27/05/2024

Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the opening of the proceedings of the 4th International Conference of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate “Protecting Religious Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights” (Athens, 26 – 28 May 2024)



Your Beatitude, Archbishop Hieronymus of Athens and All Greece,

Your Excellency, representative of the Hellenic Government,

Excellencies,

Most Reverend brother Hierarchs,

Esteemed Archons, Presidents of the Order of St. Andrew, the Brotherhood of Panagia Pammakaristos, and the Brotherhood of St. Paul the Apostle,

Honorable government representatives,

Esteemed Archons,

Distinguished guests,

Beloved children in the Lord,

Christ is risen!

We address you from the Phanar with feelings of honor and love, being present with you in spirit at the 4th International Conference of the Archons of the Ecumenical Throne, on the theme of “Protecting Religious Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights,” held in the famed city of Athens, confident that its work will be conducted with success.

We express both the sincere thanks of our Modesty and the gratitude of the Holy Great Church of Christ to those who inspired, organized, and sponsored this Conference, to the speakers, and to all those participating. The threefold theme of the Conference points to the values and normative foundations of an open society, of democracy, of the rule of law and the welfare state, to the core of contemporary political culture, with human rights at its basis. These rights serve as a barometer to detect both threats against human dignity, as well as the positive potential for the furtherance of practical and universal respect for human dignity. The focus on the human right of religious freedom is marked by the dimension of the transcendent, without which it is impossible to establish absolute respect for the human person.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948) is “probably the best-known legal document in the modern world,” a “humanist manifesto,” which emerged from the greatest humanitarian catastrophe in human history. And today, more than 75 years after their solemn Universal Declaration by the United Nations, in the Preamble of which they are described as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations,” human rights remain of central political relevance as a symbol of global civilization founded on absolute respect for human dignity.

Of course, it is precisely this universal claim of human rights that is being vigorously contested in our time, especially by certain non-Western peoples and cultures and non-Christian religions. Human rights are too easily described as reflecting a “purely Western conception of law” and even as the “Trojan horse of the West” for cultural dominance over the rest of the world. More broadly, however, despite the various advances that have been made in the areas of their

constitutional safeguarding and international protection, human rights can be gravely abused and employed as a pretext or humanitarian cloak for interference in the internal affairs of other states. A further major problem is the unthinking expansion of their content, so that even individual desires and wishes are baptized as “human rights.” For this reason, human rights will remain for the foreseeable future a task to be realized, and not a guaranteed reality.

The universal progress of human rights appears to depend in large measure on the attitude of the religions towards them, on the adoption by religions of their humanitarian demands, and on the rallying of religions in the struggle for their respect. Thus, on the issue of human rights, any analysis of the contemporary situation which does not also refer to the role of religion, is incomplete.

Perhaps human rights constitute “the most relentless question ever asked of religions.” It is the question of their attitude towards humanism, freedom, open society, pluralism, towards their own anthropological assumptions, which is a question that cannot be evaded. What is at stake in the encounter of religions with human rights is nothing less than the acceptance or rejection of their universal scope. Religions must understand that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the property of humanity as a whole. It has rightly been written that “whoever does not let the universality of human rights judge himself first, has understood nothing about it.”

In the sphere of Orthodoxy, there is no uniform attitude towards human rights. It can be said that a “defensive” attitude towards them prevails, a suspicion that they are a threat to our communal traditions. It is evident, however, that an overall dismissive attitude of the Orthodox Church towards human rights and the consideration of them as a direct threat to our identity derives from a misunderstanding both of human rights and of Orthodox ethics. We must understand once and for all that if we reject human rights outright, we deny an important part of our own humanitarian tradition. Clearly, the Church exhibits her Truth when she upholds human rights and not when she goes along with nationalistic ideologies.

Today, Orthodoxy is called to offer a positive challenge to the contemporary world, a God-inspired perspective on life and freedom in an era of redefining the hierarchy of values, placing at the top of the scale of values the sanctity of the human person and the integrity of creation.

The Church is opposed to violence and the forces that undermine social cohesion, highlighting the ethos of ministry, of service, of offering help, and the eucharistic

approach towards creation, over against isolation, individualism, and the attitude of possessiveness. She also stresses that the future does not belong to the self-appointed “man-God” of scientism, who abolishes limits and measures, destroying the terms of the “human condition” (conditio humana) and, more generally, of life on planet earth.

The Orthodox faith is a source of inspiration and dynamism for good witness in the contemporary world and promotes dialogue and cooperation for a common response to the great challenges of our time. Orthodoxy has a rich tradition, great spiritual resources, which must be exploited in the encounter with human rights. Certainly, human rights represent the ambivalence of the modern transition from “given” values to “formed” values. This transition was not without risks. However, this fact does not justify the identification of human rights with the negative aspects of modernity, nor with the “fundamentalism of modernism.”

Likewise, for the Orthodox Church, but especially for non-Christian religions, the greatest difficulties in the encounter with human rights are to be found on the matter of understanding and interpreting the right of religious freedom.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is referred to in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the following terms: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Of particular importance for our topic is the clear reference of the Holy and Great Council (Crete, 2016) to the right to religious freedom: “A fundamental human right is the protection of the principle of religious freedom in all its aspects–namely, the freedom of conscience, belief, and religion, including, alone and in community, in private and in public, the right to freedom of worship and practice, the right to manifest one’s religion, as well as the right of religious communities to religious education and to the full function and exercise of their religious duties, without any form of direct or indirect interference by the state.” (Encyclical, § 16).

Of all the aspects of the right to religious freedom, the right to “change religion” faces the greatest controversy. However, as has been said, it is precisely this point that marks the “paradigm shift” that human rights more broadly embody. An obstacle to a correct understanding of the content of the right to religious freedom is the opinion that this is a matter of securing an individual right, linked to Western political culture and corrosive to other traditions.

The right of religious freedom opens up new positive perspectives for religions, while it requires from them more than merely the toleration of difference, which, after all, is not unknown to them. The recognition of the “right to difference” is a great achievement in the history of civilization. But the notion of difference cannot disguise existing common values. Universal human values are pertinent to the deposit of values of the great religions, which must be highlighted. Religions are called upon to recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its entirety. Human rights are indivisible. They cannot be selectively invoked and used.

Esteemed assembly,

Beyond any doubt, human rights are a very important political achievement, which has led to a more humane world. No discussion of the normative foundations of global society can ignore human rights, which are today a banner for a more open society and a symbol of the struggles and hopes for a more just world. It is certain that they will remain in the future as one of the great issues for humanity, a lasting expression of humanism.

We reiterate that the future course of human rights depends on the attitude of the great religions towards them. We also believe that progress in their implementation depends on the recognition, correct understanding, and implementation of the right to freedom of religion. The regression of the religious orientation of life in the Western world, despite rumors to the contrary, not only does not promote the objectives of human rights, but negatively affects respect for them. It has rightly been written that “with the oblivion or loss of the mystery of religion, the sense of the inviolability of human dignity also disappears.” In this sense, we consider it necessary to have an inter-religious dialogue on human rights, which frees religions from the introversion that always fuels fundamentalism. In this dialogue, each religion is called upon to develop the importance of its own principles for our era, for the great issues and challenges of our time, for justice and peace, and to contribute to the shaping of common actions.

In conclusion, we wish to note that the encounter of the Orthodox Church with

human rights is a space in which to highlight its proper relationship with politics. While the Church does not deal with politics in the strict sense of the term, its witness is essentially and enduringly political. It struggles against the disfigurement of the human person in its various aspects; it denounces racism, discrimination, and modern forms of slavery; it opposes the forces and tendencies that undermine social cohesion and peace; it promotes a culture of solidarity and dialogue, reconciliation and cooperation. The objection that such an intervention involves the Church in the ambivalence of human affairs, and that Christian witness is thereby transformed into a political practice, is an objection that lacks theological basis, and indicates a weakening of the sense of the significance of historical developments.

Thank you for your attention!

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