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## PERSONAL SPIRITUAL ORIENTATIONS, ATHEISM, AND RELIGIOUSNESS IN SOVIET UNION

by Vladimir Zotz

Dr. Vladimir Zotz is a professor of philosophy in Moscow. He was the assistant for religious affairs to the deputy for education, youth, and religion of the former President of U.S.S.R., Mikhail Gorbachev, in Moscow at the time when this paper was given by him to the editor of OPREE in his Kremlin office in late November 1991.

I base confining personal spiritual orientations to the framework of the present-day Soviet society on the fact that humanity is too heterogeneous to press its development into a single particular pattern. Speaking figuratively, the river of history of human communities is divided, so to say, in separate flows, each choosing its own way at a certain stage. But the time comes when the separate flows come together again in a single stream, though each constituent jet retains its individual characteristics for a long time even in the common river bed.

Our country is no exception. Both the population and spiritual potential of Soviet peoples are as heterogeneous as those throughout the world. But no doubt there are some specific features here connected with a special way of development, that is, an individual stream which is flowing today again into the common bed of human civilization. And it would not be difficult for those who observe from the outside the specific features of this new stream and what has colored it in a strange shade which differs from the normal and traditional historic river. One can also see that the reunification of civilizations is taking place on the wave of the consciousness revolution brought about by the processes of *perestroika* in the USSR.

We are beginning to deal with a new phenomenon of public and political life, which is consciousness liberation of the Soviet people. This is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon whose nature is richly manifested. It is characterized by resolute liberation from official conformism which tried to strangle each individuality and non-standardness.

The model of spiritual and ideological process in the country seems to be absolutely renewed today under conditions of democracy, plurality of opinions, refusal to recognize the

monopoly of truth by a single party, and the recognition of dialectic wholeness of the world. Public opinion is constantly influenced by the great variety of political forces and ideological subjects which compete with each other. The socialist idea which was often treated as sheer anticapitalism is now being reconsidered. Now any stance which is not in conflict with law has the right to ideological and moral argumentation.

No doubt this is a positive fact from the point of view of democratization of society. But one should not disregard the fact that freedom granted by new political thinking is not always used for good purposes. Take the religious aspect for example. It would be appropriate here to recall questions of American professor Paul Kurz addressed to Soviet sociologists: has religiousness been reduced in Marxist countries after so many years of antireligious propaganda? Is it going to rise again now that the pressure on it has been eased? (an article "Humanism and atheism: of similarities and differences"). It is true that the religious factor in social and political life and in interethnic relations has been gaining importance and vigor in the recent period. Enhanced influence of churches on social and cultural processes has become evident; clerical tendencies are now visible, especially in relation to school, science, and culture, and there is convergence of national and religious extremism, interethnic and interconfessional conflicts. There are over forty religious movements now. The Law on Freedom of the Russian Federation on Freedom of Religious Beliefs has created favorable conditions for the unhampered meeting of religious demands of believers. Many new religious periodicals have appeared in the USSR, such as Tserkovniy Vestnik [Church Herald] and Protestant. A number of international religious and educational organizations are working actively and new theological educational institutions have been opened.

The years of *perestroika* beginning in 1986 have seen the formation and registration of about 8,000 new religious associations of different confessions and denominations, that is, every third association of all existing now. The registration of religious associations is invariably accompanied with the free use cathedrals, churches, synagogues, mosques, and other prayer houses as well as worship items having historical value. Besides, thirty-three monasteries have been opened in the past five years with big architectural ensembles given to them as well. Eighteen theological educational institutions and a great number of church periodicals function today.

That means that a course has been taken in the country to eliminate prejudices, obsolete stereotypes, and odious thinking. We have moved to plurality from total atheism in this area as well.

The enforcement of the Law of the USSR on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations has affirmed the irreversible nature of positive changes and an instrument for further improvement of church-state relations. The Law was worked out on the broad

democratic basis. Leading Soviet lawyers, legal experts and religious scholars, specialists from various ministries and departments, and representatives of all confessions, denominations, and religious groups participated in this work. International practice was also taken into consideration.

After the Bill was approved by the USSR Supreme Soviet in the first reading, it was published in mass media for open discussion. Both legislators and an overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens generally approved the designation, basic provisions, and intention of the direct action of the Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The Law covers the whole territory of the country and "guarantees the citizens' rights to define and express their attitude towards religion and observing religious rites without any obstacles, and to enjoy social justice and equality, protection of the citizens' rights and interests regardless of their stance towards religion, and regulates relations connected with activities of religious associations".<sup>1</sup>

The Law confirms the Constitutional provision that "in accordance with the right to freedom of conscience each citizen determines his/her attitude towards religion by his/her own, enjoys the right to confess any or no religion personally or corporately express and propagate convictions concerning his/her attitude toward religion."<sup>2</sup> This basic legally normative understanding of the right to the freedom of conscience is in accord with Article 18 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration (1948) and with appropriate provisions of other acts of international law which are signed, among others, by the Soviet Union.

But here the "pendulum effects" has also acted. For the recent two or three years a noted politization of religion has become evident in our country, along with involvement of some religious leaders in politically-minded public movements, including popular fronts, and in newly formed parties. A number of political parties have sprung up on the confessional basis, such as Christian Democratic or Muslim parties. Clericalization of political programs, sphere of spiritual and cultural life, and vigorous activities among young people are aimed at creation of a mass social basis for the above mentioned parties. Believers are now addressed by candidates to people's deputies many of whom are clergy.

It is not accidental therefore that religious are being involved in political struggle which inevitably leads to interconfessional confrontation. This is especially typical of the Ukraine. In the situation of social tension Greek Catholic and Orthodox and inter-Orthodox conflicts can trigger an even more large-scale social explosion which has already acquired antisoviet and anticommunist coloration.

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<sup>1</sup>Page 1.

<sup>2</sup>Page 3.

RUKH, the Democratic Bloc, the People's Rada, and a significant part of Ukrainian intelligentsia are oriented toward the Uniate and Autocephalous Churches. All mass cultural events and public and political actions are conducted by them under the auspices of these churches.

The interchurch relations in the Ukraine which have yielded a number of socially dangerous explosions during the past two years have both stirred the masses of believers in the republic and caused loud resonance throughout the whole country, in church and political circles abroad, and among the Ukrainian diaspora. The main line of tension in religious conflicts is drawn along the "triangle" consisting of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Each of these three churches confronts the other two. The conflicts have involved the Vatican siding with the Greek Catholic Church and the Moscow Patriarchate supporting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

On the surface of the conflicts one can see the struggle of Greek Catholics and Autocephalists for the revival of their respective churches while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is fighting to safeguard its positions. Hence, the struggle for spheres of influence, for leadership in the national revival, and more prosaically but very pointedly, for redistribution of church buildings. All this is undergirded by social and political stratification of Ukrainian society, differentiation and polarization of political forces, their power struggle, and search for the mass basis by new political movements. And the religious community has a real mass basis, indeed. About 15-20 million people in the Ukraine are under the influence of religion though active adult believers number about 8-10 million persons.

But no massive growth of deliberate religious convictions has been detected by sociologists. Correspondingly, no mass conscious conversion of unbelievers to the church has taken place if we look at religion in real terms and not to mistake it for an outbreak of interest in religion as an untouched area of culture and folk traditions which were intertwined with religious traditions in the past. All this should be taken into account in order to assess the real religious, political, and spiritual situation in an unbiased way.

Interconfessional and interchurch conflicts have both present-day causes and historical roots. Generally speaking, religious crises and accompanying interconfessional conflicts are not new in the history of the Ukraine. If we look back at our history, this is the sixth crisis. The first one was caused by the introduction of Christianity in Russia in 988 A.D.; the second one was the result of the Union of Brest in 1596, and the third one was connected with the Old Believers' schism in 1666-1667, though the Ukraine was not greatly affected by it. The fourth crisis was brought about by autocephaly and renewal in post-revolutionary

years, and the fifth one resulted from the Lvov Council in 1946. Now we have the sixth crisis.

It is typical of these crises that all of them were caused not by religious reasons as such, like the church rejection of religious reforms. The religious history in the Ukraine has been alien to broad movements of reformation. The crises were brought about by political circumstances. Dominating circles in different periods made certain reorientations in their policy (regardless of whether they were justified or unjustified) and attempted to have the church adjusted to them. Existing church structures were broken; different groups of believers or confessions confronted each other, and nonconformists were subjected to severe repressions.

Thus, the church had to suffer harassment and persecutions not only in the years of Stalinist totalitarian regime. Such things happened in its history more than once under the power of both princes and czars. The matter is that Christianity came to Russia with the established tradition of the church's subordination to secular authorities and its inclusion into government structures. This situation was consolidated in Russia as well and became a tradition as well. On one hand, it has organically intertwined church history with the general one, but on the other hand, it made the church an instrument of dominating forces though clergy did not always favor it.

As far as the Soviet period is concerned, the separation of the church and state did not mean its separation from society and politics. It is virtually impossible to separate religion from society and politics. As citizens, believers have been always organically involved in social processes and felt their influence regardless of whether they were favorable or unfavorable for religious associations activities. Everything which took place in society was reflected to a certain extent in religious milieu. It has been unequivocally manifested during the years of *perestroika*. Public activities, democratization, and politization have seized believers as well. It is natural that religious organizations have affirmed their political involvement. Besides, the imperfect character of church-state relations in the period preceding *perestroika*, obsolescence of religious legislation, unstable legal position of some confessions sharpened the political nature of the religious factor. That is why the religious factor takes the third place among causes of tension in our society after economic and political factors or has become intertwined with political and interethnic factors.

Similar process can be seen now in the Baltic Republics, Middle Asia, Georgia, Armenia, etc. The level of religious rites has grown two or threefold. The share of young people, particularly young men, has significantly grown in urban religious communities, especially in Orthodox parishes. Clergy of all confessions has developed religious, educational, and missionary work in a broad front using for this purpose both charity actions and Sunday Schools for children and adults. Thus one can see the intention of reactionary forces to

spiritually reorient the personality from humanistic value to the world of illusory transcendental bliss.

And now clergymen have become permanent guests at state TV and radio broadcasting stations; they participate without any need in the dedication of schools, shops, and hospitals; they attend many secular special meetings etc., deliver lectures and participate in debates at various public meetings. They are involved in business activities, establish co-ops, joint ventures, charity parties, and spiritual concerts with the propaganda of religious literature. The church is trying to infiltrate purposefully the everyday life of workers. Religious education of children is introduced in general schools without any prior arrangement.

The position which is independent of political groupings, social forces, and national features is occupied by Protestant churches, such as Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, or Jehovah's Witnesses, which have become very active in the recent years, have a great inflow of new members, expand public missionary and recruiting activities, and strengthen contacts with their foreign religious centers. Under conditions of the multiparty system, Protestant congregations and communities shape political aims in election campaigns, and form the range of political thinking of their adherents, which reflects their specific stance.

Society has become literally flooded with mysticism in the recent period. Astrologers, palmists, sorcerers, enchanters, fortune tellers, various mystics, UFO fans, and people endowed with extrasensory gifts are in the foreground now. They establish their republican organizations, try to influence political sympathies of the general population, and incite people with their prediction. They are popularized by mass media. Mysticism has become a unique fashion, a factor of non-standard thinking.

The growth of religious influence and the revival of religious propaganda are not just the result of democratization of public life and return of church-state relations back to normal but are also symptoms of deep social, political, and spiritual crisis of society. A certain part of society, especially intelligentsia, believes that the way out of it is connected with religion which is considered by them to be an instrument of spiritual and national revival, a humanistic element of cultural heritage, and the only carrier of human values. Simultaneously, atheism is represented as the main reason for the people's spiritual decline, propagation of heavy drinking, alcoholism, and crime. One can hear calls to "openly proclaim the vicious nature of the theory and practice of atheism," "publicly proclaim the church anathema upon false teachers with their materialistic dogmas."<sup>3</sup>

Opposition to the propagation of science-based knowledge on religion and atheism is more and more evident, and this propagation has been drastically curtailed in the recent period. The concepts of "atheism," "materialism," and "freedom of thought" are disappearing

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<sup>3</sup>Literaturnaya Gazeta, December 19, 1990, No. 51.

from secondary and higher education, publishing, and oral propaganda. The interest of the population in the history and theory of religion is saturated by clergy in most cases.

The religious situation in the country intertwined with the general social, political, and national situation is becoming more and more complicated. It has always depended on the state of affairs in the milieu of believers and atheists and on the nature of relations between believers and unbelievers, including dedicated atheists. As far back as in 1970s, theoreticians of atheism gave up militant antireligious propaganda and chose the course aimed at tolerance and dialogue with believers and cultural and educational activities which would form scientifically sound and realistic understanding of both religion and atheism among the population, which has not been adequately appreciated though these efforts have paved the way to present-day changes in church state relations and in the attitude towards religion. Now atheism and religion have changed their places. All negative characteristics of religion are now mechanically applied to atheism which has become a kind of a scapegoat for all deformations in our society. While earlier the arrow of the spiritual barometer greatly deviated from common sense in the attitude towards religion, now the same phenomena are evident in respect of atheism. At that time, the pressure was upon the believers which resulted in reverse effects, but now it is pressed upon atheists resulting in similar problems. The prospect of confrontation between believers and unbelievers is real now, and it should be prevented. Mutual understanding and cooperation between believers and unbelievers is a great political problem since we are talking after all about the stability of the society we are striving to achieve so dearly.

It goes without saying that scientific atheism which offers ideals and values different from religion has its own techniques and means of achievement based of implementation of Marxist humanistic ideals. However, this factor cannot be a basis or an excuse for division among people adhering to different outlooks or for building up any barriers among them. On the contrary, it shows that atheism is aimed at things which unite, integrate, and organize people thus consolidating their joint activities which results in the further cultural development.

The question is: how can we isolate and define this common and integrating basis? How can we direct it to the road of consensus, the path of constructive actions? Or, in simpler terms, how can we prevent and eliminate a confrontation of outlooks? How can we direct differences in outlooks to the road of conjunction of the unique and common and to the harmony of personal and social relations among people who may have a humane, humanistic, and cultural nature?

The essential aspect of *perestroika* is behind these problems. It affects many sides of our existence and in-depth layers of our material and spiritual life since a prerequisite for finding a way out of the crisis is the buildup of humanistic potential of *perestroika*, bringing



to life vigorous forces of socialism, and significant modification of our way of life; generally speaking, everything here is connected with and depends upon cultural problems and problems of tolerance and humanism in social relations where both atheism and religion can and do assert their existence sufficiently loudly. Religion is especially conspicuous.

Excommunication of atheism and atheists from humanism, accusations of atheism for all possible sorrows of the people, including lack of spirituality has a long-standing history. Its roots can be found in the Bible and works by the early Church Fathers. Nevertheless, atheism, regretfully, does not have sufficiently convincing arguments about the inconsistency of these accusations, especially those which concern alleged destructive effect on ethics, culture, and the personal spiritual world. Of course, this is one of very regretful consequences of perversions of culture our society today is trying to eliminate.

Religion which is known to enhance its role in times of social crises has been always designated by theologians as a science burdened with care for man, spiritual health of the people, and healing souls of lost sinners. If we correlate these assertions with real life, they are far from being perfect. How can one call religion a science if it rejects all doubts and alternatives, in other words, if it contradicts science in understanding the essence of truth which is the most important point for science? To be a science, it has to search, substantiate, and defend the truth. Truth for science is the consistency and adequacy of something which really exists, which is manifested and elucidated in some properties, which is identified by experiments rather than indoctrination and thoughtless obedience to commands. Consequently, the truth is determined on the practical basis rather than through speculations only. Therefore, the truth in science is always connected with freedom of human critical spirit. Religion, particularly Christianity, proclaims: "I am the way; I am the truth and I am life: (Jn. 14:6). In this case, believers have the only way open for them, i.e. observe the words of God as said in the Bible (Ps. 117:57), understand and conceive them as "a commandment of God" (Is. 55:3), as "the perfect truth" (Ps. 117:113).

As to theological assertions on the especially high role of man in religion, one cannot reject or question their validity. Indeed, the dominating dogma of Christianity, i.e. the redeeming death of God's only begotten Son, is projected with all its meaning on the vision that people who have believed in wisdom and justice of God "may have life, and may have it in all its fullness" (Jn. 10:10). For this reason, the above belief for adherents of Christianity is the determining law of spirituality, the law which gives the followers alleged moral life and hope for one's well-being.

What can atheism counterpose, if anything, today to assertions of this kind? In other words, can assertions of spirituality cover atheism as well? Or are atheists to be "the same tool for training theological thought and substantiation of the significance of religion"?

These questions as well as insinuations about atheism somehow convey the uniqueness of our time which society is going through. Not long ago, they could not be considered since they would have been regarded as preposterous, reactionary, and undermining the basic principles of the official ideology. Today, they are in the center of public interest. For there are many people who believe that it is religion only that can contain and save the human being from moral decay rather than the cognizance of the world and moral self-conscience.

*Glasnost* has exposed many negative facts which testify that atheism has nothing to do with spirituality. Initially, it seems that these facts denigrate atheism and abolish the question itself regarding its spirituality. Was not atheism involved, for instance, in revolutionary methods of the destruction of old social relations? Were not those in power using atheism in our country for many years as an instrument of affirmation, or rather, imposition of mechanical single-thoughtfulness? And was it not in the name of atheistic considerations, as many authors point out on the pages of many publications, that the church soon after 1917 was chained in various administrative and legal obstacles so that it was unable to heal everywhere "souls of lost sinners"? And what is the result? Is not it social hypocrisy, moral deceit, tragic discrepancy between what we practice and what we preach?

As is known, it has resulted in all the above factors. But it would be absolutely wrong to regard atheism as a form of adventurism in sociology. It would be also wrong to seriously consider affirmations of certain persons who try to profit from the situation that atheism is not a science since it rejects religion and fails to recognize its involvement to foundations of morality and disregards its ability to transform the world in a humane way.

Intolerance to atheism on the part of its present adversaries should be studied separately. One should note, however, that humanism is much closer to atheism than some may think. It is a philosophy of human priorities, which affirms the equality of human beings before the law and defends the right of each individual to honor and dignity which has been proclaimed by religion the spiritual human disaster, a visual testimony to "the rebellion against God."<sup>4</sup> Historical reasons for the development of atheism and its direct involvement in culture and buildup of humanistic potential may not cause any doubts among realistic scholars. It is true, however, that atheism in our country was used for purposes of class arithmetic and class interests which had a very negative effect on its scholarly unbiasedness and resulted in wholesale rejection of religion as a carrier of spiritual values. In the meantime, there are actually "no higher and lower cultures, progressive and negative one; there exist different cultures only. Their difference is not in 'whats' but in 'hows,' 'in what way and in what

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<sup>4</sup>Theological Works, 1976, Vol. 16, p. 200.

forms.<sup>5</sup> If this is true, then the struggle between atheism and religion is that of different outlooks and their priorities rather than group prejudices.

Thus, though in simple terms, the concept of 'being' and 'man-society' relations is the organizational foundation for atheism, the concept of 'the supernatural' and 'God-man' relations are basic for religion. For this reason, in the content of culture which is defended and affirmed by atheism, the priority is given to the sovereign being, the human being, human labor, and human spirit while in religion it is given to the supernatural and human dissatisfaction.

The acceptance of the existence of different cultures by atheism rather than of progressive and reactionary cultures implies acceptance of architectonics of any culture as the value of self-sufficient significance which should be considered. If we take Christianity, for instance, it is directly connected with the development of ethics. For example, the Christian doctrine of virtue attracts attention to the emotional aspect of morality and the role played in it by passions, faith, and love. Christianity has been introducing the fundamental moral idea of fraternal unity of human beings for the sake of development of the spirit. It is worth noting that Christianity has broadened the range of understanding of human moral qualities and laid the foundation for active analysis of many of them.

In other words, emphasizing the existence of different cultures with a certain portion of humanism inherent to all of them, excludes per se the sheer rejection of religion, which, according to Friedrich Engels, is inadmissible and harmful.<sup>6</sup> And each time atheism has the opportunity to determine value and in general terms or through a prism of an abstract idea but with consideration of the existence of a particular human being, particular society, and historical uniqueness of its development. That means that atheism poses now higher requirements to scholarly interpretation of past and present realities, both personal and religious. This makes it possible to exclude 'cavalry raids' on atheism capable of disorienting people and instigating unneeded emotions.

The nature of changes in public conscience, including the religious one, can be understood only in the context of historical perspective rather than in terms of an immediate spiritual crisis. Only an historical approach enables us to have an insight to attain the deep meaning of unsolved problems of existence and understand causes of today's *weltanschauung* confusion and moral crisis, which has affected even those people who declared themselves to be militant atheists not long ago, and thus identify reasons for a great deficit of spirituality and moral decline in modern society.

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<sup>5</sup>"Culture and Human Development; an Essay on Philosophical and Methodological Problems," p. 33.

<sup>6</sup>"Anti-During."

Speaking about the crisis in the Soviet society, we preferably pay attention to political and economical problems. However, in spite of their importance, keenness, and scale, it is necessary to realize that both economic and political institutions will not successfully function in immoral space.

The destruction of the Communist ideology is felt by a great strata of the Soviet society as spiritual crisis. Under the conditions of the old ideals and values' subversion, moral nihilism and cynicism which is especially harmful for the younger generation is confirmed. The result of these processes is the destruction of a personality and a society's apathy. The ground is being created for aggressiveness and animosity. A vacuum which appeared instead of the Communist morality is filled with religious searchings and the national idea.

Such a state of the society's moral health is also aggravated by the level of the national intellect. The public conscience is strongly defeated by scholasticism and dogmatism. A dogmatic way of thinking prevails. Egalitarianism and conformist tendencies are deeply rooted. There is a direct evidence of the hostile attitude to the priority of personal values, idiosyncrasy to intellect. Such a state is not only the result of the last seventy years but the result of a specific century-old development, when there was 'WOE from WIT,' and educated people were 'intelligent uselessness.'

In this case, there is a competition between a Communist ideology and a church with its eternal problem of 'good and evil.' Doing justice to the religion as the source of national-cultural traditions, spiritual support, and integral power of a nation, one must not labor under a delusion in regard to its potential confirmation as 'good.' In no country of the world was strengthening of the nation's health promoted only through spreading religion. Nowhere in the world was the church the unique force to resist to 'evil.'

A new way of thinking, proclaimed by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, is not a closed political system. It is based on the experience of human civilization and presupposes a mutual search for optimal decisions with representatives of different philosophical mentalities, including Christian thought.

We think that now we have managed to discuss and solve eternal and always actual problems which are not familiar with inflation even at the moment of the transfer to the market economy. Life and death, conscience and freedom, the essence of existence, the history of Fatherland and world culture, the mysteries of human psyche--these are the questions in which humanity is interested.

We have come to the conclusion that the search of truth has no limits. That is why our style is the dialogue of cultures and conceptions of the world, competitions of ideas, and respect of a person's dignity. We learn honestly to think and rethink our history, recognizing the right of everyone to defend one's point of view. We have gone away from dogma confirming that human thought is developed only by materialism and atheism. The world

is much richer, and Plato's line can present humanity with the same abundant fruits of knowledge as the line of Democritus. Their competition and theoretical struggle moves the thought much stronger than any directives and didactic sermons.

For six years, we have been conducting a wide, constructive dialogue with believers and non-believers, discussing the most complicated questions of our existence and together we try to confront injustice no matter from what place it comes. But at the same time, we do not conceal the difference in our conceptions of the world. Great public reflection was found in the addresses of famous writers, representatives of culture, scientists, and theologians on the problems of ethics, ecology, traditional and non-traditional teachings, transcendental meditation, and modern healers.

Our moral duty is to return to the people those layers of native and world culture which for a long time were artificially eliminated only because they did not conform to the Procrustean bed of dogmatic materialism and militant atheism. But we are also against eliminating new layers in culture that to-day do not conform to some religious dogmas. We decisively reject blinkers of atheist and religious dogmatism.

By getting rid of the word 'atheistic,' first of all we reject the vulgar denunciations of atheism, which contributed to the cultural and human thought, and instead, we accept science. We shall continue conducting our dialogues from scientific positions.