The Russian orthodox church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

Freedom, human rights and equality have been always of major importance to human being since he is the only one for whom it is important not just to live but to justify his life according certain moral ends.

Those who dare to impose on mankind a simplistic list of "universal" human values choose to ignore the fact that there is no universal perception of what is a human being and what is the purpose of its existence.

Many contradictory religion-based and rationalist concepts determine different paradigms for man's relationship to God and matter, his fellow man and society, nature and the Universe. In response, people have created systems of ethics based on what they consider sin and virtue, right and wrong, good and evil, just and inspiring, so as to leave an ethical and moral stamp on history.

Different civilizations have generated different concepts of honour and duty, given differing substance to categories of freedom and rights, developed their own codes of ethics between men and women, parents and children, and constructed their own interpretation of the rule of law and the State. As a result, various legal systems (consisting of positive law, under which the concept that what is not prohibited is allowed tends to predominate, and natural law, which defines sin and crime and is founded on religious canons) or moral foundations now underpin economic activity, labour, wealth and riches, and national and State concepts and institutions.

The present-day neoliberalism and its universalist project are deliberately destroying the sense of human history. The new ethical and historical nihilism is a philosophy of the end of history - history without any moral end.

PART I

Human dignity

The theory of human rights theory is based on human dignity as its fundamental notion. According to Biblical revelation, God not only created human nature but also endowed it with qualities in His image and after His likeness. This is why the church asserts that human nature has an inherent dignity.

The incarnation of God as Jesus Christ showed that human nature did not lose its dignity even after the Fall: the image of God in it remained indelible, which means that an opportunity remained for restoring human life in the fullness of its original perfection.
According to the teachings of Orthodoxy, the human being, who bears the image of God, should not exult in this lofty dignity, for it is not his own achievement but a gift of God. Nor should he use it to justify his weaknesses or vices, but rather understand his responsibility for the direction and way of his life. Clearly, the idea of responsibility is integral to the very notion of dignity.

The XX century promoters of the libertarianism declared “the absolute sovereignty of views and inclinations in the life of a human individual no matter how specific it were” (HAYEK 1990). That statement is an obvious departure from the basic Christian notion of the inherent sinfulness of human nature surmountable solely through conscious spiritual ascetic effort, comprising first and foremost a voluntary taming of one's own pride - "Blessed are the poor in spirit... (MAT.S.3)

Therefore, in the Eastern Christian tradition, the notion of 'dignity' has first of all a moral meaning: what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul. Considering the state of human nature darkened by sin, it is important that things dignified and undignified should be clearly distinguished in the life of a person.

The result of the loss of absolute criteria for good and evil, for beauty and ugliness, for canons was: beauty, harmony - norm is declared commonness and boredom. Distortion, deviation from the norm - is sophistication... There is no more indecent - that is, immoral behavior- it is only incorrect - this word contains no absolute moral judgement, its meaning is relative. “Free individual”, totally enslaved by his own pride and flesh, professes nihilism to all traditional values, narcissism for soul and hedonism for body.

Part of a modern liberal's credo both in the West and in the East is to declare that no value is precious enough and worth sacrificing human life for... It is undermining of the whole foundation of Christian culture. Inspired by the Cross Sacrifice of Our Savior, Christians both in the West and East perceived as heroes those who gave their lives for faith, patria, duty, honor, love - metaphysical values proving the supremacy of soul over flesh...

The credo of the XXI c. liberal is to stay or rise above all "relative values and pieces of truth" - that is the comfortably furnished non-alignment with the ultimate fight between good and evil. It is nothing but the Luke warmth identified in the Revelation as one of the features of the kingdom of the beast: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.” (REV. 3.15-16)

A life in sin is unworthy of the human person, as it destroys him and inflicts damage on others and the world around him. Sin overturns the hierarchy of relations in human nature. Instead of having his body controlled by the spirit, in sin the human person submits to the flesh.

According to the Orthodox tradition, a human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms because these norms express the
primordial and therefore authentic human nature not darkened by sin. Thus there is a direct link between human dignity and morality. Moreover, the acknowledgement of personal dignity implies the assertion of personal responsibility.

**Freedom**

Freedom is one of the manifestations of God in human nature. Subjection of the human will to any external authority through manipulation or violence is seen as a violation of the order established by God.

At the same time, freedom of choice is not an absolute or ultimate value. God has put it at the service of human well-being. Exercising it, a person should not harm either himself or those around him.

Jesus Christ says, 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free...Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin' (Jn. 8:32,34). This means that only those who truly free who take the path of righteous life and seek communion with God, the source of absolute truth. The abuse of freedom and the choice of a false, immoral, way of life will ultimately destroy the very freedom of choice because it enslaves man to sin.

While recognizing the value of freedom of choice, the Church affirms that this freedom will inevitably disappear if the choice is made in favour of evil. Evil and freedom are incompatible.

In human history, the choice made by people and societies in favour of evil has led to the loss of freedom and to the enormous loss of lives. Today humanity may follow the same path if such absolutely vicious things as abortion, suicide, lechery, perversion, destruction of the family, the worship of cruelty and violence, are no longer given a proper moral assessment but are instead justified by a distorted understanding of human freedom.

The weakness of the modern doctrine of human rights lies in the fact that, while defending freedom of choice, it tends to increasingly ignore the moral dimension of life and the freedom from sin. The social system should be guided by both freedoms, harmonizing their exercise in the public sphere. One of these freedoms cannot be defended while the other is neglected. Free adherence to goodness and the truth is impossible without the freedom of choice, just as a free choice loses its value and meaning if it is made in favour of evil.

Society should therefore establish mechanisms which restore the harmony between human dignity and freedom. In social life, the concept of human rights and morality can and must serve this purpose. These two notions are linked by the fact that morality - that is, the ideas of sin and virtue - always precede law. Law, in fact, arises from morality. That is why any erosion of morality will ultimately lead to the erosion of legality.
Human rights

Human rights cannot be superior to the values of the spiritual world. No human institutions, including various forms and mechanisms of the socio-political order, can in themselves make people's life more moral and perfect and eradicate evil and suffering. It is important to remember that public and social forces have a real power and duty to stop evil in its social manifestations, but they cannot prevail over sin as its cause. The essential struggle with evil is carried out in the depth of the human spirit and can succeed only if it is waged through personal religious life.

In Orthodoxy, there is an immutable conviction that, in ordering its life, a society should take into account not only human interests and wishes but also the divine truth, the eternal moral law given by the Lord and working in the world no matter whether the will of particular people or people's communities agree with it or not. For an Orthodox Christian this law, sealed in Holy Scripture, stands above any other rules, for it is by this law that God will judge the individual and nations standing before His throne.

Human rights cannot be a reason for coercing Christians into violation of God's commandments. The Orthodox Church believes it inadmissible that the believer's view of the human being, family, communal life and church practice should be subjected to a non-religious understanding of human rights. Christians should respond to such attempts as Saints Peter and John did, saying, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God' [Acts 4,1.9].

It is inadmissible to introduce in the area of human rights the norms that obliterate or altogether cancel both the Gospel and natural morality. It is equally inadmissible to elevate to a norm such immoral and inhumane actions towards the human being as abortion, euthanasia, use of human embryos in medicine, experiments changing a person's nature and the like.

Society

Human rights should not contradict love for one's homeland and neighbours. The Creator has laid down in human nature the need for communication and unity, saying, 'It is not good for man to be alone'[Gen. 2:18). The love of a person for his family and other loved ones cannot but spread to his people and the country in which he lives. It is not without reason that the Orthodox tradition traces patriotism back to the words of Christ Himself: 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (Jn. 15:13).

The acknowledgment of individual rights should be balanced with the assertion of people's responsibility before one another. The extremes of individualism and collectivism cannot promote a harmonious order in a society's life. They lead to degradation of the personality, moral and legal nihilism, growing crime, civil inaction and people's mutual alienation,

The spiritual experience of the Church however has shown that the tension between private and public interests can be overcome only if human rights and freedoms are harmonized
with moral values and, most importantly, only if the life of the individual and society is invigorated by love. It is love that removes all the contradictions between the individual and those around him, making him capable of enjoying his freedom fully while taking care of his neighbours and homeland.

Some civilizations ought not to impose their own way of life on other civilizations under the pretext of human rights protection. The human rights activity should not be put at the service of interests of particular countries. The struggle for human rights becomes fruitful only if it contributes to the spiritual and material welfare of both the individual and society.

Culture

Culture in Oswald Spengler's interpretation – a product of human spirit, as well as any concept has a philosophical foundation underneath and reflects a certain perception of one's own place and role in the world history.

Another myth that got firmly established in modern consciousness culture - is that culture has absolutely no relation to the religious and philosophical basis but depends exclusively on freedom of the individual.

Yet it is cultural impotence of our times, when the “free individual” factually becomes captive to flesh and arrogance, professing hedonism for his body and narcissism for his soul, confirms the old theological truth that evil does not actually exist and, therefore, has no potential for creativeness or creativity. Its pseudo-existence reveals itself in corruption of good. Only great taboos produced great culture, which was begotten of the grandiose test of the man’s free will, torn between temptations of evil and the sense of duty before God and people with respect to good.

Yet perceptions of good and evil, of the place and role of the man on earth, of finiteness or infiniteness of his life and soul arise from religious teachings. This is why different civilizations produced differing ethics of relationships between man and woman, parents and children, differing perceptions of the duty of the authority and citizen, different statehood types, different philosophy of law, based on the idea of identity of sin and crime. This is why the law as legal norm has always followed the ethical judgment - originally, the religious canon. Before formulating the measure of guilt and that of punishment, you first need to regard the deed as malbehaviour.

What are the basic religious-philosophical foundations of the European culture these religiously sanctioned, hence, absolute ethic parameters of Christian culture? These are the sharp distinction between good and evil and the free will - the gifts of The Holy Spirit. This is the idea of the uniqueness and supreme value of a human being granted an immortal soul over any material or manmade product no matter how precious it were and the ethic equality of human beings. These basic assumptions do not allow to use consciously human life for any purpose to use human being as means for another human being, and subjects the emperor and the servant to the Final Judgement according the same criteria.
These values gave birth to Christian culture that produced the unique human achievement in all spheres remarkable not only for its unprecedented scale and diversity but for its universal ethic and moral integrity. The interpretation of supreme power as service developed a different perception of the rights and obligations of the ruler who at least in the doctrine became an incarnated duty and ethic ideal contrary to the ancient quod licet jovi non licet bovi. The idea of identity of sin and crime became the ethics of legal conscience and corpus lea as following the moral judgement of religious canons. In the economics the ethics of sufficiency - not profit determined the accepted incentives for labour and riches - forbidding usury as in The Scripture.

The artistic conscience gave birth to the canons of art and literature - beauty and ugliness, harmony and distortion, melody and cacophony, elegance and bad taste, etc. -all proclaiming and proving that criteria of good and evil in terms of art and culture - are not relative. It is the painful passionate struggle in the human soul of its free will between good and evil that produced the great European culture with hero as the incarnated duty. It is the ardent desire to express this fight that produced the diversity and riches of genre and style. Where the apogee and what was is the reason of the rise and decline of culture along with "progress" and with more Freedom? What was Renaissance contrary to the common beliefs? This is already manifested in the trends of the human culture. Culture reflects the condition and status of our spirit and at the same time it affects the spirit, promoting or resisting good and evil. The de-Christening of all basic ethical dimensions of culture was the inevitable result.

The West achieved his earthly paradise that impresses with wealth, hardly by anything else...

But it was exactly that something else that preoccupied the Western man at the time of the rise of European culture and Europe's greatness. A Russian intelligentsia liberal of the XIX century, enchanted by Gioconda's smile and Cartesian logic, by Faust's quest for cognition, who kneeled to the "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" would not find in the today's West anything but cabalistic data of the Inter-Net and the touch of a usurer everywhere.

This real boss of Liberté, the destroyer of all civilizations and the grave-digger of the great European culture, managed to have smuggled under the tempting triad still unachievable without God - something he ruined everything with: laissez passer, laissez faire and later on: everything is allowed that is not prohibited. This key for interpretation enabled to separate the concept of crime from sin (Cavour's la loi est athée), to transform the Christian concept of freedom from the pardonable weakness to mistake and doubt, represented in Faust - into the right to declare identical beauty and ugliness, truth and lie, goody and sin thus seducing the man to the nihilism and cynicism of Mephitis, declaring good and evil identical...

And it is clear that such freedom lost every impetus for creative culture. The impetus was given to it by the limits of good and evil. Borderless freedom loses its distinction and is unidentifiable. Freedom without absolute parameters of good and evil comes to the entropy and total creative impotence. That is a manifestation in culture of the long established philosophical and theological truth: evil has no creative potency, it is not substantial, and the
definition of its pseudo-existence is nihilism and corruption of good.

Finally, there is a third generation of human rights - the one that is inscribed on the Council of Europe's messianic banner of the present-day "libertarian revolution".

These are the so-called humanitarian rights, i.e. the rights of the individual, which the West is currently inclined to regard as universal, regardless of the state, civilization or religious and philosophical system the individual belongs to. It is apparent that only a secular doctrine can act as the underlying basis of these approaches - a doctrine that in a rather aggressive and deliberate manner eliminates all distinct perceptions of the good and evil, sin and virtue, which may only be begotten of a religious teaching, after which they are handed down from generation to generation regardless of the individual's conscious attitude to faith. Friedrich August von Hayek, one of the founders of liberal philosophy, openly postulated the "absolute autonomy of the individual in all its manifestations, however extravagant they might be". It means an absolute rejection of the concept of sin, which is a pre-requisite of absolute morals.

In proclaiming a unified "post-Christian" society, "Peter's Europe" is apparently abjuring itself, its own great past and colossal culture. Its heroics and ideal, romanticism and even Descartes' doubts - all of these originate from Christian spirit.

The draft European Constitution does not at all have a list of values in the respective chapter. There is nothing here but functional conditions for professing them - for this is what the "sacred cows" of the 21st century liberalism actually are - theses on "human rights", freedom and "democracy". As there is no reference to the objective that these rights are supposed to serve, they are nothing else than a proclamation of the right to have no moral definition of objectives in life or history.

The European Constitution is a pretty dull sample of creative work of the liberal "State planning committee", in which Europe is regarded as a giant economic enterprise, serving the task of optimization and unification of requirements. Why would Peter's Europe need Freedom, in this case? Does it need it in order to "chase enemies, plunder their possessions, revel in tears of their relatives, kissing their wives and daughters", as the highest good on earth was described by Genghis Khan in his last will? Or to "return to its starry homeland" (Platon)? Or to seek Salvation and "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Sermon on the Mount)? Or to recognize the beauty and deformity, sin and virtue, good and evil as equally honored and manifestations of a sovereign individual? Europe was hardly concerned with this in the periods of its growing might, when it demonstrated to the world its great culture and great powers.

However, preachers of "liberal freedom" in Europe and Russia attack all restrictions of "freedom", making them out to be suppression of the rights to "information", to the "choice", to "freedom of creative activities"). With a Bolshevik kind of hatred, do they especially assail Christianity, which constitutes an irreplaceable source of spiritual development of the individual.
PART II

The Orthodox Church stands for the following human rights.

The right to life. Life is a gift of God to human beings. God gave the Prophet Moses a commandment that ‘you shall not kill’. Orthodoxy does not accept terrorism and condemns it, as armed aggression and criminal violence just as all other forms of the criminal taking away of human life.

At the same time, life is not restricted to temporal limits in which the secular worldview and its legal system place the individual. Christianity testifies that temporal life, precious in itself, acquires fullness and absolute meaning in the perspective of eternal life. Priority therefore should be given not to the efforts to preserve temporal life by all means but to the desire to order it in such a way as to enable people to work together with God for preparing their souls for eternity.

The right to life should imply the protection of a human life from the moment of its conception. Any intrusion in the life of a developing human personality is a violation of this right. Modern international and national legal acts seal and protect the life and rights of the child, adult and senior citizen. The same logic of human life protection should be applied to the period of life from its conception to birth.

Freedom of conscience. The individual can see the gift of freedom of choice first of all in the opportunity for him to choose particular philosophical guidelines for his life. The principle of freedom of conscience is in harmony with God's will if it protects the individual against any arbitrary treatment of his inner world, against any forcible imposition of particular convictions upon him.

A society has the right to determine freely the content and amount of cooperation the state should maintain with various religious communities depending on their strength, traditional presence in a particular country or region, contribution to the history and culture of the country and on their civil attitude. At the same time, there must be equality of citizens before law regardless of their attitude to religion. The principle of freedom of conscience does not present an obstacle for partnership relations between the Church and the state in social, educational or any other socially significant activities.

On the other hand, freedom of conscience cannot be used to establish total control over the life and beliefs of the individual, to destroy his private, family and social morality, to insult his religious feelings, to encroach on things he holds sacred, to damage his spiritual and cultural identity as all this distorts its very essence.

Freedom of expression. The freedom of thoughts and feelings, which presupposes the possibility for disseminating information, is a natural continuation of the freedom of ideological choice. The word is a principal means of communication between people and God and among one another. The content of communication has a serious impact on the well-being of the person and interpersonal relations in a society. The individual bears a
special responsibility for his words. 'By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Mt. 12:37) says Holy Scripture. Public statements and declarations should not further the propagation of sin or generate strife and disorder in society. The word should create and support the good. It is especially dangerous to insult religious and national feelings, to distort information about the life of particular religious communities, nations, social groups and personalities. Responsibility for words has grown manifold in the modern world as it experiences a rapid development of the technologies of storing and disseminating information.

The right to education. The goal of a person's temporal life is to seek the likeness of God by means of virtue. Education is a means by which not only is a person incorporated into society but also by which his personality is formed in accordance with the design of the Creator. The right to education presupposes learning that takes into account the cultural traditions of society and the worldview of the individual and his family. As most of the world cultures are based on religion, the comprehensive education and formation of a person should include the teaching of knowledge about the religion that has created the culture in which this person lives.

Civil and political rights. Holy Scriptures instructs the faithful to fulfil their family and socially important obligations as obedience to Christ. St. Paul made use of his rights as Roman citizen on more than one occasion in order to preach the Word of God. Civil and political rights offer the individual an ample opportunity for effective service of his neighbour. Using this instrument, a citizen can make an influence on the life of society and participate in governing the state. It is on the way in which an individual uses his right to elect and to be elected, to join freely an association or a union, to use freedom of expression and beliefs that the welfare of a society depends.

The use of political and civil rights should not lead to divisions and enmity. The Orthodox tradition of conciliarity implies the preservation of the social unity on the basis of intransient moral values. The Church calls upon people to restrain their egoistic desires for the sake of the common good.

People's private life, worldview and will should not become a subject of total control. Any manipulation over people's choice and their conscience by power structures, political forces and economic and media elites is dangerous for a society. Such things as compilation, concentration and use of information about any aspect of people's life without their consent are also inadmissible. Information about a person can be collected without his or her consent only in cases where it is required for the defence of the homeland, preservation of morality, protection of people's health, rights and legitimate interests or the need to investigate a crime and to exercise justice. But in these cases too, information may be collected and used in conformity with the stated aims and in accordance with law. The methods of collecting and processing information about people should not hurt the dignity of a person, restrict his freedom or turn him from a subject of public relations into an object of machine operation. The adoption of technical devices accompanying a person permanently or inseparable from his body will be even more dangerous for human freedom if used to control his personality.
**Socio-economic rights.** A person's earthly life is impossible without having his material needs satisfied. The right usage of material wealth does matter in the cause of salvation. It is necessary therefore to give a clear moral dimension to such rights and freedoms as the right to property, the right to employment, the right to protection against an employer's arbitrary treatment, the freedom of enterprise and the right to dignified living standards.

The exercise of economic rights should not lead to the formation of such a society in which the use of material wealth is turned into a dominating or even the only aim of a society's existence. One of the purposes of economic and social rights is to prevent confrontational stratification of a society. Such stratification is contrary to the commandment to love one's neighbour. It creates conditions for the moral degradation of both society and the individual, generates the feeling of alienation between people and violates the principle of justice.

A society has as its important responsibility to take care of those who are unable to secure their material needs. Access to education and vital medical care should not depend on the social or economic status of a person.

**Collective rights.** The rights of an individual should not be destructive of the life and traditions of the family and of various religious, national and social communities. Communal life begins in the family. It is in his family that a person gains an experience of love for God and his neighbour. It is through the family that religious traditions, social way of life and national culture of a society are handed down. The modern law should view the family as the lawful union of man and woman in which natural conditions for raising children are created. Law is also called to respect the family as an integral organism and to protect it against destruction provoked by moral decay. In safeguarding the rights of the child, the legal system should not deny his parents a special role in his education, which is inseparable from their worldview and religious experience.

It is necessary to respect other collective rights as well, such as the right to peace, the right to the environment, the right to preservation of cultural heritage and internal norms regulating the life of various communities.

**The following areas are singled out for our human rights efforts today:**

- Defending the human right to the free confession of faith, prayer and worship, the preservation of religious and cultural traditions, observance of religious principles in both private life and public action;
- Opposing crimes on the grounds of national and religious enmity;
- Safeguarding the individual against the arbitrary actions of those in power and employers and against violence and humiliation in his family and collective;
- Protecting life, the free choice and property of people during international, political, economic and social conflicts;
- Taking pastoral care for soldiers and protecting their rights and dignity in situations of hostilities and military service in peace time;
- Concern for the respect of the dignity and rights of those who are placed in social institutions and penitentiaries with special attention given to the disabled, orphans,
the elderly and other powerless people;
- Protecting the rights of nations and ethnic groups to their own religion, language and culture;
- Concern for those whose rights, freedom and health suffer because of the actions of destructive cults;
- Supporting the family in its traditional understanding as well as fatherhood, motherhood and childhood;
- Opposing attempts to involve people in corruption and other crimes as well as in prostitution, drug addiction and gambling;
- Concern for a just economic and social order of society;
- Preventing efforts to use modern technologies and political manipulation for total control over the individual, his choice of a worldview and his private life;
- Promoting respect for law, propagating the positive experience of implementing and protecting human rights;
- Expertise of legal acts, legislative initiatives and actions by the authorities in order to prevent encroachments on human rights and dignity and aggravation of social morals.
- Participating in the public control over the law enforcement, especially in part regulating church-state relations, and over the execution of fair court judgments.

Motivated by the Church's teaching on human dignity, freedom and rights, Christians are called to take ethically guided social action. It can be expressed in diverse forms, such as witness before the authorities, intellectual studies, campaigns in defence of particular groups of people and their rights. Without seeking a revolutionary reconstruction of the world and acknowledging the rights of other social groups to participate in social transformations on the basis of their own worldview, the Orthodox Christians reserve the right to participate in building public life in away that does not contradict their faith and moral principles. The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to defend the same principles in dialogue with the world community and in cooperation with people of other traditional confessions and religions.