

UPF Moscow, Russia: Russian Describes Christian-Muslim Peacebuilding

Maria Nazarova
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Moscow, Russia -- A retired military officer told a UPF webinar of his quest to bring Muslims and Christians together.

The online conference "Spiritual and Moral Values as the Basis for the Sustainable Development of Russia" took place on February 3, 2021, to commemorate the United Nations' World Interfaith Harmony Week.

It was held jointly by the Russian branches of UPF and the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF association.

More than 200 online viewers from Russia and other countries attended the webinar. The MC was Maria Nazarova, president of UPF-Russia.

The key speaker was Col. Nikolai Vasilievich Kizimov, head of the Great Nation Spiritual and Moral Educational Center.

The retired lieutenant colonel has three higher education diplomas -- military-political, pedagogical and legal -- and is engaged in scientific activities in the field of pedagogical science. He attended training courses at the Moscow Orthodox Theological Academy. Since 2004, he has served in six dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was awarded the Patriarchal Badge "For Works of Spiritual and Moral Enlightenment." He has participated in five Islamic forums and been awarded in seven constituent entities of the Russian Federation for strengthening interethnic and interregional relations. Through his activities, he has won the respect and trust of both Orthodox believers and Muslims.

At the beginning of the webinar, Maria Nazarova gave an introduction to World Interfaith Harmony Week, whose theme for 2021 is "Building Bridges across Borders."

She then said that Russia, in maintaining intercultural, interethnic and interreligious dialogue over many centuries, has accumulated experience that helps in resolving various social problems. She said that this webinar would discuss the age-old experience of Russia, as well as the solution of modern problems in the field of interfaith relations.

In introducing the main speaker, she asked: "What led a military man who graduated from a military-political school, studied scientific atheism and served as a political worker in the Soviet army, to religion? What prompted Nikolai V. Kizimov to go from being a political worker in the Soviet army to the head of the Spiritual and Moral Educational Center?"

Nikolai Vasilievich expressed confidence that believers, both Muslims and Christians, would understand his answer, that everything is God's will and God's providence. Then he talked about his life course.

From childhood, his parents taught him to believe in God. In the classroom at the military school, he listened to teachers who explained the laws by which our world exists. But the question logically arose as to who created these laws? While admiring people who discover laws, we also should admire the Creator of these laws. Orthodoxy says that people sow a grain, but the Lord grows it.

While serving in the Irkutsk region of Siberia, Nikolai Vasilievich met the mufti of the Baikal muftiate, Imam Farid Khazrat. Through conversations and study of literature, he became interested in Islam. In Irkutsk he closely communicated with Orthodox priests, especially with Father Mark, the archpriest and rector of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. They supported his idea of peacemaking activities.

The forces of evil act according to the principle of "divide and conquer," and people can be divided ad infinitum, according to various principles, he said. We, on the contrary, need to look for points of unity, he said. Studying world religions, he wanted to find points of unity that would help to bring peace, harmony, mutual understanding, and unity.

He named his center Great Nation. The main idea of this center is understanding that spirituality is a component of our faith. It is our soul; our morality is the common heritage of the peoples of the entire planet, together with knowledge and culture, he said. The Great Nation center aims to strengthen interethnic relations, prevent religious and ethnic conflicts, and educate young people. The great teachers of the past -- Vasyl Sukhomlynsky, Anton Makarenko, and Konstantin Ushinsky -- taught that upbringing means filling with good, he said. If we ourselves can understand and pass on to the younger generation everything that is good, then young people will strive for goodness.

Russia is a great country, he said, with a long history of over 1,000 years, a diverse population of over 200 ethnic groups, and a distance of over 10,000 kilometers (over 6,200 miles) from west to east. In Russia, four main religions are traditional, and there are also many Christian denominations. In tsarist Russia, representatives of all religions and nationalities served in the army, and in difficult times everyone stood up to defend their united homeland. This is an example of harmony and unity, he said.

Mrs. Nazarova asked the audience for their opinion on how to strengthen interfaith relations in Russia. She offered several options:

- Lessons at school about different religions
- Personal religious experience
- Joint projects for believers of different religions
- Legislative initiatives
- Other

While the participants were reflecting, Nikolai Vasilievich answered the question.

In his opinion, the main solution lies in educational activities. All our problems come from ignorance, he said. When there is a lack of information, various problems arise, both social and interreligious. We need educational programs explaining about Islam, Orthodoxy and Christian confessions, as well as Buddhism and Judaism.

He recalled speaking about Orthodoxy, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam with 500 senior students at the Siberian Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. A quote from traditional Islam, "The closest to Muslims in love are the Christians to whom the Almighty sent the Gospel and the Psalter," aroused mistrust in one junior lieutenant.

The young man asked Nikolai Vasilievich to indicate the source of this quote, as well as where this book was published. After making sure that this publication was approved by the Russian muftiate, he was outraged that the media were spreading completely different information. Therefore, disinformation separates us. This incident happened in the early 2000s, when many unscrupulous media wrote that Islam's motto is "Kill the unbeliever, and you will go to Heaven!"

In his answer, Nikolai Vasilievich also mentioned the course on religions taught to fourth-grade schoolchildren in Russian public schools. Families have the opportunity to choose from six modules: World Religions, Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Secular Ethics. But the textbooks on this discipline leave much to be desired, he said. Religion helps people to reunite with God. The world's religions have vast experiences to be learned. Therefore, the education system should give people an idea of what religion is and what its role is, he said.

It is also necessary to avoid discrediting religion and belief. Blind atheism is a thing of the past, he said,

stressing the importance of studying religions. He gave an example: Suppose you have to choose between two boxes. One contains money and the other is empty. How will you choose? First, you check what they contain. No one will rely on blind choice. He asked: What about faith? Which of the holy books have you read? If you have rejected them all, explain why? We deny without bothering to find out what it is -- in other words, without knowing what the box contains.

At the same time, spirituality cannot be removed from our life, he said; 1,000 years of faith and spirituality cannot be removed from history. There is morality -- not ethics, but morality. Ethics can change, depending on fashion. The spiritual and moral values of peoples are similar to the spiritual and moral values of the main religions. Spiritual and moral values are a deterrent factor; they protect us from everything bad in life.

Unfortunately, he said, one of the textbooks on secular ethics says that a child should thank his parents for the services rendered to him. This is what will remain in the child's mind -- that the parents provide services to the child. All religions, on the contrary, emphasize that the father and mother are sacred, that you need to take care of your parents and honor them. In the traditions of many peoples, this was the main postulate of life in the family and in the state.

According to Nikolai Vasilievich, it is necessary to conduct education on the main religions' basic moral principles, such as love for one's motherland and for parents; do not steal, do not kill, respect your elders, respect your neighbor and do not do to your neighbor anything that you do not want for yourself. If we live according to these principles, real harmony will come in our society.

When asked by Mrs. Nazarova how the moral and spiritual values and well-being of our country are interconnected, Nikolai Vasilievich expressed his conviction that the combination of spirituality (religion) and morality (traditions of our peoples) is the basis of the family, state and human destiny. Spiritual and moral values are the basis for the well-being of any nation. We may have different views on literature, art, etc., but the basic norms in society must be unified, and we must teach children these norms. Then there will be harmony.

Having lived through the Soviet era, the collapse of the USSR and the present time, he can compare them. During the collapse of the USSR, there was a widespread propaganda of the criminal world, the absence of norms. Children were brought up on these principles. These are terrible things. Therefore, the task of the state, religious leaders, public organizations, and science is to ensure the steadfastness of moral foundations, so that people feel ashamed to commit immoral acts and violate norms.

Tatiana Serebryakova, secretary of the Anadyr and Chukotka dioceses in the Russian Far East, asked about the requirements for teachers who teach fourth-graders the official Russian course about religions. How is the competence of a teacher determined?

Nikolai Vasilievich said that, first, we need professional training for teachers, and experience. Second, we need to have good knowledge of a particular denomination. Third, it is desirable that the teacher himself belongs to the confession or religion that he will talk about. Fourth, an educational institution needs to create a commission that will assess the level of each teacher. And most importantly, you must love this subject. Perhaps it is necessary to invite the teacher to first explain how he understands the subject, because a person who thinks clearly will teach clearly.

Mrs. Nazarova expressed her opinion that this issue is equally difficult and urgent for both teachers and parents. There are a lot of criteria.

She asked Nikolai Vasilievich, who served in several dioceses of the Orthodox Church, what prompted him to become so actively interested in Islam?

He said that he developed an active interest in Islam during his service in Irkutsk, when a Muslim colleague introduced him to the imam.

But it started even earlier. He is from the North Caucasus area in southwest Russia; he was born and raised in Grozny, the capital of the Russian Republic of Chechnya. Even then, he became interested in Islam and in how it differs from Christianity. But due to military service and other circumstances, his interest remained hidden. First of all, he wanted to understand those around him and to understand himself; otherwise he felt he could succumb to false propaganda. In the 1990s, the media often portrayed Muslim Russians, including the inhabitants of the Caucasus region, as outcasts and criminals. In the depths of his soul, he felt this was not true. But he lacked the knowledge to resist such opinions and protect his friends. This is what piqued his interest in Islam. Therefore, peacemaking was the motivation for his study.

When Nikolai Vasilievich received the Koran as a gift, he asked Imam Farid Khazrat to write a dedication in it. The inscription was: "May the knowledge of the sacred books help you on your life path, dispel the

darkness and help bring light to people." Perhaps that is why he participates in Islamic forums and has conversations with students and schoolchildren: to dispel the image of enemies, so that there is no misunderstanding between people.

In 2004, with the blessing of the bishop of Irkutsk and Angarsk and with support of the public and the Orthodox community, Nikolai Vasilievich and a young priest went to the Chechen Republic on a peacemaking mission. It was during the time of hostilities, and brigades of internal troops from the Irkutsk region were stationed there. Nikolai Vasilievich recalled how they met the head of the administration, explained their mission, and met with an old friend of his who lived there. They were provided with both help and support, when they went around the checkpoints, prayed with the soldiers, and explained what their military duty was.

Nikolai Vasilievich showed the newspaper Argun, published in 2004 in Chechnya, with an article about this trip. The positive effect was enormous; to some extent it prevented the recruitment of civilians into the War Party. He quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement that people's diplomacy is much more effective than official structures and administrative resources.

As an example of peacemaking activities, Nikolai Vasilievich named the newspaper Islam's Dawn, which in 2007 published an article on the front page about Akhmad Khadzhi, the first legally elected president of the Chechen Republic and a hero of Russia. This newspaper publishes articles about Muslims and Christians. It is a living evidence of friendship between peoples and religions and peacemaking activities similar to those of UPF and the United Nations.

There are many other publications in which the literary works, poems or articles of both Orthodox and Islamic authors coexist. If such examples of friendship and mutual respect appear more often in the media, we can change the situation in the country for the better. Nikolai Vasilievich called on the older generation, parents, and teachers to emphasize goodness, peace, mutual understanding and respect.

To illustrate his words, he showed a video about a forum that was held in 2007 in the Chechen Republic with delegates from 35 countries. The title of the forum was "Islam Is the Religion of Peace and Creation."

During the conflict in Chechnya, many Muslims helped Russians and Christians financially, helped them find shelter, and protected them from extremists. Some of them gave their lives. The Caucasus is of great importance to Russia, and unity in this region should not be undermined. In the center of Grozny there is an Orthodox Archangel Michael church; on it there are marble tablets with inscriptions in Russian and Chechen languages that this temple is protected by the state.

Nikolai Vasilievich told of an incident in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, when he had to flee from people who wanted to kill him. He took refuge in the Sinai monastery, and the monks did not give him up to the persecutors. Later, the Prophet Muhammad issued a certificate of protection to this monastery, with his hand as a seal. A monastery that is being built in the Russian republic of Ingushetia is named in honor of this event.

Nikolai Vasilievich mentioned that the Orthodox television program Sunday is broadcast in this Muslim republic. He emphasized that such positive programs and steps will help save our society from negativity and interethnic and interreligious strife. He thanked the representatives of the North Caucasus for their efforts, because this is real work for the good of the world.

Isa from a Muslim organization in the western Russian city of Kursk asked what advice Nikolai Vasilievich could give to young imams regarding their activities in the regions of Russia.

In answering this question, Nikolai Vasilievich gave practical advice.

First of all, they need knowledge of pedagogy and psychology. Helping people should not be limited to preaching or explaining the scriptures. People with wounded souls need understanding and advice in a particular situation.

It takes endurance to listen to a person, understand him or her, and only then instruct him in faith. Further, you need to know the scriptures well, that is, to be a trained priest.

An important aspect of any priest's activity, he said, is the ability to establish contacts and interact with government officials.

It is necessary to communicate and hold roundtables with young people to counter propaganda on social networks.

Dr. Rafik Aliyev, an ex-minister of religious affairs of Azerbaijan, asked why power, society and religion

serve the same purpose?

Nikolai Vasilievich answered that power, society, and religion are interconnected; a common goal helps them to move in one direction. Landmarks in life, both spiritual and moral, come from religion; for society, they are restraining laws, and power should not exist by itself. It is necessary to understand: To whom much is given, of him much shall be required. Unity is necessary, because only then will there be no misunderstanding and disunity in society.

Nikolai Vasilievich was asked about the relevance of World Interfaith Harmony Week in Russia and how much this idea is in demand now in Russia.

Religion plays an important role in society, he answered. The Lord knows every movement of our soul and our thoughts, as well as our actions. In this respect, religion is a deterrent that keeps us on track, protects our society, and helps us understand life and ourselves.

He quoted a poem by Mikhail Lermontov.

In conclusion, Nikolai Vasilievich recited his own poems dedicated to the young people of the Caucasus and life in general.

At the end of the webinar, Mrs. Nazarova thanked everyone for a very interesting conversation and expressed hope that the webinar would contribute to strengthening interreligious harmony in Russia.