

POST-SOVIET CIVIL RELIGION AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract. The religious revival in post-Soviet Russia resulted in a new, more intimate than ever before, alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church and Putin’s autocratic regime. Three key elements were essential in shaping this unholy alliance: a) re-establishing the Russian Orthodox Church under Stalin’s decree in 1943, b) the constant support of local Orthodox Churches and the ecumenical movement, and c) the formation of a specific religious-based ideology.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, War in Ukraine, Post-Soviet Civil Religion, Church and State, Religion and Politics.

The Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC’s) justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine raises the questions of how and why the official Church and Patriarch Kirill, in particular, have become an essential ideological tool of Putin’s regime. These questions are vital: a) for the ROC itself, as further reforms will be shaped by this dynamic, b) for the local Orthodox Churches, as they should be aware of this hook in church-state relations, and c) for the entire Christian world, as the myth of the ROC as a mega-Church is powerful, especially in conservative groups and organizations.

Among the concerns that merit examination, and, perhaps, the approaches of previous years, which must be revised, three stand out: 1) the origins of the ROC: what is fundamental to its formation in the 20th century; 2) the place of the ROC in the Christian world and, in particular, in the ecumenical movement; and 3) the views and ideas preached by the ROC, and their relevance to the Gospel and the Christian tradition.

I will briefly discuss the first two points and elaborate on the third.

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Formation of ROC in the 20th Century

A period of religious revival began in 1988 with public celebrations of the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus' in many regions of the Soviet Union. This celebration was a declaration of the continuity of Christian tradition not only from Kyiv to Moscow, but through the centuries, spanning Kyiv Rus', the Moscow Tsardom, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. Later, post-Soviet Russia was also included in this single orbit.

As a result, a new robust myth was born. This narrative, not only sought to explain unobvious historical connections, but also sought to build a narrative, in which the history of the Church and the state in Russia and post-Soviet space was tightly intertwined.

The war in Ukraine questioned the continuity of the Kyiv and Moscow Rus' traditions. In this war, the Russian Federation looks and acts more like a Golden Horde, than a European state. The establishment of the autocephalous Church of Ukraine and the break between the Ukrainian Church and the Moscow Patriarchate, which followed as a result of the war, indicated that the Kyiv and Moscow church traditions were diverging and would not continue to co-exist. They have separated and will continue to evolve independently of each other.

However, this is not the only historical rupture that has recently become evident. No less severe is the gap between the church tradition of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the Orthodox Church of Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) that Stalin "permitted" in 1943. This Church is today known as the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). To what extent is it a blend of the Soviet era, and what exactly does it inherit from the Russian Greek Catholic Church of the Russian Empire?

The "peculiar character" of the Church, which fully adapted to life in an atheistic state and even received regular benefits from the Communist authorities, must now be described anew from the tragic perspective of war between Christian nations. The criticisms of the ROC from the standpoint of the Russian emigree community in the 20th century should not be forgotten, but rather must be revisited.²

² Of the new studies on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church, the books, articles, and lectures by Archpriest Georgy Mitrofanov, professor at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, are especially noteworthy.

Among the principles on which the life of the Church was redesigned during the Soviet era, many remain relevant today. They continue to be a tool for control and manipulation by the Church hierarchy. These are the withdrawal of the autonomy of parish communities, the formation of an authoritarian top-down order, the recognition by the state of the representatives of this vertical as the only legitimate representatives of the Church, the rejection of synodality as a principle of Church governance (imitation of synodality), the willingness to follow the ideological guidelines set forth by the state, and the habit of working “under control” and receiving instructions from state officials.

The ROC’s bishops and top administrative officials are still very comfortable with these principles. The critique heard from voices at the grass-root’s level are fairly weak and often ignored.

The Role of ROC in the Christian World

The Russian Orthodox Church was isolated from the Christian world for decades. At first glance, this statement may seem like an exaggeration. There is a rich history of ROC representatives participating in ecumenical gatherings at various levels and in bilateral dialogues with various churches. Even Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) was involved in the ecumenical movement. These were educated men and women, and experienced diplomats. However, they represented not so much the Church, but rather the interests of the Soviet state. Cooperation on a broader scale was impossible because it would have compromised the foundation of the state’s official atheist ideology.

Later, in the post-Soviet period, this isolation did not cease; it continued intellectually and culturally. A relatively small group of staff in primarily the Department for External Church Relations has retained a monopoly on all contacts with other churches and ecumenical organizations. With very few exceptions, the ROC consistently refuses to cooperate with other churches in the domains of theology, religious education, and youth work.

In the last two decades, inter-Christian and even inter-religious dialogue was focused on promoting the ROC, and specifically Patriarch Kirill, as leading defenders of traditional values on a global scale. That approach limited dialogue to conservative Christian organizations. Official theological discussions also continued, but as in Soviet times, it was open only to official Church diplomats and a few experts usually appointed directly by the Holy Synod.

In 2018, the ROC took a new step in self-isolation. Due to his highly unsuccessful policy in Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill forced the Holy Synod to break off eucharistic communion with local Orthodox Churches – the Ecumenical and Alexandrian Patriarchates, and the Churches of Greece and Crete – that had supported the creation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine.³

By supporting the war in Ukraine, the ROC has taken another step toward self-isolation, exposing itself to harsh criticism from other Orthodox churches, as well as the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

Throughout the war in Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill, have captured global media attention as never before. Unfortunately, this is not because Patriarch Kirill is taking a stand against the war and denouncing the aggressor. Instead, a scandal has erupted: the Patriarch pays lip service to peace, while at the same time justifying the war. In addition, not a single bishop within Russia has condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Priests who deliver antiwar sermons are subjected to repression, and most clergy and laypeople are now silent. Quite possibly, this could be the most shameful page in the thousand-year history of Russian Orthodoxy.

One big question remains: how did it happen that the commandment “thou shalt not kill!” was forgotten in Russia, and how is it that military chaplains are quoting lines from the Gospel like “greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15, 13) as they bless soldiers being sent to fight and loot a neighboring country?

Yet we should also ask another question: why do Christians all over the world – neither the Churches, nor their affiliated organizations, when condemning the invasion, say almost nothing about the non-Christian nature of statements heard from Patriarch Kirill and other bishops and priests, who preach “to kill with a prayer on the mouth”? Their approach contradicts the Gospel, and yet many Christians are silent on this matter.

Post-Soviet Civil Religion

Unfortunately, within the post-Soviet context, this cannot be viewed as an accident. Religion and atheism in Russia have made the leap from opposition to synthesis. After the collapse of the Soviet Union – when the Church was said to be

³ Sergei CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post* (21.06.2022).

witnessing a revival – the focus was entirely on restoring churches and monasteries, founding new dioceses and forming a new administrative model.

The successes in expanding and strengthening the Church looked impressive, but was in no way a reflection on the content of the faith that took shape in the 1990s and 2000s. Calling the revived faith in Russia “traditional Orthodoxy” was rather naive, despite the fact that over the past few decades it has become commonplace to say so.

The main problem is attributable to the fact that the ROC reluctantly and extremely ineffectively approached catechesis and religious education. The overwhelming majority of those who had joined the Church and were baptized, retained both the worldview and habits of the Soviet era. Thus, a synthesis of Orthodoxy and Soviet emerged. In 2011, in a public lecture on the occasion of the 21st anniversary of Archpriest Alexander Men’s murder, I termed this phenomenon “post-Soviet civil religion.”⁴ This trend combines elements of the Orthodox tradition, usually superficial and formal, with everyday Soviet content, and a passionate desire to revitalize the empire.

This synthesis was rather organically accepted by the state bureaucracy and a significant section of both society and the ROC itself.

There is an element of chance that this synthesis was successful. However, one cannot deny that overall, post-Soviet civil religion turned out fundamentally well-constructed, providing reliable mechanisms to channel religious ideas and historical myths into a deeply secular post-Soviet society. The Commandments, which serve as guidelines for the life of a Christian, have been replaced by so-called “traditional values”. At the same time, the struggle for traditional values in Russia and worldwide has assumed the significance of an apocalyptic battle. The defense of traditional values has become the *raison d’être* for many Christian organizations in Russia and the content of their activities, as well as an essential element of domestic and foreign policy.

The concept of Holy Rus’ is no less compelling. In the secular context, it was successfully transformed into the *Russian World*. At the level of cultural communication, the Russian language plays the central role in this concept, but in

⁴ Sergei ЧАПНИН, “Soviet and Post-Soviet in Contemporary Church Culture: Personality of a Pastor, Evangelism and Ministry” [Советское и постсоветское в современной церковной культуре: образ пастыря, свидетельство, служение], *Bogoslov.ru*, (11.09.2011), <https://bogoslav.ru/article/2005170> [date accessed: 02.11.2022].

determining the general geopolitical contours of the Russian World, an essential contribution belongs to the ROC. The “canonical territory” of the ROC has turned out to most closely resemble the contours of the new empire that Vladimir Putin aspires to rule directly and indirectly.⁵

The State Takes the Place of a Deity⁶

The government unquestionably incorporated both concepts of traditional values and the Russian World into its neo-imperial ideology, and showed gratitude to the Church, which had been directly involved in their development and shaped the worldview of state officials.

With respect to the religiosity of Vladimir Putin, we can draw parallels to the Byzantine Emperor Constantine the Great. At the beginning of the 4th century, Constantine declared Christianity the state religion, replacing the polytheistic content of Roman civil religion with monotheism. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 21st century, Putin took the next, no less radical step: he de facto removed the actual religious content of post-Soviet civil religion and made it a pure form of state ideology, in which the state takes the place of a deity, but without a link to any conception of the divine – be it polytheism or monotheism. Putin’s empire does not need any gods – old or new - the divine miracle is the revival of the empire after, as Putin himself put it, the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe.”

This is precisely the meaning of the phrase about Russia as “rising from its knees”. These words were first spoken by Boris Yeltsin, when he became president of Russia as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. However, they took on their contemporary meaning much later, in one of Putin’s speeches eight years later: “Russia might rise from its knees and whack [someone] good.”⁷

Putin’s Russia affirms itself not through a convincing vision of the future, but by justifying itself through history. A powerful source of self-justification from the 20th century was the Victory in World War II. However, the idea of war as a tragedy, as a crime against humanity, is nonexistent in the new myth. Under Putin, Victory Day celebrations have become a lavish demonstration of Russian

⁵ CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

⁶ CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

⁷ “Who Started to Raise Russia from Its Knees?” *Rosbalt News Agency* (27.11.2013). <https://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2013/11/27/1204714.html> [accessed: 02.11.2022]

exceptionalism. An important element of this ritual is the entirely pagan worship of the Eternal Flame and the “Immortal Regiment” mass march (a secular “cross procession”), with portraits of those who died in the war paraded through the streets, representing a cult of heroic ancestors, instead of the cult of venerating saints more familiar to the Orthodox tradition.⁸

Back in 2005, Archpriest Georgy Mitrofanov, a leading Christian publicist in Russia, called this cult of the Victory “*pobedobesie*” (“Victory obsession”).⁹ However, his warnings went unheeded.

The para-religious justification for the war, that it will bring victory over evil, remains an important element of “patriotic” journalism within Russia. Thus, the idea that Russia is always right and fights ‘for the truth’ is automatically transferred from World War II to any other war, and now to the war in Ukraine.¹⁰

Alexander Prokhanov, editor-in-chief of the conservative *Zavtra* newspaper, wrote this piece on Easter 2022:

Today Russia is leading an Easter procession around Mariupol. Lighting lamps in Donetsk and Lugansk. Putting out Easter candles near Kharkov. Hanging lights near Kherson and Nykolaev. Merging with the Easter choir is the roar of long-range guns, the whistle of Hurricanes [Uragan rockets], the roar of diving bombers.¹¹

Prokhanov is not interested in the fact that as a result of the “Easter procession around Mariupol”, the city was almost destroyed. His task is to support Russian military propaganda and form a new myth cloaked in Christian imagery. This task can hardly even be called hypocritical. There is something frankly demonic about it.

Contemporary Russian theology and religious thought were caught completely off guard by these developments, and the attempts to substitute the Gospel with a “national-Christian ideology” received the full support of the official Church. Here

⁸ CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

⁹ In 2022, links to Russian sources were blocked, but the reference to Archpriest Georgy Mitrofanov as the author of this pejorative still could be found on Ukrainian Wikipedia: <https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Победобесие> [accessed: 02.11.2022]

¹⁰ CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

¹¹ Alexander PROKHANOV, “Truly!” [Воистину!], *Zavtra Newspaper* (25.04.2022), <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/voistinu> [accessed: 02.11.2022]. [Note of the editor: The quote reflects the Russian spelling of the names of the Ukrainian cities of Luhansk, Kharkiv and Mykolaiv.]

is what Alexander Schipkov, the Deputy Chairman of the Synodal Department for the Church's Relations with Society and Mass Media, a close adviser to Patriarch Kirill, wrote during the war:

Russophobia in its current political forms is a set of both discriminatory and repressive practices and has a specific goal: the violent de-Russification of Russians on their own historical territory... This is a hybrid war being waged against Russia and Russians by representatives of the contemporary liberal and Nazi political consensus.¹²

Schipkov's article was published in the official newspaper of the Duma and reprinted without any comments on the official website of the ROC. It fully conforms to the general line of Russian propaganda – that the war is not being waged by, but against Russia, that it was not Russia that attacked a neighboring state, but the forces of the collective, openly “Nazi” West, that are waging a hybrid war on Russian territory.¹³

Such a plunge into darkness could not help but trigger rejection by the dioceses and self-governing Churches that had been more open to the West, or were weighed down by constant ideological pressure from ROC officials. Since the war began, several parishes in Western Europe have broken up with the ROC and joined the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP). In Lithuania, a group of five priests was received into the Ecumenical Patriarchate after they were defrocked by a local metropolitan for their consistently anti-war stance. Furthermore, another two Belarusian priests emigrated to Lithuania and were received by the EP to serve the local community of Belarussian emigres. A substantial number of parishes outside Russia have stopped commemorating the name of Patriarch Kirill at services – all this being a sign of categorical disagreement with the ROC's position concerning the war in Ukraine.¹⁴

Judging by the speeches of Patriarch Kirill, he refuses to take this disagreement seriously: Ukraine has become something abstract for him, a distant land where a people that is “one with the Russians” lives. Yet for him, this people is not worthy

¹² Alexander SCHIPKOV, “Derussification and Theological Warfare” [Дерусификация и теологическая война], *Patriarchia.ru* (13.05.2022), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5925379.html> [accessed: 2.11.2022].

¹³ ЧАПНИН, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

of support, sympathy or love. The Patriarch could not find a single warm word for the victims of the war and has not expressed condolences to the families of dead Ukrainians. Moreover, in early May, when Russia's aggression against Ukraine had been going on for more than two months, Patriarch Kirill preached:

We don't want to fight with anyone. Russia has never attacked anyone. It's amazing that this great and powerful country never attacked anyone – it's only defended its borders. God grant that until the end of the century our country will be like this – strong, powerful and at the same time loved by God.¹⁵

Three weeks after this sermon, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which for three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union had remained an integral part of the ROC, convened a Council, the highest institution in the Church, expressed its disagreement with the position of the Patriarch, and declared its independence from the ROC. Patriarch Kirill has lost Ukraine, and has lost it exclusively by his own choice.¹⁶

Kirill failed to take the risky yet essential step of calling on Putin to end the war. On the contrary, Patriarch Kirill has actually supported the war and chained himself to the Putin regime.

EU sanctions against Patriarch Kirill could have become an important indication that the global community understands his role in justifying the war. However, Patriarch Kirill has influential allies – Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán vetoed the move. Still, the UK took the first step in mid-June, announcing sanctions against Patriarch Kirill “for his prominent support of Russian military aggression in Ukraine”,¹⁷ and later Canada also sanctioned Patriarch Kirill.

Perhaps with the help of state-controlled media, Patriarch Kirill has some tactical achievements to his name. However, this won't help either him or the “official Church” to solve the main strategic problem – the substitution of Gospel

¹⁵ Patriarch KIRILL, Sermon after the Liturgy in the Arkhangelsky Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin, *Patriarchia.ru* (3.05.2022), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5922848.html> [accessed: 02.11.2022].

¹⁶ CHAPNIN, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.

¹⁷ Press release “UK sanctions Russian linked to forced transfers and adoptions”, *Gov.uk*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-russian-linked-to-forced-transfers-and-adoptions> [accessed: 02.11.2022].

teachings for a religious ideology designed to serve the political interests of an authoritarian regime.

The retrieval of the Russian Church to its true mission will only arise through a crisis. That crisis will be protracted, profound, and severe. Moreover, getting over it will be possible only after the radical change of the political regime in Russia.¹⁸

It bears noting that Russia is not the only nation suffering from post-Soviet civil religion. Christian churches and communities worldwide are too tolerant of various justifications for war and violence. Their attempt to remain silent while Patriarch Kirill, day after day, preaches about Russia as a force of light fighting the corrupted West, is a sign of moral bankruptcy. There is no simple way out, but there is a way to witness the peace and love God has given us, and proclaim a truth that does not conform to any ideology that justifies war and hate.

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¹⁸ ЧАПНИН, “Post-Soviet Civil Religion Instead of Orthodoxy”, *Russia.Post*.