

**Address
by Hegumen Philaret (Bulekov),
Russian Orthodox Church**

Mr. Moderator,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank you for the invitation to take part in such a major conference and for the opportunity to address the participants on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church. Our Church considers it very important to hold such conferences aimed at drawing attention to the painful problems of European societies today. We believe it to be vital to form fully-fledged civil societies – societies of mutual civil responsibility and tolerance in countries experiencing epoch-making transformations. In this process, churches and religious communities **must** play a significant role.

Addressing the general theme of our conference, I should clearly state that the Russian Orthodox Church has always been against any forms of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, which contradict the very essence of Christian faith. In its Social Doctrine, our Church has unequivocally stated that such phenomena as racism, the preaching of national exclusiveness, ethnic strife and xenophobia are **sin**. The manifestations of anti-Semitism and hostility towards immigrants from the East and South,

as well as those who confess other faiths, have always been publicly condemned by the supreme church leadership.

At the same time, the recent Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Associations in Russia, has noted in its statement that it does not associate today's manifestations of anti-Semitism in Russia with the Russian Orthodox Church, which maintains constructive cooperation with Russia's Jewish community. The Russian Church is engaged in intensive dialogue with all the dominant religions in Russia and in the post-Soviet space, such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and with various Christian denominations. This dialogue is aimed at achieving mutual understanding and at asserting mutual tolerance. Russia has accumulated a unique historical experience of peaceful co-existence of traditional religious communities.

However, we have certainly not gathered here to hear only positive evidence and declarations of good intentions. Our principal task is to understand why today, after six decades of our common victory over Nazism, which is associated in our awareness with

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racism and genocide against Jews, Slavs and Gypsies, why we should again confront the problems of racial, religious and cultural intolerance and enmity, which we know are still rife in our societies.

It seems to me that in addition to the way that we sinfully tend to divide the world into **us** and **them**, there are other problems involved as well. And one of them is related to a new processes taking place before our very eyes with many people viewing traditional religions as passé and old hat and progressively losing their social energy. Today, however, after the collapse of totalitarian quasi-religious ideologies and with the advent of globalization, it has become clear that the announcement of 'the death of religions' has been premature. Religions have recovered their social and even political energy and influence on the secular space. This is especially characteristic of societies in transition, including Russia and other post-Soviet countries, where we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of religious activity, which are expressed, first of all, in the proposal to society to enter into dialogue with religions, in a search for constructive patterns of development.

A certain role in the changed religious situation in Europe has been also played by the growing Muslim population, which seeks, in getting integrated in a context new to them, to preserve its own religious traditions and symbols. On the other hand, after September 11, the world has become fully aware of the need to integrate Muslims into Western society.

Could anybody really imagine, just a few years ago, that the presence of religious symbols in schools and public establishments, would provoke such discussion and become the cause of such tension? And this discussion, with the involvement of both public bodies and Governments, took place not only in France and Germany, but also in other countries, including Russia. This discussion has shown that, on the basis of respect for human rights and for the right to religious freedom, it is impossible to come to an unambiguous solution of the problem. In addition, when some of the protagonists are adherents of religious traditions, what should be taken into account are not only the rights of the individual but also the collective right of people united by certain religious beliefs.

In this regard, it should be admitted that radical sentiments have increased within religious communities. But what are more dangerous, are attempts, sometimes successful, to use these sentiments for political purposes. The manifestation of religious radicalism, which is not mainstream but rather marginal within the great religious traditions, is often treated as something inherent in these traditions. **This is completely untrue** and the fact that it is untrue needs to be taught to young and old alike. At the same time, followers of secularism tend to view any participation by religious communities in public life, as illegitimate and fraught with extremism. But we understand indeed that, in today's situation, civil society cannot function without input from and participation by religious associations.

We should carefully examine these processes, to find ways of opposing their negative implications. Old approaches often fail to work here.

In the first place, we should remember that most people on our planet are religious people. And most people are concerned for the peaceful co-existence of religions and cultures. Only those radicals and politicians who use radicals are not concerned for it. Our common task is to ensure that these radicals, even if they seek support from religion, should not prevail.

What can we do to oppose religious-tinted radicalism generating xenophobia, anti-Semitism and inter-ethnic enmity, what can we do to oppose it in the situation of religious communities growing ever more active?

First of all, there are educational programs. We should see to it that schools should teach not only an adequate knowledge of various religions and cultures, beginning with their own, but that the process of teaching should include education for tolerance and mutual respect, based on this knowledge. In the case of religious education proper, the task is to cultivate not only committed followers for their own religion, but also people who are aware of their civil responsibility – responsibility before the whole of society. This endeavour cannot succeed without cooperation between educational bodies and religious communities. It is only constructive cooperation between them, that can be an alternative, to the education offered by groups and communities of radical believers.

In addition, it is necessary to develop as far as possible the dialogue between representatives of religions and proponents of a secular worldview. Inter-confessional (within Christianity) and interreligious dialogue has been in place for many years. But previously it was up to the religions themselves to initiate such dialogue, while today it should be of interest to society as a whole. Frankly it has been a difficult dialogue but in today's situation there is no alternative whatsoever. Believers and non-believers **must** work together for the common good.

Returning to positive examples, I should inform you that an Interreligious Council in Russia, initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church, is successfully working in our country and includes leaders of the world religions represented there – Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Recently another interreligious body, an Interreligious Council of the CIS, has also been established.

In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia, have developed a joint work plan, involving academic conferences and round table discussions between scholars and religious experts. One of the primary aims of this cooperation, is to explain, in a systematic way by using the mass media, that any form of xenophobia or anti-Semitism **completely inadmissible**.

Thank you for your attention.