East-West eliminated these difficulties and contributed to the rapprochement to the World Council of Churches.

The Russian Orthodox Church entered the World Council of Churches with the aim of testifying to Orthodoxy, and with the aim of cooperating with other Christian churches and denominations in jointly testifying, jointly serving the world, and in joint direction towards unity of all under the one headship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is quite clear that churches and Christians are closely connected to traditions and customs of religious life which are passed on from generation to generation. In such conditions changes which are often very necessary are not made easily, not only in Orthodoxy and in Catholicism, but in Protestant communities which contain more recent traditions, as well. Many problems can be quoted which today confront Ecumenical Orthodoxy. They are connected with liturgical, canonical and disciplinary questions, and with the understanding of foundations and perspectives for confessional unity with closely divided brothers, as well as with more distant ones. Many of these questions were discussed at all of the pan-Orthodox meetings.

We are witnesses of the fact that many protestant communities on the one hand, strongly aim at interconfessional approachment and unity, and on the other hand it is not easy for them because of historical differences, traditions, and even of their understanding of Christian unity. Correct thinking on problems of church unity nowadays, more than ever, depends on a clear understanding of that foundation on which each church is constructed.

In the protestant world of the U.S.A. an increasing aspiration can be observed to newly define and express the foundations of their faith.

The dynamic direction of Christianity towards Church renewal and ecumenical rebuilding, which can nowadays be attributed more or less to all churches and christian communities, is not explained by the fact that suddenly in our 20th century Christian leaders, namely priests and theologians, have better perceived the gifts of the Holy Spirit than before. It is well-known that in the history of the Church and of every Christian confession there were formerly no fewer than in our time numbers of reformers, renovators, ecumenists, people who were truly holy, who denounced human distortions in the life and traditions of the Church, who fought for the unity and brotherhood of all Christians founded on the Gospel and on Christ's teaching. But it is also quite clear that the genuine urge towards renewal of the Church towards ecumenical unity is unprecedented. In the past nothing like what we see now existed. This can be explained by the fact that the world in which the church and Christ's followers act has started to change so fast. Faster than ever human society is changing in social, political, scientific and technological and economic spheres.

Being part of ecumenical movements, taking part in assemblies, meetings, workshops, undoubtedly affects people's thinking and the theology of our Church, and then become serious inspirational factors for theological work.

Our participation and our Orthodox witness undoubtedly also influence the World Council of Churches and the ecumenically-minded theologians, on the development of all sorts of programs and directions of activity in the field of service to Christian unity.

Ecumenism as a movement is permeated by one general idea: to bring about the unity of all who call themselves Christians. This is the origin of fundamental promises, of Orthodox understanding of ecumenism, that is not just unity, but unity in the Church, and not just any church, but in the True Church which answers all the requirements of Orthodox understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, as the pillar and confirmation of Truth. (1 Tim. 3-15) Orthodoxy cannot think of a unity which is thought of by ecumenism otherwise than on a purely Church basis, for which all other elements, which enter from outside, moments of genuine and possible Christian solidarity, are only outward elements, psychological ones, which have no direct connection to real ecumenical unity. All problems of political, cultural, social, international, economic life of contemporary man, if they are the only concern of Christians and Churches and are one of the important objects of study in the ecumenical movement, nevertheless do not belong to the ecumenical question in its fundamental, ecclesiological essence. The achievement of Christians to unity of points of view and actions in those spheres of life in that movement, though they bear witness to psychological compatibility, cannot on their own be examined as ecumenical unity. Unfortunately there exists a real tendency in separate ecumenical circles to put first their exterior, secular, unity of Christians, and also to make it almost the first aim of the contemporary ecumenical movement. This presents the danger of the ecumenical movement gradually departing from the main aim of Christianity which is the eternal salvation of man.

Orthodox understanding of Ecumenism presupposes a definite spiritual foundation on which alone it is possible to construct an all-Christian unity. In Orthodoxy special requirements exist for spiritual life. They must lead along paths of life, and not death. The specifics of Orthodoxy in comparison with dissenting groups, is that, by the voice of its ascetics speaking in unison it warns of a real danger threatening spiritual life, of deviation from the truth, and of falling into a condition called allurements--in other words, a high opinion of oneself, and of one's Christian merit. This condition can exist not only in separate persons. It can even take hold of whole communities, expressing itself in various forms of religious life. And so, falling away from the true path of spiritual life, according to the thoughts of all Orthodox Church teachers who touched on this question, is equal to the falling away from the Church. It leads the human being to spiritual perdition, and to spiritual isolation of Christians, not depending on their emotional and doctrinal unity. Orthodox consciousness cannot accept the reigning conviction among the protestants of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all ecumenical meetings, prayer--and business-meetings. The artificially created atmosphere of exaltation at some prayer-meetings cannot contribute to the creation of a genuine prayerful condition, and has the character

of an uncontrolled process. Arbitrariness in that sphere of the ecumenical movement is specially dangerous.

In this way ecumenism in Orthodox understanding, having a common aim for all Christian confessions, the unity of Christians, at the same time cannot accept and indefinite compromises, and especially those outside Christian interpretations of the same character of this unity. Unity can also be achieved on a purely Church foundation, and only with the Church.

This means that the numerous divisions which have their place in Christian history, have put forward questions about the Church and its understanding onto the first stage of theological discussion. With the appearance of the Ecumenical Movement this question has acquired a special actuality and sharpness.