

REMARKS AT THE KYIV INTERFAITH FORUM'S INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON FAITH'S ROLE IN STATE, GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS.

Kiev, 23 April 2013

Esteemed Mr. Feldman,

Distinguished Members of this Conference,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again it is an honour for us to be present at this international conference and as we begin our work to be able to say a few words on the role of religion and faith in our modern society. This is a crucial subject as we seek to build human communities around the world in which there is lasting peace, true justice, and authentic co-existence.

We would like to make three brief points.

The first point we wish to emphasize is that the religious impulse lies at the heart of our human condition. Time and time again it has been proven that the homo religiosus -that is, the inherent drive in human beings towards the transcendent and to eternal meaning – has survived and flourished throughout every other change in and challenge to human civilization. Indeed recently we have been hearing, in our modern technological idiom, that human beings are “hardwired” for belief in God. Religion is natural to us, and, as those who are made in the image and likeness of God, we are

constantly seeking our true eternal home.

We know that all human cultures are formed at their core by religion. So total is this formation of human culture, both at the individual and at the collective levels that those who have attempted to suppress or destroy religion have failed utterly. While it is true that in some cases one religion has successfully replaced another in a given culture, in no case have we ever witnessed a completely religion-less human society. And indeed, in those societies in which religion was fairly recently taboo, we have seen the resurgence of religious, belief and practice in unprecedented ways.

The second point that we wish to make is this. Because of the fact that the religious impulse is fundamental to human society, it can be a powerful force for good, or it can be a powerful weapon for evil. Religion is meant to serve God and to promote God's will for God's human creation. God is both the supreme Good and the absolute Beauty, and whatever is from God, therefore, is perfect and for our good.

But we know too well from our own experience that people can easily take religion into their own hands and use it to their own ends. In precisely this way are religious fundamentalisms and religious terrorism born, and because this is such a profound misdirection of the homo religiosus, it is therefore a most serious threat to human civilization. We cannot allow religion to be the tool of destruction or the reason for violence. This is not religion, and we who represent our respective traditions must be ever vigilant to condemn such acts and explanations. Religion serves the common good and our common humanity.

At its most creative – in other words, in its deepest reflection of the life of God – religion engenders in us a deep mutual respect for the other, and for each other's religious experience. We come from different religious traditions here, but each of our traditions shares an

understanding of what it means to be in relationship to God in prayer and worship, to be knit together in a community of shared values and beliefs, and to ask ourselves questions of appropriate response to the truths we profess. This is the shared ground from which we begin together to build a human future in which we can live together in mutual respect and in the richness of our diversity.

The third and final point we wish to make concerns Jerusalem. The land that we call the Holy Land is the home of the three great Abrahamic faiths that make up, together, the largest religious group in the world. Jews, Christians and Muslims not only share a region that is of supreme importance to us; we also share a deep inter-connectedness.

In the Holy Land, there is no doubt about the truth of all that we have been saying in these brief opening remarks this morning. Religion determines everything in our region, and it is not possible either to ignore religion, or to be dismissive of its determinative role in our life.

Jerusalem is a paradox. On the one hand it has been a place of conflict. We know this only too well. On the other hand, Jerusalem has also been the model of a community in which those of different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds have lived together. And in all three Abrahamic traditions, Jerusalem is the city of hope, the image of that divine society in which all may live together in peace and harmony.

We wish to thank you, my dear Mr. Feldman, the founder of this Forum, for your vision and for bringing us together, so that we may take to heart matters that are both at the centre of every human conflict that is currently raging in our world, and that are also at the centre of the resolution to those conflicts. This conference owes its origin to your commitment to the eradication of any form of bigotry and prejudice in your own country and around the world.

May we all be agents of the deepest values of our respective religious traditions, so that the world may know that peace of God “which passes all understanding”, (Phil. 4:7) and which is the longing of every human heart.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem.