

SPEECH
OF HIS ALL HOLINESS
ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEOS
AT THE OSCE CONFERENCE IN BRUSSELS
ON THE TOPIC OF
“TOLERANCE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST
RACISM, XENOPHOBIA
AND DISCRIMINATION”

(13 September 2004)

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Your Royal Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great joy indeed that we participate in this Conference, although we do not represent some specific state, or national or international organization, but rather the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is accorded precedence over all Orthodox Christian Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches. The reason of our joy is that this Conference revolves around the topic of tolerance and the fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination, a topic on which we are very sensible.

We say this because the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not a national organization and does not represent any particular national or local church, such as the Greek, or the one in Turkey, the country of its See, but is a supranational ecclesiastical institution, holding within its bosom the faithful of many nationalities, and maintaining a benevolent and equitable disposition, being open to all human beings on equal terms. It is an institution, which demonstrates religious tolerance as a beautiful reality, for we bear respect toward all our fellow humans, irrespective of their faith. Without any trace of fanaticism, or discrimination on account of differences of religion, we coexist peacefully and in a spirit that honours each and every human being.

Furthermore, we stand firmly against any racist ideology. Since 1872, a time when nationalism was rife in Europe and abroad, as propounded in chauvinist theories and a host of pan-slavist, pan-germanic and generally pan-nationalist movements, we had condemned nationalism and racism by a synodal decision. These movements were leading to the establishment of national Christian Churches, and rendering the unifying message of the Gospel the servant of nationalistic divisions and conflicts. Many centuries ago, at a time when the latinization of all nations was pursued by authorities in the West, we as Ecumenical Patriarchate did not hesitate to create a special alphabet for the Slavic language, through the efforts of our missionary saints Cyril and Methodius, and to

translate our church service books, promoting the establishment of a new, non-Greek civilization: namely the civilization of the Slavs. We have always sought and still do, in each country indigenous leaders for the local Churches, and when they are found and/ or trained, we assign to them the responsibility of governing those Churches without any racist considerations or discrimination. History records a multitude of such instances, and the present reality confirms our position, even though nationalist tendencies may still exist amongst certain ecclesiastical figures, without of course our approval.

Quite recently, in 1976 to be exact, on the occasion of the IV Preconciliar Panorthodox Conference held in Geneva, we expressed the desire that the Orthodox Church should contribute to the upholding of the Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love amongst peoples and to the removal of racist discrimination so far as to the inter-religious cooperation, and through it to the abolishment of fanaticism of every kind and likewise to the reconciliation of all peoples and the prevalence of the ideals of freedom and peace in the world, for the benefit of modern humanity, regardless of race or religious conviction. This issue has occupied our thoughts and we have discussed means, through which the Orthodox Church would be able to contribute to the elimination of racism and the fanaticism that derives from it. For the extreme racism undoubtedly breeds or provokes religious fanaticism which in turn leads to the scourge of terrorism, which in our present era delivers its blows on humanity so tragically and extensively.

We are not afraid of strangers: on the contrary we cherish them. The application of the Apostolic words “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers” (Heb. 13,2) is our daily practice and has been so for centuries, without concessions to any form of discrimination.

Therefore, we consider the topic of your conference most familiar and dear to us and are pleased that humanity has progressed insofar as to put forth such a demand on behalf of all human beings, for what we have always been preaching, even though many have regarded it as utopian, is put forth by means of the present conference and by numerous other praiseworthy activities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and of several other international Organizations and Agencies.

We have often expressed the view that all humans are equal both in spiritual terms and before the law, a view that is espoused by all sensible people, regardless of religious conviction, and have spoken repeatedly of the necessity that all should welcome the alterity of others and of their cultures, with all that such an attitude should entail.

With every given opportunity we emphasize that the minorities’ religious rights have to be respected and that one of the most substantial amongst those rights involves the right of educating its staff members under the care of specially trained educators, for if this task is assigned to others, outside the Minority, there is the direct and real danger of gradually distorting the content of the Minority’s religious tradition. That is in fact the reason why all the attempts that seek to distort peoples’ religions try to gain access to their educational system and to exert their influence thereby.

Overstressing the racial origins for one, and mainly racism, as well as discrimination against the weaker minorities on the basis of racial, religious, linguistic or any other reasons, together with xenophobia, are ideologies and mental attitudes that are entirely opposed to the attitude, the convictions and the principles espoused by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, who is the main exponent of the Orthodox Church. The term “Ecumenical” seeks precisely to denote the acceptance of all people who live on our planet, our ‘ecumene’, as equal and equally acceptable.

Thus, from the Ecumenical Patriarchate –which is perhaps the very first institution that has historically been accorded with the title “Ecumenical” (VI century A.D.), denoting its universality, not in any sense of holding dominion over the world, but in the sense of accepting all human beings as equals - we feel profoundly moved as we address you, our wholehearted greetings and praises for your work.

We realize of course that there have been times and places when Christians did not live the Christian brotherhood of humanity, and that many times they tried to uphold their self-seeking discrimination against their fellow humans in the holy texts of their faith. However, those were but deviations from the right path, and grievous sins on the part of those who behaved in such a condemnable racist manner. Surely such censure cannot be levelled against healthy Christianity, which unequivocally condemns racism, discrimination and xenophobia.

Saint Paul, the Apostle himself while being of Jewish origin with a complete Jewish and Greek education, during the first period of his life at the time that he had not known Christ yet, was deeply intolerant and was persecuting the Church of Christ, under the influence of certain Jewish circles of the time. Once he came to know Christ, he overcame his nationalism and religious intolerance, and, due to his Hellenistic education, became sensible of the unity of humankind, and the equal love that God bears toward all human beings. From that time he declared the equality of all before God, which ought to become also the equality of all before one another. He is worthy of admiration for having conceived and expressed the profoundest tenets of Christianity regarding the brotherhood of humanity through pithy and unforgettable statements such as: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal.3,28).

Just a few simple words overturned all the discriminations between human beings of that time. That was immensely daring for his era, an era that recognized slavery as a lawful and morally correct institution, an era that regarded women as objects (*res*), an era when the prevalent attitude amongst Jews was that they were God’s chosen people who had to keep themselves pure from any mingling with the society of the gentiles, an era also when other peoples strongly experienced a sense of their supremacy over all others, as was the case with the Roman citizens vis-à-vis all other nations.

The present conference is a fruit and an outcome of this declaration that was so revolutionary for its time, upsetting established order as it did. Of course not all of its participants are adherents of the religion preached by Apostle Paul, but we all rest assured that the principle he voiced in the words we quoted, stands true and indispensable for peaceful coexistence and progress of humankind.

Unfortunately, nationalism of all types and the racial discrimination based thereon, the oppressive measures often reaching to the extreme of eliminating minorities of various kinds, the discrimination based on religious considerations and oppression, the violations of prohibitions of religious conversion often carrying the death penalty, the extreme disadvantage at which women find themselves in many lands, all kinds of exploitation of children, xenophobia and the atrocities perpetrated wantonly against strangers for the sole reason that they differ from the majority inhabiting a given place, are all shameful and deplorable dark spots on our civilization: dark and shameful spots that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in holding this conference, is commendably seeking to eliminate.

May it be permitted to us to express the view that racist nationalism is profoundly irrational. The racist views of any Nazism absolutely lack any scientific basis. They are the product of empty egotism, which instead of seeking – as it should – to reward those who possess it on the basis of their good and meritorious works, establishes their domineering views merely on the accident of their racial origin. In other words, no person is worthy of any praise, since such a person has engaged in no honourable effort in being born within any given race. Thus those who boast merely over their racial origins deserve our pity, rather than our esteem, for they have nothing of their own to contribute, and thus seek to make much of qualities, which they took no pains to make their own.

On the other hand, xenophobia is the product of a timorous conscience, namely of individuals who lack sufficient self-confidence, who do not feel secure in their personal status. Strangers are thus regarded as a threat, as posing a hazard.

It is precisely when we do not feel efficient in our self-assurance and confidence that we consider others, especially strangers, as the root cause of our worries and turn against them in the hope that by removing them we remove the danger that ostensibly threatens our being. Nevertheless, the insecurity that breeds xenophobia, is internal. The strangers are not the cause of it. It pre-exists their presence, and simply seeks to set them up blindly, as the object upon whom to place the blame for its existence. Proof of the truth of this is found in those great nations and confident peoples who receive them favourably and put their wherewithal to use for their progress.

The situation becomes unbearable for indigenous minorities, for those who exist within intolerant societal majorities, for they are deemed alien whilst being equally indigenous as the majority. In many cases the majorities merely indulge in intense attempts to assimilate the minorities culturally, religiously, nationally and linguistically. There are other more painful instances when majorities will be looking for scapegoats for their backwardness, or for their failure to progress, and find them in the members of the minority, against whom they turn virulently with the aim of destroying them, exterminating the minority as the ostensible cause of their real or imagined woes, despite the fact that the minority in question is actually not in the least responsible for what it is being blamed for. And then there are cases when confrontations drive minorities to take desperate measures of a bellicose nature that exacerbate the conflict and drive away any hope of peace.

Regrettably the societies of our times have yet to reach the necessary level of maturity to become fully accepting of strangers. The clause of the European Treaty in respect of freedom of taking up residence constitutes a courageous impetus towards the right direction, but certain reasonable reservations are bound to curtail its breadth of application. The reason for this would be that unrestricted freedom of taking up residence, if it oversteps certain boundaries, will certainly spark adverse reactions, because societies have not yet reached the advanced degree of freedom espoused and instituted by the Treaties.

For our part we pray that society will mature beyond the limits envisaged by the Treaties so that all of humanity, imbued by the spirit of brotherhood, will coexist in equitability, freedom and mutual respect. And with such a prayer we come to the close of our brief address and express our gratitude to you for having invited us to this forum, and for the attention with which you have followed our words, and add our prayer that the work of the Conference will be crowned with success, and that during its course resolutions that will benefit humanity will be achieved. So let it come about.