

An assessment of the Two-Day Meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy

There are many who, even today, either question or dismiss the social dimension of Orthodoxy. Therefore, I consider that an important initiative was taken by the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) at the beginning of this month (March 3-4) in the Queen of cities, Istanbul (Constantinople): an inter-religious and cross-cultural two-day meeting organised under the blessing of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on “The social dimension of monotheistic religions” in the context of the regular meeting of the International Secretariat and of the Chairs of its Committees. I also consider that the active participation of the Ecumenical Patriarch was exceptionally important, since he officially opened the conference open with an inspired address before a large audience which comprised not only the Orthodox parliamentarians of the IAO but also Christians of other denominations and believers of Islam from the scientific, literary, cultural and religious world of the Middle East and Turkey.

If we wanted to assess this event and also the work conscientiously performed for the last 20 years by the IAO –let us note that the event dedicated to IAO’s twenty-year anniversary shall take place in Pnyx during the celebrations in honor of Apostle Paul on June 29–, we could refer to various aspects. In other words, we could assess both the conference and the entire work of IAO from a theological, ecclesiastic, political, or even social perspective. In full awareness of the responsibility for such a task and recognizing the complexity of the issue, I shall attempt to make a brief assessment of this two-day conference, which also encapsulates IAO’s entire undertaking.

I have had the honor to follow the activities of IAO from its very conception, from the first conference that took place in 1992 in the conference centre of the convent of Panagia Philanthropini in Ormylia of Chalkidiki which is spiritually affiliated with the monastic community of Simonopetra in Mt. Athos, while I also participated from the beginning in several of its conferences. Therefore, based on this experience, I have to underline the following:

a. As stressed by the Secretary General of the International Secretariat, Mr. Anastasios Nerantzis, it was an excellent idea to choose the Queen City for a conference on the twenty-year anniversary of IAO’s operation, a city which is both a cradle and a centre of Orthodoxy. His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew not only gave his blessing and support to the IAO, as repeatedly stressed by its President Mr. Sergey Popov, but he also gave a speech, declared the conference open, stayed until late Sunday evening at the reception offered in his honor and discussed with the conference participants. For the head of Orthodoxy it was a day full of ecclesiastical and other obligations, which started with a panegyric Divine Liturgy in which he duly honored the IAO’s multi-member delegation and the conference participants and he also read their names from a roll. Later, and until late in the afternoon, he welcomed all participants, irrespective of religion, in the hall of the throne, he talked about the work and vision of the ecumenical throne and Orthodoxy in general, and sent his blessings and prayers to the participants’ churches and countries of origin, many of which are suffering hardships, especially in the Middle East.

b. Given that the conference was organised by a parliamentary body and compared to most of the prior conferences, it has indeed been of a high-level, and also ambitious and even innovative in certain respects. First of all, the conference managed to overcome obsessions and traditional fixations and to venture into a purely inter-religious dimension by inviting Muslim scientists, scholars and eminent representatives of the authentic Islamic faith from both the Sunni and the mystical Alevi tradition, some of whom had taken important inter-religious initiatives (such as the vice-president of the Turkish journalists and writers Foundation, Mr. Cemal Ushak, who also helped significantly in organising the event at the local level). The IAO had already opened its doors to the Old Oriental Orthodox of the Pre-Chalcedonian tradition (Copts, Armenians, Jacobite Syrians, etc.), who immediately became members of IAO, while many of them currently share with the Orthodox similar problems of religious and physical survival. Also, the IAO had achieved a successful agreement on an important number of issues with the Pan-African Parliament as well as with the Aga Khan Development Network in Portugal and Mozambique, while an important collaboration –which has indeed been agreed in advance– with the Parliamentary Union of Islamic Cooperation (PUIC) is still pending.

c. With regard to the reports that were delivered in Greek, Russian, English and Turkish with simultaneous interpretation, they covered a broad range of the conference's themes: from the general sociological approach on the role of religions in parliamentary democracy and civil society (by the Alternate Secretary General of IAO, Mrs. Eirini Dourou) and the research project of the Emeritus Professor of Sociology in the University of Florence, Mr. Arnaldo Nesti, to the theologico-political analyses by the members of the European Parliament from Finland and Poland, rev. Mitro Repo and Mr. Michał Tomasz Kamiński respectively, and the emphasis on the positive role of minorities by the representative of minorities in the General Directorate of Foundations in Turkey, Mr. Lakis Vingas, as well as by the Turkish Alevite, Mr. Cafer Solgum.

d. Very important reports have also been delivered by the heterodox (the member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, Aragats Akhoyan, and the Copt member of the People's Assembly of Egypt and Professor of Law in the University of Alexandria, Mrs. Suzy Adly Nashed), and especially by Muslims: the vice-president of the Writers and Journalists Foundation of Turkey, Mr. Cemal Usak, the Professor of Law in the University of Doğuş, Mr. Niyazi Öktem, but also the member of the People's Assembly of Egypt, Mr. Helmi Alsaied Abdul Aziz El-Gazzar. Even though the latter, as a representative of the Muslim Brothers and a Secretary General of the ruling Egyptian party "Freedom and Justice", argued that there is a cultural rift between Western and Eastern values and views and hinted at the possibility of applying the Sharia, Mr. Cemal Usak, who underlined the significance of religious morality for the establishment of world peace, adopted an inter-religious approach which contributed substantially to the general deliberation of the conference. Equally important was the quite self-critical and well-documented report by Professor Niyazi Öktem concerning Turkey's hesitation to re-open the Theological School of Halki and recognise the "ecumenical" character of the Mother Church of Constantinople.

e. The reports by the two IAO advisors, the Greek Dr. Kostas Mygdalis and the Russian Professor Valery Alexeev, touched on aspects that were of direct interest both for the future of parliamentarism and democracy and for the Orthodox witness in the sensitive social and political realm. I believe that the issues raised in the reports of

the two advisors (who also contribute significantly to the entire activity of IAO) should be formulated and addressed officially to the parliaments of the IAO members and to the leadership (and coordinating centre) of Orthodoxy respectively.

f. My own report on “The responsibility of Monotheistic Religions for Ecology, World Economic System and International Law” focused on the role that religion (more specifically, the “faithful” of the living religions) should play in the modern and post-modern era, an aspect of which is the manifold activity of IAO. By insisting on the necessity of inter-religious dialogue, which has been consistently conducted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and promoted very successfully by IAO, I argued that inter-religious dialogue and cooperation between the faithful of all religions are necessary especially in our times and especially in the areas where the current dominant “modern paradigm” failed to succeed: i.e. in the spiritual and material welfare of the people and the prevention of degradation in social and moral values. More specifically, I highlighted the inability of the world order to enforce a lasting just peace on earth, the unwillingness of the powerful to preserve the integrity of the created world, i.e. the natural environment, and finally, something which is timely, the surrender of society to the rules of the market and the dominant world economic system. Based on the recent official Orthodox, Ecumenical and Inter-faith declarations, I stressed that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the basic pillar of modernity, is awfully ineffective if it is not accompanied by an equally internationally binding Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, and this is something that only a powerful movement of the people of faith around the world can promote in the era of globalisation. In this perspective, if it operates effectively, the IAO shall have a unique chance to play a globally pioneering role which shall be recognised by all the healthy spiritual forces around the world.

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