



HIS HOLINESS BARTHOLOMEW 1ST

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

Your Eminence,
Your Excellencies,
Religious Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Participants,

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Thierry de Montbrial for inviting us to take part in the deep thinking made possible by a conference such as this. We would also like to acknowledge, straight away, the relevance of the subject which has brought us here, namely the relationship between politics and religion. This theme certainly seems to be of increasing interest to the world of research, and to political decision-makers. For all that, the contemporary rediscovery of the relationship between the profane and the spiritual, a relationship that was thought to have disappeared, tells us something about the world in which we live. Indeed, the religious has always lived alongside the political, even if the political has not always been aware of it.

From the 17th century on, Western Christianity succeeded in establishing an, albeit painful, separation between religion and politics. The implementation of the Westphalian principle "*cuius regio, eius religio*" gradually led Christians to replace the definition of the spiritual identity with a territorial identity. Political communities are no longer defined by religious convictions but by borders drawn in the geographical space. One's birthplace has become more important than one's beliefs.

In one sense, modernity was founded on this expulsion of religion from the public sphere into the private sphere. Secularisation has become a new ideal and the world has followed this political model to a greater or lesser extent. Over the course of the 20th century, liberals and communists at least agreed on one thing: religion's political role was now in the past.

But history surprises us once again. Over the past few decades, and especially since the end of the cold war, religion has begun to return as a political force. According to some researchers, Samuel Huntington among them, religion is even in the process of becoming a major structural factor in international politics, because it constitutes the backbone of what the Harvard professor calls "civilisations" in their destiny to enter into conflict. Even if we don't agree with his theories, it is difficult to deny the increasing political influence of religion. During the successive crises in the former Yugoslavia, religion became a fault line leading to battle. The attacks of September 11th brought religion into international politics in an even more dreadful manner. Today, in the Middle East and North Africa, religious fanaticism is threatening the survival of religious minorities who are so many precious witnesses to the history of cultures.

However, the new wars conducted under the banner of religion do not correspond to the definition of "religious" wars. Their aim is not to convert "infidels" or "heretics" to the true faith in order to save them. These new forms of conflict are no different to the "non-religious" wars of the 19th and 20th centuries in their objectives or causes.

Religious identity has quite simply replaced identity-based and national, or even ideological, factors. In addition to weakening nations, globalisation, along with the failure of communism, has led to a spiritual void. Religion seems to be the only possible alternative to the mobilisation of populations. Contrary to what some may think, the politics of the 21st



century are not determined by religion. On the contrary, politics has the upper hand over religion, transforming it into an instrument for its own use.

Contemporary conflicts, stemming from religious issues, are yet another expression of the limits of the Western model. The exclusion of the spiritual from politics was an illusion. Modernity has created its own materialistic “divinities” which not only legitimise the new political forms of community but have also exercised a destructive influence during the last two world wars which devastated Europe and brought about the ruin of a large part of the world.

The reappearance of religion in politics is not a mere return. Today’s religious fanatics are deeply contaminated by the evils of nationalism and ideology. It is not surprising that they contest the established religious institutions. Religious fanaticism is not only a threat to peace, stability and coexistence. It also threatens humanity’s precious heritage: all the accumulated wisdom of religious traditions.

Faced with these challenges, we need to rethink the relationship between religion and politics. The Western model cannot be considered as universally acceptable to all peoples and all cultures independent of their own historic experiences. Religion and politics have been intimately and closely linked since ancient times, even if the forms of their relationships have significantly evolved. Each culture’s experience of bringing together religions and politics is precious. It cannot be replaced by externally introduced models without these interfering with the social equilibrium. By denying this fundamental fact, we are laying the cornerstones for particularly aggressive forms of relationships between politics and religion, such as those which threaten our world today.

For all that, reassessing the issue of the relationship between politics and religion is not just a way of avoiding conflicts. It is also a question of governance. Today’s threats to stability coincide with serious difficulties in guaranteeing political stability, equity and prosperity in many countries around the world. Even in European countries, trust in the political elite is waning and extremist forces are growing. The situation is even more serious in countries with limited democracy, torn between dictatorship and anarchy. It is impossible to overestimate the contribution made by religions to promoting positive values in these societies. By marginalising the role of religions in the past, in an effort to limit the liberal and communist models, politics’ moral foundations have been eroded. In the weakest States, an anti-Western attitude is developing, strengthening tendencies towards religious extremism.

By comparison with Western Christianity, Eastern Christianity has a different experience of the relationship between religion and politics, based on a long historic experience dating back to Ancient Greece. This experience can make a useful contribution to the search for suitable responses to the spiritual needs of a suffering world. Without these responses, the tendencies towards the “regionalisation”, as it were, of politics and politicisation of religions will continue, to the detriment of both. Excessive ignorance of religion’s role in politics will lead to the overstatement of its political role and the distortion of the religious in our world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have worked, throughout our pontificate, to preserve the autonomy and independence of religion and politics. The Orthodox Church has no intention of getting involved in politics. For the Church, this is an inalienable condition that should allow it to work to build a world united by peace and respectful of its diversity. For the Orthodox Church, the model that we describe, at least conceptually, bears the name of “Symphonia”. Put forward as a paradigm by the Emperor Justinian, the aim of the Byzantine Symphonia is to respect the independence of institutions by separating them, while at the same time envisaging a possible cooperation between them. The dialectics of unity in diversity, although peculiar to Christian theology, can only be understood through a tireless commitment to dialogue, not only



between religions, but also between politics and religion. We are convinced that this dialogue will make it possible to consider their complementary roles in a society which has as much need of hope as of justice. In this way, we will be playing a part in reconciliation through the truth of the words which we exchange and which mark the starting point of any relationship, any communion. We cannot resign ourselves to the view that civilisations can only coexist in conflict fuelled by religions. Religions must be catalysts for dialogue.

Pierre Morel, Director of the Pharos Observatory of cultural and religious pluralism

Merci Votre Sainteté. C'est vraiment, comme vous l'avez rappelé, une sagesse en exercice depuis vingt-deux ans comme Patriarche Œcuménique que vous avez partagée avec nous.