



Orthodox Church seeks God's mercy and endeavors to strengthen its ties with the venerable tradition of Judaism

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28 January 2024 - Address by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America on The National Day of Remembrance of the Greek Jewish Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust.

I would like, first of all, to warmly thank the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece and its President, David Saltiel, for inviting me to participate as a keynote speaker in tonight's commemoration of the Greek Jewish martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust. The connections between the Holy Archdiocese of America and the Jewish element in New York, as well as across the United States, are historical, fraternal and deeply grounded in our shared spiritual tradition. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki for the esteemed distinction of naming me an honorary member.

I am well aware of the special place that the city of Thessaloniki, the "Jerusalem of the Balkans," holds in the collective memory of the Jews, especially after 1492, when the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, forced all Jews to convert to Christianity or leave the country immediately. It is estimated that over 250,000 Jews were exiled and about 20,000 of them settled in the city of Thessaloniki, forming an important and fast-growing Jewish Community.

However, I am mindful of the profound human loss endured by the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki during the Nazi occupation. Out of the approximately 50,000 Jews residing in the city, who were forcibly transported to the harrowing death camps, only a mere 4% had the opportunity to return to their homes. I am aware that within the Jewish Cemetery of Thessaloniki lie the remains of a hero and Jewish compatriot, Colonel Mordechai Frizis. Not only did he distinguish himself during the Balkan Wars and the Asia Minor campaign, but he also stood among the first senior officers of the Greek Army to fall on the Albanian front. His sacrifice exemplifies a commitment to defending cherished values such as freedom, integrity, and the dignity of our homeland.

Lastly, I acknowledge the multicultural history of this city, where individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds coexisted harmoniously and peacefully for centuries (Orthodox, Armenians, Jews, and Muslims). For all these reasons, I am deeply moved to be present here tonight in the welcoming and familiar premises of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. It is at the Theological School of this esteemed institution where I received my education, and later, I had the privilege of imparting the teachings of Orthodox theology. This theology embraces open horizons, extroversion, dialogue, and respect for all forms of diversity.

Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, the focal point of our gathering lies in the concept of historical memory, which possesses a redemptive nature, serving as a resilient force against the overpowering sway of time. Memory is the foundation of history. All historical knowledge is nothing more than a memory. On the one hand, without memory, there would be no history. After all, the concept of memory, that is, the recollection of God's salvific intervention and presence in history, is profoundly ingrained in both the Christian and Jewish faiths.

On the other hand, the commemoration of the Holocaust, with its devastating toll of 6 million innocent lives, serves as a stark reminder of unfathomable evil. As I had the opportunity to emphasize during my visit to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, on December 5, 2022, “The act of preserving memory remains, has always been, and will continue to be a form of resistance against the barbarity and brutality of past and future anti-Semitism.” The Shoah almost wiped out the Jewish people, yet the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 marked their resurgence as an active and vibrant part of the global community. Holocaust denial transcends mere scientific disagreement; it represents a deliberate rejection of historical truth and a purposeful distortion of reality. Indeed, a recent judgment of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Holocaust denial is not protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which refers to freedom of expression^[1]. The envisioned Holocaust Museum of Greece, situated here in Thessaloniki, aspires to fulfill a pivotal and educational role by preserving the historical memory of this unimaginable atrocity that defies the human mind. “It is our responsibility to remember so that something similar will not be repeated. It is our duty to acknowledge, sparing humanity from reliving such experiences,” had underlined Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.^[2] I am delighted, particularly following the recent issuance of the construction permit, with the material and moral support of the Greek Government, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and Dr. Albert Bourla, through the Genesis Prize Foundation, as it brings us closer to the imminent inauguration of this significant project for the history of our fellow Jews.

In our shared faith, the world is not inherently evil. It is the “very good” creation of God’s love. However, the world is afflicted by the forces of evil that find their place in human history. In the current global context, political and social forces at both European and international levels exploit the worldwide economic downturn, public discontent with political elites, the emergence of “post-democracy,” the complex immigration challenges, and the failure of nations to establish cohesive immigration policies at the national or regional level. These forces are fostering an extreme rhetoric, openly aligning with ideologies reminiscent of the darkest chapters in modern history.

At the same time, we are all witnessing an alarming outbreak of anti-Semitism internationally. Anti-Semitism is increasingly used as an easy and simplistic excuse for a wide array of issues, ranging from political crises and economic turbulence to natural disasters and the recent global health crisis. There are those who believe that our complex and often contradictory world finds coherence and significance through the lens of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism becomes an effective mechanism for defusing public discontent, especially in times of crisis. The notion of “God-killing people,” as a scapegoat for virtually all troubles, conveniently allows individuals to shift blame onto others, evading accountability for their own choices. Have we ever wondered how many of us become “God-killers” every day? This is the result of our boundless egoism, insatiable greed, incurable hypocrisy, unrestrained hunger for power, and provocative indifference to the suffering, the needy, the underprivileged, and our marginalized brothers and sisters, whom our Lord not only likened to Himself but identified with (cf. Matthew 25, 35–40).

The most important and most disheartening thing is the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism by religious and church officials. I have no intention of excluding anyone. The oil of religion in this case, instead of healing the wounds, rekindles the fire. We need to speak up in the clearest way possible. Anti-Semitism is not merely an “insult to common sense,” as accurately expressed by Hannah Arendt^[3], but rather a profound stain on our culture. For this reason, the Christian Churches and Confessions of the European continent, as represented by the Council of European Churches and the Council of Roman Catholic Episcopal Conferences, unequivocally denounce anti-Semitism in the Ecumenical Charter jointly signed in 2001. In this charter, they explicitly condemn anti-Semitism, seek God’s forgiveness for instances of anti-Semitism within Christian circles, and reaffirm their steadfast dedication to fostering tolerance and reconciliation with Judaism. (§ 10).

We must be courageous and honest. Evil bears a name, an identity, and a history. It goes by the

names of “fascism” and “Nazism.” These ideologies have left indelible stains of blood on Europe and the world. They bear no authentic connection to Christian theology, notwithstanding attempts by some to cloak their extreme ideologies in the guise of Christianity. Those who seek to link Christianity, particularly Orthodoxy, with fascism and National Socialism—what the Dutch writer Menno ter Braak aptly deemed as “the doctrine of resentment” in one of the most scathing critiques of this heinous regime—effectively position themselves outside the sacred boundaries of the Church. The founder of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ, along with His All-Holy Mother and the inaugural messengers of joy, the Apostles, were born in the land of Palestine; a land blessed by the spiritual legacy of the Patriarchs and Prophets of Israel.

The ecumenism of the message of Christianity, as the result of the universality of Christ's redemptive mission and the message of unity among humanity (Acts 17, 26 & 28: “From one man he made all the nations... For in him we live and move and have our being”), stands in stark contrast to the core tenet of National Socialism. National Socialism promotes a divisive ideology that categorizes races as superior or inferior, with those deemed inferior obligated to serve the supposed superior ones or considered devoid of a reason for existence. The worth of every individual lies not in their affiliation with a superior race, purity of blood, cultural superiority, or unquestionable nativeness. Instead, it emanates from their status as a unique, vibrant, and irreplaceable image of God. The Orthodox Church has a valuable spiritual legacy. The Local Synod, convened in Constantinople in 1872, characterizes “phyletism” as a “new doctrine.” Thus, it explicitly condemns its heretical teachings, considering them contrary to the teachings of the Gospel and the Church Fathers and fundamentally incompatible with the Christian Orthodox ethos.

To us, the exemplary actions of esteemed hierarchs who risked their lives and steadfastly stood alongside our persecuted Jewish brothers and sisters here in Greece serve as beacons of light and commendable role models. They courageously denounced unjust deportations and inhumane killings, offering both material and moral support to those affected. They also facilitated the escape of persecuted Jews to other countries and provided them protection and solace. Esteemed figures, including Damaskinos of Athens, Chrysostomos of Zakynthos, Gennadios of Thessaloniki, Ioakeim of Demetrias, and others, bore witness to the liberating and true Christian conscience. Our Ecumenical Patriarch notes in this regard: “When, as believers, we remain silent in the face of intolerance and torture, we forfeit the right to be called human beings and we abandon the essence of true religion. Therefore, we are not truly free! When, despite being believers, we passively accept prejudice and discrimination against others, we fail to acknowledge the image of God present in them.”^[4]

At this point we must take a bold step and engage in self-criticism. The text from the Ecumenical Patriarchate regarding the social ethos of the Orthodox Church, published in 2020, already undertakes this critical introspection. The text acknowledges instances of brotherhood and mutual understanding among the Orthodox towards the suffering of our Jewish brothers and sisters during the Second World War. This recognition is exemplified by the bestowal of the honorary title “Righteous Among the Nations” upon them. At the same time, however, the text emphasized that “other nations, with historical ties to Orthodoxy, exhibit troubling aspects of antisemitic violence and oppression.” (§ 57). In the face of individual or collective shortcomings, omissions, or even crimes, the Orthodox Church seeks God's mercy and endeavors to strengthen its ties with the venerable tradition of Judaism.

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, that took place in Crete in 2016, consistently emphasized that fundamentalism is not intrinsic to the essence of religion. It was described as an expression of unhealthy religiosity. The Council also affirmed that genuine and thoughtful dialogue among religions plays a pivotal role in fostering mutual trust and global peace. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has consistently been a trailblazer, not only in fostering inter-Christian and inter-religious relations but also in actively cultivating the Academic Dialogue with both the traditions of Judaism and Islam. Our Ecumenical Patriarch, the longest-serving Patriarch in the history of the

institution, was and remains the Patriarch of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation. In May 2019, he led the 31st "March of the Living," dedicated to the 6 million Jews who were exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. "Auschwitz will forever stand as a symbol of the profound origins of evil, a testament to the devastation and violence that human beings are capable of when subjected to the rhetoric of hatred, capable of neutralizing any creative force," Patriarch Bartholomew said, among other things, in his speech.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With a profound conviction that anti-Judaism is, in essence, another manifestation of anti-Christianity, I would like to conclude my speech tonight by quoting the words of the esteemed French writer Jean-Paul Sartre: "The black author Richard Wright once stated: 'There isn't any Negro problem in the United States but a White problem.' Similarly, we can assert that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is our problem... It is not the Jews who must take the lead in a united struggle against anti-Semitism, but rather, it is incumbent upon us^[5]."

Translated by:
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[1] Chronicles no. 252/2019, p. 2.

[2] Ec. Patriarch Bartholomew, ?????????? ?? ?? ?????????? (??? ?????????? ?????????? ??? ??????????) [Meeting with the Sacrament (A Contemporary Reading of Orthodoxy)], trans. P. Tsaliki-Kiosoglou, ed. Akritas, Athens 2012, p. 176.

[3] H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Part A: Anti-Semitism), trans. V. Tomanas, ed. Nisides, Thessaloniki 2017, p. 23.

[4] Ec. Patriarch Bartholomew, ?????????? ?? ?? ?????????? [Meeting with the Sacrament] ..., op. cit., pp. 177–178.

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, Reflections on the Jewish Question, trans. Ath. Samartzis, ed. Estia, Athens 2006, p. 174.

Source: [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America](http://GreekOrthodoxArchdioceseofAmerica.com).