



Rationalizing the war in Ukraine through religion: The Orthodox Church and Russia's imperialist motif (A response to Hans-Herbert Kögler)

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Hans-Herbert Kögler's essay is an original and illuminating contribution to the discussion on how to ethically approach the Russo-Ukrainian War.¹ In my response, I concentrate on the aspects of Kögler's essay where he emphasizes the necessity of understanding the 'rationality' of Russia's actions – as a condition of eventual negotiations and peace-making. I will focus on four themes, promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church – *Russkii mir*, Eurasianism, collective versus individual rights, and militarism – the conjunction of which provides theological hermeneutics consistent with the invasion of Ukraine. Kögler is right in pointing out that the expansionist character of Russia did not appear overnight in February 2022 but was building over the last decades. Over this period, Russia has internalized, yet again, the imperialist motif of its czarist and Soviet history. One could wonder to what extent the Russian political leadership is under the influence of Alexander Dugin or, indeed, any other philosophical or ideological frameworks of thought. However, I suggest that there has been an overlapping consensus, to use a Rawlsian term, between Russian policymakers, conservative intellectuals and the Church, which made the 2022 invasion actively or passively supported by the majority of the Russian population. The arguments to which different players appeal vary, but they

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coincide in creating an image of Russia, which is imperialistic and aggressive towards its neighbours, anti-liberal, corrosive of individual human rights and, last but not least, cultivating anti-Western alliances with autocratic regimes around the world. Dugin's is not the only anti-individualistic and anti-Western intellectual voice in Russia worth considering. The Russian Orthodox Church has been pushing forward many theologico-political narratives quite similar to those of Dugin, and, arguably, even with greater success, since it relies on a much wider network – from grassroot communities to religious diplomacy – to deliver its messages.

Russkii mir (Russian world) ideology has been rightly considered to be one of the key conceptual justifications behind the Russo-Ukrainian War.² A successor to Russian imperial, and later, Soviet, expansionism, this ideology claims that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians (and in some variations also Moldovans and Kazakhs) form one people or nation, *Holy Rus*.³ The implication is that Ukrainian national identity, and thus, its right to exist as a separate (from Russia) nation state are denied. *Russkii mir* anachronistically projects upon modern Ukraine, which has defended its freedom during two revolutions, a reality that might have existed centuries ago, but does not exist today. In a way, the ROC claims that this imagined and ideologically crafted history – rather than a conscious choice of Ukrainian citizens – should decide the fate of their country. The ROC might well recognize the need for Ukrainians for something more than their bare biological existence, but certainly not their cultural or political agency. They may have a history, but not a future. The Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', Kirill, has interpreted the ongoing war as an attempt to save the unity of the common Russian nation from external adversaries.⁴

The ROC preaches that Russia shares more with Asia than with Europe and the West, in a way not dissimilar to Dugin's Eurasianism.⁵ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev (until recently the number two in the ROC's hierarchy) argued that historically, Russian religious and political leadership opted for relations with Asia rather than with the West, and that contemporary Russia is a product of 'intercivilizational Christian-Muslim interaction'.⁶ Of particular interest here is the theological dialogue of the ROC with Iranian Muslim leaders, which is advancing an idea that an Orthodox understanding of ethics, social values and human rights has much more in common with Islam than with Western Christianity.⁷ As Regina Elsner puts it, the ROC 'sees the Islamic cultures of the Middle East as allies in the struggle against the hegemony of the Western values system'.⁸

The preference given to the often-autocratic Eurasian regimes vis-à-vis Western democracies goes hand in hand with the critique of individual rights and an allegiance to political power. In the tension between individual and totality, the ROC, not unlike Dugin, sides with the latter. The Western worldview is criticized by Kirill as being based upon anthropocentrism and personal autonomy. On the contrary, 'Orthodoxy has always promoted sacrificial love towards [...] one's family and the Motherland'.⁹ Although the ROC's *Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* (2008) does not reject human rights altogether, it attempts to neutralize them, as it were, by introducing the concept of 'collective rights'.¹⁰ As Kristina Stoeckl points out, the latter 'are chiefly opposed to individual rights'.¹¹ Unlike the classical approach to rights, which articulates collective rights as the protection of minorities and disadvantaged groups from the majority community, the ROC is concerned with protecting family, religious community

and the majority from the individual. By prioritizing the collective, the ROC, in fact, prioritizes the state. According to Kirill, a key aspect of Russian national identity is constituted by ‘the relationship of a person with the state’ and ‘loyalty to the central state authority’.¹²

Finally, the ROC is providing a theology to militarism. The Western public has been shocked by the ROC leadership’s justification of the war following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill has described it as the necessary ‘metaphysical’ battle with Ukraine and the West¹³ and promised the remission of sins to those Russian soldiers who will die in the line of duty.¹⁴ However, the ‘culture of war’, as Boris Knorre puts it, has been a growing trend within Russian Orthodoxy, which from a marginal movement in the 1990s became mainstream during the last decade.¹⁵ One of the aspects of this fascination with violence is the ROC’s unwillingness to condemn the Soviet regime and its repressive methods, as, for example, was done by German Christians vis-à-vis Nazism. Notwithstanding the fact that the Orthodox Church was one of the Communist regime’s biggest victims, Kirill has praised it as a *podvig* (ascetic deed), which promoted a search for justice and solidarity.¹⁶ A symbolic expression of the ROC’s fascination with militarism is the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, consecrated in 2020.¹⁷

There is certainly much more nuance to the way each of these themes is articulated, and one could question the extent of the Church’s influence over policymakers and public opinion. In any case, the ROC, with around 40,000 parishes in Russia, Ukraine and beyond, and privileged access to the media and educational institutions, has been strengthening the general trends towards authoritarianism and militarism in Russia – pointed out by Kögler. The four themes treated above are per se not inherently interconnected. However, by having raised in prominence, they have reinforced each other and formed an explosive mix, which made the invasion of Ukraine logically possible from the Russian Orthodox point of view. The same is also true at a different level. The ways in which Putin, Dugin and Patriarch Kirill have arrived to ‘make sense’ of the war on Ukraine differ, but the very diversity of their arguments makes the consensus stronger. Failing to see this prevents us from understanding Russia and, thus, from solving the crisis at its root level – even if matters settle politically. Without renouncing or substantially relativizing the logic of *Russkii mir*, Eurasianism, collectivism and militarism, a lasting and sustainable peace between Ukraine and Russia is impossible.

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Notes

1. Kögler, Hans-Herbert, “Democracy or dictatorship? The moral call to defend Ukraine”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 26(4) (2023): 450–478.
2. Cf. Brandon Gallaher, Pantelis Kalaitzidis, and the Drafting Committee, ‘A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii Mir) Teaching’, *Mission Studies* 39 (2022): 269–276.
3. Cf. Cyril Hovorun, ‘Interpreting the “Russian World”’, *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-reflection, Dialogue*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 163–172.
4. Kirill Gundyayev, ‘Патриаршая проповедь в праздник Благовещения Пресвятой Богородицы после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя’, *Русская Православная Церковь* (2022), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5915151.html>.
5. This should be qualified by observing that the ROC, especially prior to the ongoing war, consistently argued that it constitutes the ‘true’ Europe, that is, that it continues European Christian tradition much more faithfully than Europe itself. There is thus no irrevocable split with Europe on Russia’s end. Even verbally, *Eur-asia* includes Europe.
6. Hilarion Alfejev, ‘Вера – формирующая сила и основа цивилизационной стабильности государства’, *Церковь и время* 71 (2015): 24–26, at 24. In the essay, Hilarion draws heavily on Lev Gumilev, one of the key advocates of Russian Eurasianism.
7. Cf. Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2012), 206; Aleksandr Agadjanian, *Turns of Faith, Search for Meaning: Orthodox Christianity and Post-Soviet Experience* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2014), 277.
8. Regina Elsner, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Modernity: A Historical and Theological Investigation into Eastern Christianity between Unity and Plurality* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2021), 314.
9. Kirill Gundyayev, ‘Выступление на X ВРНС’, *Всемирный Русский Народный Собор* (2006), <https://vrns.ru/documents/63/1190>.
10. ROC, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights’, in Kirill Gundyayev, *Freedom and Responsibility: A Search for Harmony – Human Rights and Personal Dignity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; DECR, 2011), IV.9 [p. 133].
11. Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 84.
12. Kirill Gundyayev, *Семь слов о русском мире* (Москва: Всемирный Русский Народный Собор, 2015), 57.
13. Kirill Gundyayev, ‘Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя’, *Русская Православная Церковь* (2022), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.
14. Kirill Gundyayev, ‘Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю 15-ю по Пятидесятнице после Литургии в Александро-Невском скиту’, *Русская Православная Церковь* (2022), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html>.
15. Boris Knorre, ‘The Culture of War and Militarization within Political Orthodoxy in the Post-soviet Region’, *Transcultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 15–38.
16. Kirill Gundyayev, ‘Выступление на открытии III Рождественских Парламентских встреч’, *Русская Православная Церковь* (2015), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3960558.html>.

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17. Bojidar Kolov, 'Main Cathedral of Mutual Legitimation: The Church of the Russian Armed Forces as a Site of Making Power Meaningful', *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1–20.

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