

Address by His All-Holiness  
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

“The Role of the Churches in Today’s Europe”  
College of Europe, Bruges  
11 November 2019

Your Eminences,  
Your Excellency,  
Honourable President of the Administrative Council of the College of Europe,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Students,

It is with great joy that we address this distinguished audience, in the presence of so many students, women and men, promising a splendid career in society and science. In our tradition we call the youth as the most hope-oriented period of human life. We express our wholehearted thanks to the newly appointed President of the Administrative Council of the College of Europe, Professor Herman Van Rompuy, former President of the European Council, for this gracious invitation and to the other speakers for their participation and contribution and to you all for your presence and participation.

In our time we face a world changing rapidly, full of new challenges and unforeseen possibilities for development and progress. When confronted with the contemporary challenges, what should the required stance for the Christian Churches be? How could they make good use of their precious spiritual and moral heritage, their deep anthropological knowledge and their philanthropic traditions? Over the last decades, we have witnessed a re-evaluation of the role of religion for human existence. It is not by chance that, in our present day, the talk about the coming

“post-religious age” has been replaced by the discourse of a “post-secular period,” in which religions claim and play a prominent public role and join all the remarkable efforts of humankind. As Pope Emeritus Benedict writes: “complete secularity” (*Profanität*), “which was aimed for in the West, is something deeply foreign for the civilizations of the world. They are convinced that a world without God does not have any future.”<sup>1</sup>

For the eminent Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, humanity does not live in our days waiting for an age without religion or a secularized society, which has totally pushed religion to the margins. The main question today is not when religion will completely disappear from the spotlight of history, but for how long will manage to survive a society completely cut off from its religious roots.<sup>2</sup> According to His Eminence Walter Cardinal Kasper, it is a commonly accepted truth that “every society needs institutions of transcendence,” which publicly represent the “dimension of the Divine.”<sup>3</sup> The modern attempt to found society on atheistic or religiously indifferent principles has failed.

Religion remains a central dimension of human life, both at the personal and the social levels. Without reference to religion, it is impossible to understand the past, to analyse the present, or to imagine the future of humanity. Unfortunately, the ongoing outburst of religious fundamentalism and the terrible acts of violence in the name of God and religion give to the modern deniers of religious faith arguments against religions and support the identification of religion with its negative aspects. The credibility of religions depends largely on their commitment to peace, the way to which is, in our times, interreligious dialogue and common witness in view of the great contemporary challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien, 2005), 887.

<sup>2</sup> W. Pannenberg, “Religion und menschliche Natur”, in: *Sind wir von Natur aus religiös*, ed. by W. Pannenberg (Düsseldorf, 1989), 20.

<sup>3</sup> W. Kasper, *Zukunft aus dem Glauben* (Mainz, 1978), 90.

Dialogue is the most effective means for addressing problems and it promotes confidence and mutual acceptance. It is as such a gesture of solidarity and a source of solidarity. Never in history have human beings had the opportunity to bring so many positive changes to so many people and to the global community simply through encounter and dialogue. While it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined that there have also never been greater chances for communication and cooperation. Humanity is called to react and act collaboratively, working as a whole for our common presence and future. Nobody—not a nation, nor a state, nor science and technology, nor a church or a religion—can face the current problems alone. We need one another; we need common mobilization, common efforts, common goals.

We also need a religion that does not betray earth for the sake of heaven, the present for the sake of future. Genuine religion does not absolve humans from their responsibility in the world and for the world. On the contrary, it enhances their commitment to responsibility and action, while expanding their witness for freedom, justice, and peace. For genuine believers, faith is to be a presupposition to approach rightly the earthly reality. Faith does not belong ultimately to the private sphere.

Unfortunately, the Orthodox Church is often accused of neglecting the world for the sake of spiritual life, of being centred on worship and liturgy and ignoring social problems, of turning solely towards the future, to the Kingdom of God to come, disregarding the present and the current challenges. Nevertheless, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which was convened in June 2016 on the island of Crete, proved the opposite. It addressed the main contemporary challenges and named as such: secularization, scientism, individualism, the ecological crisis, globalization, violation of human rights, famine, violence, injustice, military conflicts, religious fundamentalism, the refugee and migrant crisis and others.

The attitude of the Orthodox Church towards the modern world is not a defensive one. We do not reject modernity and its contributions to progress. Neither do we regard it as a threat to our identity. We discern autonomy from autonomism, protection of individual rights from individualism. At the same time, we fervently call upon the representatives of modernity to avoid identifying Orthodoxy with anti-modernism, conservatism, traditionalism, orthodoxy and ethnophyletism, as well as associating Orthodoxy with the rejection of individual rights and individualism and with the incapacity to accept secular ethics and the secular state.

And above all, we hold that in the Orthodox tradition and theology, reason (*λόγος*) and freedom (*ἐλευθερία*) are highly appreciated and respected. We have never sacrificed reason to a supreme authority. We have never rejected human freedom and synergy in the name of the sinfulness of the fallen human being. We are continuing this tradition when we support the core values of Orthodoxy, person-centred ethics, respect for human dignity, peace and reconciliation, love and philanthropy, the protection of the environment. This magnificent tradition is properly expressed in the documents of the Holy and Great Council.

In this spirit, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is also unshakeably committed to openness. We engage in inter-Christian, inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue, we discuss with secular institutions, with contemporary philosophy and modern science. As an example of our activities we would like to especially stress on our common commitment with Pope Francis in ecological and social issues. The Church of Constantinople is widely known for its environmental initiatives. The Ecumenical Patriarchate was the first to highlight the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the ecological problem, to stress the importance of the Church's contribution to its handling, to showcase the ecological dimensions of the eucharistic and ascetic ethos of Orthodoxy, and to

propose ways to protect the natural environment. We have not only reach out to Orthodox faithful, to Christians and other believers, but rather to every man of goodwill, while expressing our trust in the responsibility of every individual and especially connecting our hopes of the positive contribution of all. We consider that the new generation—which envisions a world that will function as a true “house” (*οἶκος*) for all humankind and strives toward this very purpose—is interested in our message, to be especially important. The very life of the Church is respect in deed and care for creation in tangible forms, as well as the source of its ecological actions. The protection of the natural environment is an extension of all that is experienced in the Church. Ecclesial life is applied ecology.

The real interests of man are served only within an intact environment. So, we consider the approach of the ecological crisis in connection with social problems to be especially important. It is Pope Francis' and our common belief that the current economic developments within the framework of globalization destroy social cohesion, solidarity and the overall function of interpersonal relations. It is precisely this spirit that the Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) and our *Common Message* with Him, *On the World Day of Prayer for Creation* (September 1, 2017), express. From the very beginning, we have supported the idea that serving our fellow human beings, preserving nature, environmental justice and social justice, are inextricably interconnected. It is quite characteristic that the Roman Catholic Church started by addressing social matters and continues its way to the *Laudato Si'* Encyclical in 2015, which has the ecological issue at its core; while the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which, in 1989, began concerning itself with the care for the natural environment, today finds itself also engaged in a struggle for a culture of solidarity, for the protection of the sacredness of childhood, for the support of refugees, as well as in initiatives against modern slavery. Therefore, it was natural and beneficial for us to meet in our journey.

Churches resist injustice and all anti-personal powers that undermine social cohesion by putting forth the social content of the Christian Gospel. They exercise critique on the declaration of the rise of economic indicators to the absolute criterion of economic activity and the subordination of the human being to the tyranny of needs and consumerism. In this spirit, the Ecumenical Patriarchate declared the year 2013 as a “year of universal solidarity”. In our Patriarchal Encyclical, we articulated the conviction that the ongoing worldwide economic and social crisis expresses a lack of solidarity. Solidarity with the human being and solidarity with creation are the presuppositions not only of peaceful coexistence, but even the sheer survival of humanity. Our aim was to sensitize individuals and peoples to poverty and the great inequalities that exist in the world. We underlined the necessity for initiatives to relieve those who are needy, and to ensure the right that every human being enjoys the essential goods of life.

Our Church also has a fruitful encounter and cooperation with the Protestant world, bilateral dialogues and its long presence in the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches. In the framework of this dialogue, aside from other issues, the idea of freedom in Christ, which is at the center of Luther’s theology, is considered as an essential point of reference, with particular emphasis on the relations between Christian freedom and the modern idea of a self-centred freedom, widely prevalent in today’s societies.

This modern freedom has at its fundament the idea of the autonomous human person and expresses itself as self-determination and self-realisation. The Reformation strengthened the position of the individual. Without Luther’s doctrine and actions, the freedom of the individual would not have become the Magna Charta of Europe. In this sense, Luther’s concept of freedom is very important for Christianity’s dialogue with the modern world. Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants must advance this dialogue with theological seriousness and without

theological minimalism, with the unshakable goal of a common Christian witness to the world.

In this regard we cannot accept the division made by Samuel Huntington between Western Christianity and Orthodox Christianity as totally alien cultures.<sup>4</sup> We agree with Hans Küng for whom Orthodox and Western Christianity are not completely different faiths or cultures, but rather “only two paradigms of the one and the same Christianity. They were distanced from each other during the second millennium, but a future reconciliation can in no way be excluded.”<sup>5</sup>

In our days we observe in Europe a distancing from the tradition of solidarity and the transformation of society into a gigantic market. Even children are being converted through the educational system into consumerists. As it was rightly said, childhood has basically become a term synonymous with the incitement and exploitation of children’s needs and alleged desires. For us Europe is a great experiment of solidarity on a continent that during the last century experienced the two most bloody and terrible wars in the history of humanity. It is a project of peaceful coexistence, freedom, justice and respect of human rights and of pluralism. In this sense, Europe is not a “*Kopfgeburt*,”<sup>6</sup> that is, a product of the mind—as it has been called in the past by the renowned sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf—but rather embodies high human ideals and, we could say, an idealism. It is not possible for the European Union to merely exist as a plan of uniform economic politics and economic development, based on the principle of the “autonomy of the economy.”

In a similar manner, University Professor Joseph H. H. Weiler, who has also taught at your College, writes: “One of the most widespread stories concerning the construction of Europe is that it started as an

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<sup>4</sup> See S. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 22-49, at 29-31.

<sup>5</sup> H. Küng, *Das Christentum. Wesen und Geschichte* (München/Zürich, 1994), 888.

<sup>6</sup> R. Dahrendorf, “Europa – was man gemeinsam besser tun kann, gemeinsam tun,” *Lufthansa Bordbuch* 6 (1992): 28-36, at 31.

exclusively economic project and that it was transformed, in more recent times, into a political project. Europe, from the beginning, was a political project *par excellence*, the continuation of which was enabled by economic instruments. The *telos* which underpins the foundation of Europe does not refer to the creation of a common market likely to increase our common well-being. The creation of a common market is an instrument, a means. The ‘aim,’ the objective for which these means are implemented, is ‘integration,’ … the European ideal of redefining the way in which each one of the national societies enters into relations with other nations with which we share the hope ‘of building our destiny together.’ Nothing in our ethical conscience, in our moral sensitivity and in our social practices more effectively determines what we are than our attitude towards what the Bible calls the foreigner,” (*ξένος*).<sup>7</sup>

From its very foundation, at the centre of this great European Project is the protection of human rights. Last year we celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948 “as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.” Human rights are not a rationalistic project. They are one of the greatest accomplishments in the field of politics in the entire history of humankind, which have been achieved through valiant struggles and steady faith in the ideals of justice and freedom. Speaking about human rights today means referencing human dignity, the protection of freedom and justice, as well as open society and international peace. Indeed, human rights are a central expression of humanism in our world, claiming to function as universal humanistic criterion.

The role of Christianity in the rise of human rights is a well-discussed topic and an agreement exists on the main points. Modern human rights presuppose the long schooling of our culture in Christianity

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<sup>7</sup> J. H. H. Weiler, “A Christian Europe? Europe and Christianity: Rules and Commitment,” *European View* (2007): 143-150, at 146.

and they bear its stamp. Their roots are found in the Biblical teaching about the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. The initially negative attitude of the Churches against them was not based predominately on theological criteria, but on historical circumstances and mutual prejudices.

It is, more or less, known the confrontational trajectory of the relations between the Churches of the West and the human rights, as they appeared at the forefront of history through the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” of the French Revolution in 1789. Of course, the negative stance of Western Christianity was influenced to a significant extent by the anti-ecclesiastical tendency of the representatives of the Enlightenment, who considered religion as a remnant of the pre-modern era. However, there were also substantive reasons for this controversy, due to the different anthropologies and the divergences in relation to the understanding of freedom. This unfruitful controversy was continued until the mid-twentieth century. After the disastrous World War II, the attitude of the Western Churches toward human rights gradually changed. In the Catholic Church this renewal has been expressed through the encyclical *Pacem in terris* of Pope John XXIII, a document called “the ecclesiastical Magna Charta of human rights,” and also through the Declaration of Vaticanum II, *Dignitatis humanae*, about religious liberty. Today, Western Christianity appears as pioneer in the protection of human rights, without, unfortunately, the total extinction of prejudices toward Christianity on behalf of the contemporary human rights movement.

In the Orthodox Church we are also convinced that the existing tensions between Orthodox theology and modern human rights are not primarily rooted in “principles,” but rather in historical contexts. It is saddening to note that some Orthodox scholars insist on regarding the discourse on human rights as an “imported” one, as being unfamiliar to Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox Church regards the support of the

social content of human rights as crucial. Yet, the accentuation of social rights does not dispense us from the concern of individual rights. Human rights are indivisible.

We especially underline that human rights are not a threat to pluralism, as postmodernism claims, but rather they ensure the necessary conditions for free cultural expression and for the respect of difference. Universality does not mean uniformity. In this sense, religious freedom, which is a constant concern of our own, belongs to the core values of the European Union. It is a fundamental human right to freely cultivate one's particular identity. Nevertheless, pluralism can only function creatively on the ground of common core values. Otherwise, pluralism can devolve into nihilism, into the postmodern ideal of "anything goes." This is in fact the negation of true pluralism, which is meant to be an expression of freedom, or, as Karl Popper stated, "the credo of the West."<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the European Union did not come into existence *ex nihilo*. It is rooted in a long tradition of values, struggles for freedom and justice, and faith in the dignity of man. Without these roots, it would be impossible to identify itself as "Europe." One of these roots is unquestionably Christianity. The historical path and the identity of Europe is directly connected to Christianity. We are convinced that it is impossible to understand and to assess the European culture, without reference to its Christian roots and Christian past. The fundamental values, ethics, education ( $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\varepsilon\iota\alpha$ ), art, science, economy, the social and political organization of Europeans, have Christian origins. It is our steady conviction that Christian Churches today can contribute to this culture, thereby strengthening the European identity. Concerning the particular contribution that the Orthodox Church can provide, we believe that this is related to the centrality of the social dimension of freedom, which safeguards against the conversion of human rights into endless

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<sup>8</sup> See K. Popper, *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt* (München/Zürich, 1994), 231-253.

individualistic entitlement. Our own view of Europe has an ethical and spiritual foundation and orientation. We discern the concept of a technocratic and economocentric Europe, a Europe whose priority is the economy and the functioning of the market, from a concept of Europe based on human dignity, freedom and justice. It is quite characteristic that these principles come to the fore when Europe's unity and future are in question.

This calls to our mind the burning issue of the present migrant and refugee crisis. We all recognize that migration and the continually intensifying exodus of refugees from war-torn areas and of victims of famine, caused by ecological disasters and climate change, constitute one of the greatest contemporary problems of all humanity. Immigration affects children to a great extent. In fact, children are among the most vulnerable with regard to these problems.

This crisis challenges the fundamental values of European civilization. It is impossible for the current migration and refugee crisis to be addressed by the values of a bureaucratic, technocratic and economically centred Europe. The solution must be based on the principles of the values of human rights and solidarity, which have at their core the protection of human dignity. The natural allies of human rights are Christian Churches. They are able to decisively address the issues of immigration and refugees, by implementing and cultivating a spirit of solidarity, and by supporting relevant initiatives and tendencies in the political and social world that have the protection of human dignity as their goal.

Faith inspires and strengthens the struggle for justice and freedom and even provides support when it appears to be at an impasse. We are certain that the migration and refugee crisis is an opportunity and a basis for cooperation and mutual initiatives for religions, churches, governments, humanistic movements, non-governmental organizations

in Europe and on a global scale. After all, the contemporary refugee and migration issue does not affect only Europe.

For us the humanistic level of a society is judged by the treatment of the needy and suffering people in it. The support of our fellowmen in need, independently of social, political and economic perspectives are at the core of Christian ethics, of the commandment of love (Mt. 22:37-39). But, the true faithful who really embraces and practices this commandment will not be satisfied only with this immediate help to their neighbour. They will take the next step: fighting against the causes of injustice and for the foundation of a society in which human dignity will be the highest value.

Distinguished audience,

We hear it often stated that the last two centuries were times of struggle for freedom and equality. If this is true, then our century must become an era of fraternity and solidarity. We are convinced that the future of humanity is related to the establishment of a culture of solidarity. On the one hand, the term “solidarity” points to the struggle for social justice, freedom and dignity, while dynamically expressing the social and political dimension of the term “fraternity” formulated in the triptych of the French Revolution “Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité.” However, it also promotes the idea of law, of social justice and of the social content of freedom as co-freedom, as cooperation for the common good, and as co-responsibility for the common “*oīkōs*.” On the other hand, solidarity points to Christian fraternity, to the unconditional love for our fellowmen, and to the unbroken bond between the love toward God and love toward neighbour. Thus “solidarity” holds together the two unshakeable pillars of humanism and freedom: on the one hand justice, and on the other hand love.

The action of the Church cannot replace politics and it does not aim to do so. The Church can support all initiatives, tendencies and

developments, which lead to an improvement of social standards, to justice and peace, and criticizes all anti-personalistic powers, which undermine social cohesion and solidarity, transform the human being into a consumerist, to the detriment of his fellowmen and nature, and of the lives of future generations. The most serious contemporary threat of solidarity is economism, the deification of market and profit. We reject “economic reductionism,” the reduction of the human being to *homo economicus*, the identification of “being” with “having.” We call for the respect of the social parameters in the economy, which are the basis for life in freedom and dignity.

It is in this framework that we can find a response to the question of Hans Küng: “*Quo vadis Europe?*”<sup>9</sup> We are sceptical about the characterization of contemporary Europe as a “post-Christian Europe.” Europe’s secularized present cannot be separated from its religious past, inspired and formed by Christian culture. Any retreat of Christian consciousness in Europe ultimately has a negative impact on Europe’s self-consciousness and identity, which will in turn affect the respect and validity of human rights.

We share the concern of German professor and former Education Minister in Bavaria, Hans Maier, which is especially relevant today: “Do we ultimately know if the social state will survive after the devaluation of love for our neighbour? Wouldn’t solidarity for our neighbour disappear if he were simply a stranger, the “other,” the competitor or even the enemy? Is it possible for social responsibility to exist when the “right of life” of unborn children and of the elderly is disputed? Will human rights continue to exist when humanity and the Creator have disappeared from the forefront in a clash of civilizations?”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> H. Küng, *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft* (München/Zürich, 1997), 189.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Maier, *Welt ohne Christentum-was wäre anders?*” (Freiburg, 1999), 150-151.

Democracy lives from powers, which it cannot create itself. For us, one such central power is Christianity, in which the Biblical tradition, the ancient Greek idea of freedom and the Roman culture of justice have found a creative synthesis. We believe that all of humanity needs such a grounding as in Plato's statement that "God is the measure of all things," (*Laws*, 716 c; «πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον Θεός»), formulated against the maxim of Protagoras that "man is the measure of all things," («πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος»). The future does not belong to the self-ordained "man-god," a new Prometheus, who ignores or abolishes limits and undeniable measures. All attempts to establish a just society need reference to an "Absolute."

The history of freedom does not begin with the birth of modern human rights. Indeed, in Europe and across the world, within the Christian framework, and despite occasional inexpediences, true freedom has been experienced and witnessed. The core of this freedom is not the claim of any rights but instead the renunciation of individual rights for the sake of love, which does not diminish the importance of human rights but actually increases our concern for human dignity and basic rights. In this sense, Christians are more humanist than humanists themselves, because the struggle to protect the human beings is not just a moral imperative; it is a commandment of a loving God.

Thank you for your kind attention!