

Acceptance Speech for the Award of Doctor of Philosophy (Honoris Causa) by the University of Malta

Delivered at the Aula Magna,
University of Malta (Valletta Campus)
Tuesday 6 December 2022

Your Excellency, Mr President of the Republic of Malta,
Esteemed Members of Parliament,
Your Excellency, the Archbishop of Malta,
Your Excellencies, Brother hierarchs,
Honourable Chancellor of the University of Malta,
Honourable Dean of the Faculty of Theology,
Distinguished professors,
Honourable representatives of the civil authorities,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We are grateful to the University of Malta for extending to us the exceptional honour of conferring to us the title of Honorary Doctor. This distinction belongs, through our person, to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Holy Great Church of Christ, which “leads through suffering” and for seventeen centuries serves the people of God, unwaveringly preserving to this day as well the Apostolic and Patristic traditions, along with the faith, ethos and culture of Orthodox Christianity. What follows expresses the spirit and life of our Church, its concern and care for humankind and creation. It is this Church that we have served – with the goodwill and grace of God, the giver of all good things – for more than six decades as a clergyman, thirty-one of which as Ecumenical Patriarch.

The Orthodox Church has never been unworldly and indifferent to history and culture, which is wrongly assumed based on the central place accorded to its divine worship, monastic witness, and eschatological orientation. Instead, what is accurate to say is the witness of the Church in the world comprises a “liturgy after the Divine Liturgy,” a dimension of its eucharistic realisation. It is not by chance that the social contribution and charitable activity of the Church impress even the opponents of Christianity.

The word of the Gospel cannot remain on the margin of contemporary discussions on the great issues facing humanity. Christians, too, are called to live within a rapidly changing global environment. It is there that we are obliged to be a good witness about freedom in Christ, to be the “salt of the earth” (Matt. 5.13) and proclaim the Gospel “to all of creation” (Mark 16.15).

Fr Georges Florovsky used to say that all Christians “somehow belong to the same spiritual world (*Bible, Church, Tradition*, Thessaloniki 2018, p.32); they represent and express a common tradition, which has been ruptured. We must always bear in mind our “original connection” and “common past” (op. cit., p.33). The Christian East and West cannot be conceived as “separate units” understood in and of themselves. “We might call them cultural sisters. I would even dare to say that they are conjoined sisters (“The Legacy and Goal of Orthodox Theology,” *Theologia* 81, n.4 [October-December 2010]: 22). And Florovsky adds: “The tragedy of division is the greatest and most critical problem in the history of Christianity” (op. cit., p.34).

This is why we cannot understand those who reject the contemporary ecumenical movement, especially when it is carried out without theological minimalism and ecumenical utopianism. We believe not only in the necessity, but also in the capacity of dialogue. Sincere dialogue has no victors or victims. Contemporary dialogues have released creative forces within church life and highlighted the importance of Christian values for the present and future of humanity.

Beyond the dialogue among Christians, the dialogue among religions also comprises a mandatory and positive challenge. Despite secularism, religion today stands at the forefront and influences global developments. As it has correctly been observed, an analysis of the modern international context without reference to the role of religion remains incomplete.

Religions provide answers to our vivid existential questions, preserving a profound anthropological knowledge and wisdom, as well as fundamental moral values such as respect for human dignity and all of creation. The noblest cultural achievements of humanity are associated with religions. In general, civilization

bears the seal of religion. Even recent secularistic and humanistic movements, like the movement for human rights, cannot be comprehended without their religious origins.

Together with all of this, religion has a central role in the shaping of civilization. Religious identity belongs to the nucleus of cultural distinctiveness. Consequently, if we appreciate the religion of others, then we shall also better apprehend the concept of otherness and be able to communicate and dialogue with them. In this sense, religions are significant factors in the process of establishing and sustaining peace. As eloquently articulated, peace among religions is a precondition for peace among peoples and cultures. Of course, we all know that religions can divide people, nurturing hatred, fanaticism and aggression. Nevertheless, this reflects their failure and not their mission or essence.

The purpose of inter-religious dialogue is – beyond a lifting of prejudice and a collaboration before great challenges – the discovery of common values that exist in the various religious traditions. The promotion of common basic values is of vital importance for our world, which is threatened by a “clash of civilizations,” is faced with complex moral dilemmas, such as the ecological crisis, and experiences eruptions of religious fundamentalism and brazen infringement of human rights in diverse forms. In order to address such problems, what is required is a radical change of mentality and a Copernican reversal of our values, to which religions are called to contribute.

We would like to focus on two areas, where the contribution of religion has proved particularly poignant: 1) on the matter of protecting the natural environment; and 2) on the role of religion in respecting human rights.

Protecting the Natural Environment

We are proud that the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the first Church that has highlighted the ecological message of Christianity and promoted church life as “applied ecology.” In this sense, the vibrant interest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the natural environment has not merely been a circumstantial reaction to the contemporary ecological crisis. The latter was solely an occasion for us to develop our eco-friendly traditions in a timely manner.

From the outset, we have approached the ecological crisis as a social problem and emphasised the interdependence of environmental and social questions. The horrible threat of climate change for life on our planet demonstrates the accuracy of our approach. The social consequences of climate change are tangible and measurable; indeed, the first of these include forced migration due to a rapidly

changing climate. We must become aware of the severity of the situation in order to bring about a global and radical change of direction. The problem will be resolved when its causes are addressed. The causes of the imminent “climate destruction” also include the predominant model of economic development. We repeat here what we have frequently stated: An economic activity that does not respect the natural environment as our common home can no longer be sustainable. There is no future without a comprehensive turn toward an “ecological economy.”

The struggle for the protection of creation and the respect for the human person are inseparable mind-sets. We believe that the root of our ecological and social problems is a single spiritual crisis. Genuine faith in God eradicates human arrogance, which abolishes limits and boundaries with a view to instrumentalizing our fellow human beings and all of nature for the satisfaction of boundless ambition.

Human Rights

Human rights comprise one of the greatest achievements of humankind in our age. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (December 10, 1948), as “arguably the most familiar document in the modern world” (M. Babo, “Einleitung,” in: K. Bentele/ M. Heimback-Steins (ed.), *Theologie und Menschenrechte*, Freiburg/Schweiz 2008, p.15), was a “manifesto of humanism” that emerged from the greatest destruction of humankind in history.

From the classic Declarations in the second half of the 18th century to this day, human rights have proved to be a dynamic reality, capable of responding to new challenges, addressing new threats against freedom and justice, and granting definitive responses to newly arising crises.

It is our fervent conviction that the future of human rights depends to a great degree on the related stance of religions. There is no doubt that human rights possess the stamp of Christianity, but without compromising its immediate creation. Western Churches have long been in direct conflict with human rights. It is only after the Second World War that the position of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism changed in relation to human rights, which are now appreciated as invaluable elements for the witness of the Church in the world.

The Orthodox Church does not have a uniform vision and viewpoint on human rights. There is relative agreement on the positive nature of social justice. The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete 2016) underlines that human rights “are today at the centre of political debate as a response to contemporary social and political crises and upheavals and in order to protect

the freedom of the individual (Encyclical, paragraph 16). It then continues to emphasise “the danger of individual rights falling into individualism and a culture of ‘rights’ [that] functions at the expense of the social content of freedom and leads to the arbitrary transformation of rights into claims for happiness, as well as the elevation of the precarious identification of freedom with individual licence into a “universal value” (op. cit.).

This understanding of the Holy and Great Council is also reflected in a subsequent document on the social teaching of the Orthodox Church more recently commissioned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and entitled *For the Life of the World*.

It is certain that an overall dismissive attitude toward human rights and their consideration as directly threatening the identity of Orthodox Christianity springs from a misinterpretation of both human rights and the Orthodox ethos. We believe that dialogue with human rights and the struggle for their protection constitute a fundamental dimension of Orthodox witness in the contemporary world.

Unfortunately, non-Christian religions very easily describe human rights as a “western ideology,” an expression of Christian values, and a symbol of Western individualism or secularism. They claim that human rights are a “Trojan horse of the West” that seeks to corrupt social traditions of non-Western peoples. Naturally, human rights do not constitute a threat to the particular identity of religions and cultures; nor do they represent a “tyranny of the universal”. Rather, they secure the basic presuppositions for free cultural expression and respect for otherness. The universality of human rights does not promote homogenization. At the same time, however, pluralism can only function creatively on the basis of accepting global common values. Otherwise, it risks being reduced to nihilism, to the mentality of “anything goes” of postmodernism, inevitably leading to a clash of civilizations.

Distinguished audience,

Despite what may be said to the contrary, the diminishment of a religious orientation in life and secularism do not advance the goals of human rights, but negatively influence their support and respect. The phrase “generally for humankind” is not sufficient to establish absolute respect for human dignity. Instead, the reductionist perception that ensues from it fosters the objectification of human beings and naturalistic tendencies.

Humanity needs a religious foundation of human dignity. The way we perceive the human being: its origin and destiny, its body and soul, its needs and dreams, and its freedom and happiness form our attitude toward it. According

to the Christian teaching, the human being has a divine dignity as the bearer of God's image, destined to become God by grace. This perception is magnifying the human being to its highest possible degree. Christianity rejects any degradation, instrumentalisation, and exploitation of the human being.

The future does not belong to a self-ordained "man-god," to a Prometheus, to the "man" as "the measure of all things," as postulated by the sophist Protagoras. All attempts to establish a just society, a culture of solidarity with humanity and with creation need a reference to the Absolute.

In this sense, we are sceptical about the characterization of contemporary Europe as "post-Christian Europe." Europe's secular present cannot be separated from its religious past as inspired and formed by Christian culture, without a negative impact on Europe's self-consciousness and cultural identity. Europe is an experiment of freedom, solidarity, and openness. It is not a "Kopfgeburt", that is a product of the mind – as it has been called by the renowned sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, but rather embodies high human values and an idealism. It is not possible for the European Union to merely exist as a project of economic development. At the centre of the European identity stands the belief in freedom, the protection of human dignity and of the whole creation not only as a moral imperative, but also as a commandment of the God of love and justice.

Thank you for your kind attention!