

The Unholy War Heresies and Theological Errors in the Russian Orthodox Church's Support for War

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Abstract: It is difficult not to see how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has taken the wrong side when it openly supported the war against Ukraine. But in so doing, ROC invited in some problematic and even heretical teachings. It embraced the heresy of (ethno-)phyletism, it combined ethnic nationalism with civilizational nationalism into a toxic mix, and it also violated its own social teaching that explicitly states that waging aggressive external war is one of the areas “in which the clergy and canonical church structures cannot support the state or cooperate with it.” Moreover, it has promoted and supported a political ideology that downplays the human dignity inherent to every living person. This paper will shortly explore each one of these theological transgressions and will conclude with some warnings that such ideas have a contagious potential that could easily spread to other countries in the region, with emphasis on Romania's case.

Keywords: ethno-phyletism, human rights, political religion, ethnic and civilizational nationalism.

Introduction

After the initial shock of witnessing Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022, a whole series of questions arose, especially when the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) publicly affirmed its full support for the so-called “special military operation.” This attitude has evoked historical precedents going all the way back to the Crusades and even earlier – when secular and ecclesial powers joined forces to justify and support each other's actions. Even if the earliest landmarks are pre-modern, there are also modern precedents of when autocephalous Orthodox Churches were involved in nationalistic movements, justifying state decisions and actions that were directed against ethnic and religious minorities.¹ These memories are common

¹ Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies. The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 144-175.

in our part of Europe, whether we are talking about Romania, Greece, Serbia, or, obviously, Russia.

Although the famous Byzantine “symphony” appears as a ghost behind these unholy alliances, more recent theological developments seemed to discourage the injudicious replication of a model that has proven both its virtues and its many shortcomings.² It seemed, at least for a while, that the lessons of the last century were not entirely in vain and that the Orthodoxies of the Eastern half of Europe have distanced themselves, and were trying to defend their theological heritage from the aggressive intrusion of politics, safeguarding it also against political temptations – with some inevitable (but deplorable) relapses and slips.

Much has been written lately, since Russia has been waging war against Ukraine, about the religious rationale for military ideology and actions. What I intend to pursue in this article is rather to emphasize the way ROC is at odds with its own doctrine or, more precisely, with significant tenets of its own heritage, namely the stance against phyletism. Also, another direction sketched in this material suggests that there are formulations in the ROC’s social teaching that can be distorted to justify military aggression and dehumanize the Ukrainian people by contesting their humanity. In the end, the paper will underline the contagion potential that the ideas discussed here pose to the neighboring countries such as the majority-Orthodox Romania.

Phyletist heterodoxy in the light of Orthodox dogma and theology

Reflecting from an evangelical perspective on the “symphonic” model, some authors state, in a strongly critical tone, that the Byzantine church “*has lost not only its ontology and its specific role (oikonomia) but also its independence.*”³ While this judgment may sound drastic and undoubtedly raises many theological issues (e.g., can the Church lose its *ontology*?), it does reflect the danger the Church faces when it maintains a very close and equivocal relationship with secular power. And such was the case of most of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches in the majority-Orthodox world.

It is this model (the *symphony*⁴) that is usually invoked to explain why European Orthodoxies seem to always be tempted to ally themselves with politics. The analogy with the two natures of Christ, which lies behind this “marriage,” is appealing and seems strong enough to justify its existence.⁵ However, as pointed out by contemporary Orthodox theologians who have critically examined their own tradition, Christ’s double nature can also nurture other paradigms. Perhaps one of the most interesting

² Both Cyril Hovorun and Aristotle Papanikolaou re-evaluate the ‘symphonic’ model from a critical Orthodox perspective. See Cyril Hovorun, *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 37-68; Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 26-30, 56-72.

³ Paul Negruț, *Biserica și Statul. O interogație asupra modelului “simfoniei” bizantine*, (Oradea: EIBE, 2000), 42 (*italics added*).

⁴ For a short history of this term’s evolution, see Cyril Hovorun, “Is the Byzantine “Symphony” Possible in Our Days?,” *Journal of Church and State*, Volume 59, Issue 2, June 2017, doi:10.1093/jcs/csv140, 282-288.

⁵ Hovorun, “Is the Byzantine...”, 289-290.

approaches is that of Aristotle Papanikolaou, who uses the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ (and the *theosis* that becomes possible on the incarnation grounds) as a lens for evaluating precisely the distortions effected and justified by an abusive extension of the authority of tradition.⁶

Thus, if we consider these perspectives that dare to re-evaluate the symphonic model in a biblical and patristic light liberated from ideological contamination, it becomes clear that the Eastern Orthodox could not avoid a future confrontation with past shortcomings especially now, in the context of a secular society.

A toxic offspring of the old Byzantine symphony and one of the most irresistible temptations has been the alliance of the church with the nation, especially in the last century. To a certain extent, this is understandable, since the liberation from the oppression of various empires and the pursuit of independence in many central and eastern European countries were achieved with the support of the majority Orthodox churches. It was in this political context that the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to condemn the temptation of nationalism at the Pan-Orthodox Synod of 1872. The gesture, although to some extent politically inspired (since the autocephalous churches claimed the right to have their own patriarchates), was nevertheless prophetic.⁷ But this alliance outlived its initial context and escalated during the inter-war period.⁸

Seen from an outside and non-ideological perspective, one of the most obvious drifts towards heresy committed by the ROC is precisely towards ethno-phyletism. Reality itself was reframed by Russian political-religious ideologists to hide such implications. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand it after lightly stripping it of the ideological veneer. In Cyril Hovorun's terms, we can speak of two kinds of nationalism – ethnic and civilizational.⁹ In my opinion, the ROC makes use of both, at various levels.

Civilizational nationalism has inherent empire aspirations. And this kind of nationalism was popular, especially in Greek and Russian contexts, and the latter is directly related to the idea of “Russian world” as opposed to the western world.¹⁰ A specific feature of civilizational nationalism is that it “claims superiority for one civilization over others,” and its Russian version is more prone to war, as it has already proven in different parts of its former empire at the beginning of the new millennium.¹¹

Coming back to ROC, it presents itself as the Third Rome and deploys a whole arsenal of symbolic images evoking the uniqueness and messianism of Russian Christianity, sending the underlying message that the Kingdom of God finds its most

⁶ Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, esp. “Introduction”, 1-12; see also the “Conclusion”.

⁷ Cyril Hovorun discusses the context of this synod and explains how the concept was coined – in the context of the independence proclamation of the Bulgarian Orthodox church – and that it was considered a “heterodoxy” and even an “antichrist's doctrine” (See Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 188-189).

⁸ In Romania, for example, the feared Iron Guard was active in those years, and it attracted a lot of priests in its “nests”. (See, for example, Radu Ioanid, “The Sacralized Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 5:3, 419-453, DOI: 10.1080/1469076042000312203.)

⁹ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 147-169.

¹⁰ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 165, 168-169.

¹¹ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 169, 170.

appropriate form in Russian civilization. But, by way of the “Christianity defender” rhetoric, it appeals to the Christian sensibilities of the Eastern Europeans: it inflames the Orthodox ego (and aims to profit from all the West-East mentality clashes) and it fuels all the fears that secularism and different forms of progressivism stir in this part of the world, especially in traditional and conservative groups.

If such is the case, then the political religion promoted by the union of the Russian State and its obedient servant ROC marches under a double-faced banner: it claims to be the only genuine Orthodoxy, as well as the only genuine Christianity in the world capable to oppose secularism. Under different circumstances, a posture like the one described above might just be defensible. But, as we will see in the following pages, this is not the case for ROC.

ROC also claims – in agreement with the political powers – that to become genuine Christians, other neighboring Slavic nations must acquire something of the authentic Russian spirit and obliterate the differences. While the use of this claim is clearly ideological, the theoretical eradication of the differences between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians also signals ethnic nationalist features that are not only allowed but supported by ROC. In a recent declaration, Kirill talks about Ukrainians and Russians being “one nation that came out of the Kyiv baptismal font, but it is already a very large nation. From the White to the Black Sea... The Orthodox Church was and is the force that unites this nation.”¹² It is still unclear the extent this language applies but it nevertheless points towards a twist from the “one spiritual space framed by the Russian Orthodox Church,”¹³ depicted in 2019.

Indeed, ROC has taken enough steps to enter the zone of heresy with a shameful history loaded with violence. As Hovorun and others demonstrate, under this ethnic nationalism, campaigns of persecution and murder have been carried out in the majority-Orthodox countries and, not infrequently, with the blessing of some of the priests.¹⁴

ROC’s distortion and violation of its own principles of social teaching

It is sometimes said that the problem of Eastern European Orthodoxies is that they suffer the consequences of the fact that they have not experienced a modernity similar to Western Christianity.¹⁵ Moreover, the aggressive secularization that was imposed by communist regimes obstructed any interaction with modern ideas

¹² <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/01/7/7383898/>, accessed June 15, 2023.

¹³ An address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, at the conference on Russia – Ukraine - Belarus: A Common Civilizational Space?: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/46324/>, accessed June 15 2023.

¹⁴ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 47-66. Romania had more than 2000 priests attracted by the nationalist movement (see Lucian Leuștean, “For the Glory of Romanians’: Orthodoxy and Nationalism in Greater Romania, 1918–1945,” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 35, No. 4, September 2007, 731).

¹⁵ Radu Preda, *Ortodoxia și ortodoxiile. Studii social-teologice* (Cluj-Napoca, Eikon, 2010), 139-140. See also the chapter “A rămas oare Ortodoxia în premodernitate?” [Did Orthodoxy abide to premodernity?] by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Ortodoxie și modernitate. O introducere*, trans. Florin-Cătălin Ghiț (Cluj-Napoca, Eikon, 2010), 127-140.

and processes, triggering instead the emergence of survival strategies, often involving compromise at different levels and of different magnitude. It is plausible to think that ROC could fit into this description.

However, after the fall of communism, the Moscow Patriarchate produced two documents with a strong modern character: one on social teaching and the other on human rights. Below I will discuss parts of these documents relevant to the topic of this paper.

The relationship with the state and with the institutions of earthly power is a very important issue for ROC, as one can see reading *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (BSC)¹⁶ and reviewing the chapters dedicated to different aspects of this general topic (II – Church and Nation; III – Church and State; V – Church and Politics). The document evokes the Byzantine symphony somewhat critically, but the model suggested implies a rather harmonious relationship with the authorities – and seems to be inspired by the old symphonic pattern.¹⁷ The Church affirms an important place for itself in society and recommends itself as a privileged partner of the state. Even in relation to the army, the ROC envisages a wide range of interactions, spiritual assistance, and even spiritual authority. It is also open to the possibility of associating itself with any political regime, because “the Church does not give preference to any social system or any of the existing political doctrines” (BSC III.7).

However, when it comes to war, there are some clear stipulations that prohibit supporting unjust wars of conquest and oppression of others. Chapter VIII concludes with these words: “The Church also opposes the propaganda of war and violence, as well as various manifestations of hatred capable of provoking fratricidal clashes.” (BSC VIII.5) This article directly incriminates the recent declaration and actions of the ROC and its hierarchs.

Despite this apparent conclusion, one may find nuances that can be reread such as to justify aggression. Since the document stipulates that the “Church does not prohibit her children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbors and the restoration of trampled justice” (BSC VIII.2) and that “international relations should be based on the following basic principles: love of one’s neighbors, people and Fatherland; understanding of the needs of other nations; the conviction that it is impossible to serve one’s country by immoral means” (BSC VIII.2), it becomes evident that it leaves room for the arbitrary interpretation of notions such as “security of neighbors,” “trampled justice,” “the needs of other nations,” and the easily perverted “Fatherland.” The problem becomes even more complicated if one agrees that it is “difficult to distinguish an aggressive war from a defensive war” (BSC VIII.3).

¹⁶ *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*: <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx>, accessed May 15, 2023.

¹⁷ Cf. Ionuț Biliuță, “The Romanian Orthodox Church between the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Putinist Temptation: Ultrnationalist Propaganda Among Orthodox Clergymen and the Russian War Against Ukraine,” *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai - Theologia Catholica Latina*, (LXVIII) 2023, June, vol. 1, 127.

However, for everyone who has enough resources not to be misled the official propaganda, it is impossible not to see at least some discrepancies between the blind support for the “special military operation” and the social teachings of ROC. In the light of what the Russian military left behind in some Ukrainian cities (like Bucha), ROC is far astray from its principle that states: “War should be waged with righteous indignation, not maliciousness, greed and lust (1 Jn. 2:16) and other fruits of hell” (BSC VIII.3). Moreover, the goal prompting that “the Church has a special concern for the military, trying to educate them for the faithfulness to lofty moral ideals” (BSC VIII.4) is even blatantly trampled underfoot.

To reinforce this point, we may recall that in the ROC’s document, legitimate warfare is defensive, not offensive – although it recognizes that it is difficult to distinguish between these two. ROC claims that it “identifies with the victims of aggression and illegitimate and morally unjustifiable political pressure from outside. The use of military force is believed by the Church to be the last resort in defense against armed aggression from other states.” (BSC XVI.1) This principle should have prevented ROC’s leaders from blessing acts of aggression that clearly result in innocent victims. However, not even the deceptive language of the ‘special military operation’ (an ineffective euphemism) can hide the brutal reality of this military action. It is therefore legitimate to observe that ROC is contradicting the core meaning of its own social teaching. And only a distorted interpretation – involving significant reinterpretation and adjustments – could keep up appearances.

Dehumanization of the... human rights

After we have recognized in the previous section that there is an inconsistency between the teaching and the practice of the ROC, a possible “solution” to this inconsistency could have been provided by another official document of the same Orthodox Church, namely its official teachings on human rights: *The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* (BTHDFR).¹⁸ However, as one can realize, there are some persistently problematic views in this document as well.

Let us first record that there is a trend in Eastern European Orthodoxies to challenge the very idea of human rights on the grounds that it is a concept “inherently linked with a non-relational, autonomous, individualistic understanding of the human person that does not resonate with experience”¹⁹ or that it is “a secular or liberal Western concept”.²⁰

It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on these assertions, so it will suffice to mention them as possible sources or justifications for the suspicion with

¹⁸ *Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*: <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/>, accessed June 1, 2023.

¹⁹ Papanikolaou, *The Mystical As Political*, 88.

²⁰ Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde, “Introduction: Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights – An Ambiguous Relationship”, in Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde, *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights* (Leuven, Peeters, 2012), 4-5.

which some Orthodox thinkers regard the idea of human rights. Instead, here the focus will be on the idea of human dignity, which the ROC document defines as follows: “the notion of ‘dignity’ has first of all a moral meaning, while the ideas of what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul,” “while dignified life is related to the notion of God’s likeness achieved through God’s grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue” (BTHDFR I.2).

It is difficult to avoid – even if the document offers some further nuances – the inference that this conceptual framework opens the door to despising those who do not live up to a certain moral standard and labeling them as unworthy. Indeed, if certain human beings fall short of the basic level of dignity – so to speak – it could become legitimate to be treated differently from those who meet the (far from simple) minimum requirements.

To press further the idea, the document states: “A morally undignified life does not ruin the God-given dignity ontologically but darkens it so much as to make it hardly discernable. This is why it takes so much effort of will to discern and even admit the natural dignity of a villain or a tyrant.” (BTHDFR, I.4) The idea that natural dignity could be ontologically ruined is a daring statement that calls to mind the Reformation’s doctrine of total depravity. But the difference is that the Reformed sentence is allegedly pronounced by God. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the Protestant traditions experienced modernity and secularization and also supported democratic human rights on the grounds of human dignity. Such a dissimilarity should not be overlooked.

Back to the Moscow Patriarchate, this manner of defining dignity could license an arbitrary interpretation of human rights and leave them to the caprice of different proponents. And this seems to be precisely the case of ROC. In other words, if it wants to justify its attitude towards Ukrainians to Western Europe (since the religious and political perspectives are coextensive), it is precisely this controversial theological and moral playground the Russian majority church could make use of, justifying its pro-war attitude in this paradigm of fighting against undignified vices and ideologies – and against the people supporting them.

The problem stems from the fact that, instead of regarding dignity as inherent to any human being created in the image of God, this document claims for ROC the privilege of deciding on its own authority who is dignified and who is not. In other words, it converts dignity from an innate feature of every human person into a toilful and measurable virtue – although it is not clear who and how will measure it.

With this maneuver, it is not only that ROC can grant dignity exclusively to the privileged who are considered to meet certain criteria that can be redefined at any time, but also summons the diabolical game of dehumanizing “undignified” people. Instead of being a non-negotiable noun, dignity is transformed into an adjective with a variable and arbitrary value. What rights can those who are undignified have? Should these rights be respected – on what grounds? Is their humanity sufficient in

itself to command respect as a true person or not? These are just a few questions that arise if one considers such a conception.

Searle's emphatic statement reveals how this reasoning can be extrapolated to a whole country, not in a top-down manner (imposing the Christian values to all by the force of the state) but in a bottom-up manner (by nurturing these values in individuals that in the end would carry them in the society as a way of life):

“true fidelity to the Gospel requires a more tangible embodiment of the Gospel values of justice, peace, and compassion. A country can rightfully be called ‘Christian’ not by the number of people who claim to belong to a religious institution, but by the extent to which the gospel values of honesty, dignity, freedom, justice and compassion are embodied in both the culture and the everyday realities that determine social and personal relationships among the people as a whole.”²¹

Even if ROC does not make plain use of this perspective in the context of the war against Ukraine, this view is implicitly present. Moreover, since this has been an official teaching it certainly left some marks in the Russian popular mind. Once the idea that there is no “equal dignity of mankind” is induced, it opens the door to all kinds of discrimination: ethnic, political, religious, racial, etc. Thus, even a catechized believer can more easily justify his active support for the war if others could be labeled “Nazis,” “Satanists,” “globalists” and so on. More than that, if the Church agrees to collaborate with the official ideology, human dignity can be made the object of political definition.

Another significant issue is that there remains little room for a clear-cut distinction between church and society if a “direct link between human dignity and morality” (BTHDFR, I.5) is identified. If only those morally apt are dignified, and since the church should impose moral principle, it comes as an unavoidable consequence that the believer can fulfill the standard. Alternatively, moral behavior could be faked, in which case the church would consist of hypocrites. Either way, the church and the civil society are hard to separate.

Some critique from within the Orthodox tradition

In order to complete the picture and to provide a critical perspective from the same theological background, we will now shift the focus to the document endorsed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP): *For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (FLW).²² Significantly less influenced by the old models, FLW openly criticizes the Byzantine symphony legacy, and inspired by biblical prophethism, it suggests a significantly different approach for the relations with sec-

²¹ Joshua Searle, “A Theological Case for Ukraine’s European Integration: Deconstructing the Myth of “Holy Russia” Vs. “Decadent Europe””. *Theological Reflections: Eastern European Journal of Theology* 20 (2), 2023: 25. <https://doi.org/10.29357/2789-1577.2022.20.2.1>.

²² This document was published two decades after ROC’s statements and a strong Western influence is visible in the way of thinking things through. <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>, accessed June 2, 2023.

ular powers. It emphatically condemns ethno-phyletism and acknowledges its harmful consequences in different countries. Even patriotism is treated with the same caution since there is a danger to be “mistaken for a virtue in itself, or for a moral good even when one’s country has become profoundly unjust or destructive.” This document speaks outright against nationalist idolatry in unequivocal terms: “it is absolutely forbidden for Christians to make an idol of cultural, ethnic, or national identity” (FLW §11).

Returning to Hovorun’s terms, EP’s position reprobates ethnic and civilizational nationalism at once leaving no room for any favorable attitude towards these toxic ideologies. A cautious patriotism is all we can support if we are to stick to what is right from a biblical, patristic, and theologically sound perspective.

Regarding a desired political regime, the Ecumenical Patriarchate expresses its plain preference for democracy, “a very rare blessing indeed, viewed in relation to the entire course of human history, and it would be irrational and uncharitable of Christians not to feel a genuine gratitude for the special democratic genius of the modern age” (FLW §10).

Since human rights are essential in a democracy (providing the very foundation for this societal structure), and they are accepted by virtue of the inherent dignity of *every* human person, the church is recommended to support this perspective: it “should support the language of human rights, not because it is a language fully adequate to all that God intends for his creatures, but because it preserves a sense of the inviolable uniqueness of every person and of the priority of human goods over national interests, while providing a legal and ethical grammar upon which all parties can, as a rule, arrive at certain basic agreements” (FLW §12).

From this perspective, the church is not against society, but it rather acknowledges that despite the fact that the Christian goal for human beings cannot be fully accomplished in earthly society and by its means, there is still a significant value in the human rights language which “can help to shape and secure rules of charity, mercy, and justice that the Church regards as the very least that should be required of every society.” This is the reason why this “language... must be unfailingly affirmed and supported by all Christians in the modern world” (FLW §63).

This appreciation of democracy and human rights significantly limits the possibility of arbitrary, ideologically contaminated interpretations and establishes a solid basis for the relationship between the Orthodox theological tradition and modern liberal democracies. It preserves human dignity as a minimum and non-negotiable innate feature of every person, regardless of their set of beliefs or moral performance.

Further, the EP document is much more cautious in its references to war, questioning the very notion of just wars which “are never blessed by God” and the Church “could never refer to war as ‘holy’ or ‘just’” (FLW §46, 47). One could hardly find in this text a theological justification for what is currently happening in Ukraine.

The effort put by Orthodox thinkers in grappling with new realities such as the nationalist resurgence, democratic regimes, and human rights language, should be

invited to join the conversation over/against the outrageous claims made by ROC. Following the statement of the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete, Cyril Hovorun calls the theological support offered to nationalistic ideologies, i.e. phyletism, “an ecclesiological heresy.”²³ Romanian theologian Radu Preda is of the opinion that “etho-phyletism lingers beyond any doubt as a pastoral cancer that devours the foundations of modern Orthodoxy, split into local orthodoxies that compete with each other.”²⁴ As a result, the nationalist ideology is not only toxic for the various Orthodox patriarchates, but it also adds conflictual potential to the already complicated relations among autocephalous Orthodox churches. (This competition can be illustrated with the case of Moldavia, which has two parallel hierarchies, divided between Moscow and Bucharest.²⁵ And the situation is quite similar in most of the Western countries with Orthodox minority communities.) Yet another perspective is added, for example, by Dragoș Herescu, who sees in these temptations faced by the Church (including ethno-phyletism and nationalism) “the greatest secularizing danger for the [Romanian] Orthodox Church,” since it submits to a secular agenda of defining religious identity and surrenders to secular categories.²⁶ These statements are enough to prove the point that a nationalistic agenda comes with many intrinsic dangers and cannot be used by the Church without a high cost.

The Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis states that “the culture of human rights seems, indeed, to represent a particular challenge that Orthodoxy, whether historical or real, as well as Orthodox theology itself, have not always been able to tackle positively”, and, in fact, this culture seems to be absent from Eastern Orthodox countries.²⁷ In Aristotle Papanikolaou’s view “the Orthodox notion of divine-human communion... actually implies the rhetoric of human rights.” Moreover, “Christians promote a space that maximizes the conditions for the possibility of rejecting God” thus enabling religious freedom. Papanikolaou is a forthright opponent of the BTHDFR document that severs this close connection between dignity and morality: “Orthodox can, and indeed must, endorse human rights talk, since human rights structure relations in such a way that humans are treated as unique and irreplaceable, thus mirroring sacramental communities. In other words, human rights can be considered a practice that realizes uniqueness and irreducibility, even if to a lesser degree than what is possible.”²⁸

It is thus significant that through the EP’s document ROC’s assertions are presented with opposing views originating in the same Orthodox environment. This is at the very least indicative of the fact that it is possible to draw on the same theological tradition and to arrive at different or even contradictory conclusions. But it should also

²³ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 190.

²⁴ Preda, *Ortodoxia și ortodoxiile*, 14-15.

²⁵ Biliuță, “The Romanian Orthodox Church”, 126.

²⁶ Dragoș Herescu, “Ortodoxie, societate și secularizare în România – O perspectivă critică”, in Răzvan Brudiu Mihail K. Qaramah, eds., *Biserica și Statul: perspective diacronice asupra unei relații polivalente* (Iași, Doxologia, 2023), 142.

²⁷ Kalaitzidis, *Ortodoxie și modernitate*, 45-46.

²⁸ Papanikolaou, *Mystical as Political*, 117.

be noted that the FLW document was developed against the backdrop of a secularized society, while ROC's statements were produced in a context where the Church was a close ally of the state. Even more significantly, the EP's position seems to assess the multi-millennial heritage critically, screening it for, and acknowledging sins and distortions of the biblical and patristic teachings. It is highly commendable that more and more Orthodox theologians seem to be ready to process their own dogmatic treasure for use in the contemporary context.

Sources of contagion

For Orthodox countries in the region, the three issues discussed above are also potential pest holes of ideological contamination – if we were to use medical language. Firstly, the idea of an ethnically and theologically defined nation is still lingering in fundamentalist circles in Romania, Serbia or Greece. As some scholars suggest, nostalgia for the Iron Guard (the nationalist political-religious group of the inter-war period) is revived and there are even attempts to retroactively legitimize some “Legionary” activists by beatifying them on the basis of their suffering in communist prisons.²⁹ The details of this complex issue are yet to be unearthed but it is relevant that in 1937, for example, “33 out of 103 representatives of the Iron Guard Party [in Parliament] were Orthodox priests.”³⁰ The nationalistic influence was strong enough to survive even the communist repression and imprisonment. Nationalist sentiments continue to exist and manifest in Romanian society, no matter whether they are backed by the “martyrs” or not. But the so-called “Prison Saints” are at hand for anyone that wants to connect the nationalist ideology with the Orthodox faith. Recent parties, with a strongly populist discourse, revive various themes in an explicitly national-religious key. And, of course, national messianism closely follows this discourse. The adversary can be globalization, the EU, and, if necessary, any other Western entity that seems to threaten the identity of modern nation-states.³¹ It is in this common resentment towards a common adversary that some Orthodox and even evangelicals could join with the official propaganda circulated by ROC and Putinists.

However, it is important to keep this in mind: the Romanian national-religious identity developed in a rather polemical relationship with the Muscovite Orthodoxy. And the shades of resentment begotten of a tormented history did not go away.³² In Hovorun's terms, Romanian “nationalism was more particularist and isolationist.”³³ As Adrian Velicu points out, the post-communist discourse on national identity focuses mainly

²⁹ Ionuț Biliuță, “Constructing Fascist Hagiographies: The Genealogy of the Prison Saints Movement in Contemporary Romania,” *Contemporary European History*, 2021, 1-21, doi:10.1017/S0960777321000424.

³⁰ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 62.

³¹ Biliuță, “The Romanian Orthodox Church”, 129-131.

³² See, for example, Matei Udrea, “Rusofobia la români. De ce nu-i suportă poporul român pe ruși: jaloanele unei ostilități seculare”, *Colecționarul de istorie*, Published 26 martie 2021: <https://colectionaruldeistorie.ro/rusofobia-la-romani-de-ce-nu-i-suporta-poporul-roman-pe-rusi-jaloanele-unei-ostilitati-seculare/>, accessed May 30, 2023.

³³ Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 56.

on the Latin cultural element (a Greek-Catholic influence) that singles out Romanian Orthodoxy in this part of the world.³⁴ This is despite the fact that until the 19th century, the liturgical language in the Romanian Principalities was Old Slavonic. Contagion therefore does not come from the resonance with pan-Slavic ideas, but rather from the rejection of the West and from the illusion of self-determination that authoritarian leaders put forth. As Joshua Searle noticed: “In both Orthodox and most Protestant churches, we see the same desire for a ‘strong hand,’ as well as anti-Western sentiment, passive tolerance of legal nihilism, nostalgia for Soviet-style communism, widespread nationalism, and anti-democratic attitudes.”³⁵ This is also true for the Romanian Christian environment and it “can be partly explained by fear or lack of information, and partly by religious traditions that promote adaptation and submission.”³⁶

However, the nationalistic discourse gets approval even from evangelicals when it laments the fate of the Romanian minority in Ukraine, which is considered to have no free speech rights. Because here the ethnic component takes precedence – and the pro-Russian propagandists know how to manipulate it – the religious element is significantly blurred and ethnic Romanians from Ukraine become “our brothers” by virtue of their ethnic origin and language, regardless of their religious convictions.

Much more relatable, however, is what Hovorun calls civilizational nationalism. Not so long ago, it would have been difficult to find a Romanian evangelical publicly praising the civilization created by Orthodoxy – although in some theological circles, there was a sincere and genuine appreciation for Orthodox theology inspired by patristic thought. Once Western secularization began to be perceived as a threat to “Europe’s Christian roots,” things changed significantly, and the self-proclaimed defenders of this Christian heritage are gaining appreciation and support. Authoritarianism is also seen as proof of resilience in this “culture war.” Power seems the most promising and effective weapon against ideological threats. Heavy-hand rulers are praised as godly people who are determined to protect Christianity at any cost and (often said *sotto voce*) by any means. Those who raise their voice in religious political discourse are given an aura that exonerates them of a plethora of sins because they seem courageous enough to defend “us” against “them.” But in order to be able to fight against the others and to legitimize this fight, another key factor is needed, which leads us to the next point.

A more subtle and pervasive element of influence is connected with the perspective on human dignity. Especially ideological progressivism and discourse on sexual minority rights are stirring – inevitable – reactions in conservative circles. This should not be a problem *per se*, but understood as a component of the dynamics of a democratic society and of a functioning public space. However, the problematic issue is how these rights should be linked to human dignity. If it is accepted that dignity is intrinsic to a person by virtue of being born, then an attitude of respect will accompany any

³⁴ Adrian Velicu, *The Orthodox Church and National Identity in Post-Communist Romania* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 18-26.

³⁵ Searle, “A Theological Case”, 19.

³⁶ For example, 6 out of 10 Romanians share a favorable perception of Viktor Orban, another “strong hand” figure. See <https://ziare.com/ungaria/ungaria-sondaj-popularitate-premier-viktor-orban-romania-1752595>.

public or private dialogue with people who share other beliefs. Conversely, if dignity is depicted as a virtue acquired by conforming to traditional or allegedly Christian moral standards (as the ROC document suggests), then respect is no longer implicit – and this often seems to be the tendency in traditionalist circles. The next step could be to dehumanize any opponent who does not meet the minimal standards of morality for one to be considered “worthy” of respect. Thus, it is not the *image* of God in every person that is the ultimate factor that substantiates respect for his/her dignity, but rather the *likeness* – if we are to keep using Orthodox theological language. And this likeness seems to be assessed in terms of public morality exclusively. This system of evaluation is highly problematic from a Christian point of view. Moreover, a democracy is not functional if rights and freedoms can be preferentially regulated or minorities can be oppressed.

This kind of discourse also seems to be appealing to evangelical communities, which have become very sensitive to the idea of culture wars imported from American conservatives. And since many contemporary ideologies explicitly attack traditional – Judeo-Christian-inspired – morality, the promoters of these new mindsets easily fall into the category of those not morally qualified to be granted human dignity. Therefore, their human dignity is undermined and can be disregarded without a twinge of conscience, especially if they are also explicit atheists or anti-theists. And we should always keep in mind that “the attractive prospect of imposing the kingdom of God on a godless society has been tempting to Christians for many centuries, although the history of Christian theocracy is a history of failure.”³⁷

For example, when, before the war broke out, the authorities in Moscow had announced legal measures against people who declared themselves gay or against movies considered to be propagandistic, there were particularly appreciative reactions in conservative circles, regardless of Christian denomination.³⁸ However, no such reaction was triggered by the legal measures that stripped Jehovah’s witnesses³⁹ and evangelical communities of some of their privileges and rights.⁴⁰

In spite of these troublesome developments, the myth⁴¹ promoted by Russian propaganda permeated the Romanian media – be it mainstream or niche – because it creates a sense of belonging to the same tradition that opposes the maleficent Western influences. And this unlikely agreement and unity become possible since “for each type of audience, [the myth] can mean something different, which at the same time merges into the general meaning controlled by power or ideology.... It is important to understand that myth does not hide or conceal anything; its main function is to deform the

³⁷ Searle, “A Theological Case”, 23.

³⁸ For a series of legal decisions that restricted the freedom of speech, see Andrey Shishkov, “‘Russkii mir’, Orthodoxy and War”, *Theological Reflections: Eastern European Journal of Theology* 20 (2), 2023, 65. <https://doi.org/10.29357/2789-1577.2022.20.2.5>.

³⁹ https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2021/05/03/forb_in_russia/, accessed on June 3, 2023.

⁴⁰ <https://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/news/has-russia-banned-evangelism.cfm>, accessed on June 3, 2023.

⁴¹ Following Roland Barthes, Andrey Shishkov underlined the task of myth, within this context: “The task of a myth is to create a sense of belonging, not to explain it rationally.” (See Shishkov, “‘Russkii mir’, Orthodoxy and War”, 69.)

content.”⁴² It is a plausible explanation for the uncritical and somewhat unexpected submission of Romanian believers to the Russian political-religious ballyhoo.

Bringing all these together results in a more benevolent attitude toward the motives behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Especially when Ukrainian leadership affirms their pro-European orientation, some Orthodox majority, and Evangelical minority Christians tend to resonate with the political-religious Russian propaganda. They may not support the war openly, but they do not condemn it either. Harvesting the fears, resentments, and unfulfilled expectations, there are political actors and demagogues who pour oil on the fire, in order to maintain the tensions and to gain visibility and popularity. Significant parts of the Romanian Christian churches are easy prey for these master puppeteers, regardless of their denominational affiliation. That is not to say that they will all fall for this, but the danger is there. Admittedly, the deconstruction of this insidious discourse is an “important task that should be done not only by political scientists and sociologists, but also by theologians. But it is important to analyze existing narratives, not to invent them.”⁴³

But such a task would be more of a quest for underlying causes that are not articulated and expressed openly. If in the case of Russian society, the “lack of self-esteem,” “a sense of constant humiliation and fear,” “a lack of self-confidence” or “resentment”⁴⁴ are where one could seek a possible explanation for the success of political-religious ideology, similar research would be of help for understanding the deeper roots of the Romanian Christians’ sympathy with this propaganda.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I discussed some things probably known to most readers. What I pointed out first was that the ROC can be shown to be at odds with Orthodox dogma on phyletism and with some of its own social teachings. At the same time, clear contradictions can be seen between the tenets of social teaching in the Russian documents and those in the document endorsed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, on sensitive topics such as nationalism, human rights, or just war theories.

But what is the main emphasis of this article is rather the contagious potential of the ideology that ROC uses to argue its blessing of a criminal regime and a war that has nothing holy in it. I have illustrated this contagious potential with three ideas that already have followers in Romania and that have been wrapped in a tunic of spirituality to hide their deeply flawed and eminently toxic essence. There is a clash between traditionalism and progressivism, between religiosity and secularization, etc., but the true defenders of the old Christian faith are not dictators or populist leaders who incite hatred, contempt, or, ultimately, public and even physical assassination of their opponents. Human dignity is God-given, a consequence of the divine image innate in every human being (no matter how morally vile one may become), and cannot be removed by any church no matter what its claims are.

⁴² Shishkov, “‘Russkii mir’, Orthodoxy and War”, 69.

⁴³ Shishkov, “‘Russkii mir’, Orthodoxy and War”, 73.

⁴⁴ Shishkov, “‘Russkii mir’, Orthodoxy and War”, 76.

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Несвященна війна. Єресі та богословські помилки Російської православної церкви у підтримці війни

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Анотація: Важко не помітити, що Російська православна церква (РПЦ) стала не на той бік, коли відкрито підтримала війну проти України. Але, роблячи це, РПЦ залучила деякі проблематичні і навіть єретичні вчення. Вона прийняла єресь (етно)філетизму, поєднала етнічний націоналізм з цивілізаційним націоналізмом у токсичну суміш, а також порушила власне соціальне вчення, яке прямо говорить, що ведення агресивної зовнішньої війни є однією зі сфер, “в якій духовенство і канонічні церковні структури не можуть підтримувати державу або співпрацювати з нею.” Більше того, вона просуває і підтримує політичну ідеологію, яка принижує людську гідність, притаманну кожній живій людині. У цій статті ми коротко розглянемо кожне з цих богословських порушень і завершимо її деякими застереженнями про те, що такі ідеї мають заразний потенціал, який може легко поширитися на інші країни регіону, з акцентом на прикладі Румунії.

Ключові слова: етнофілетизм, права людини, політична релігія, етнічний і цивілізаційний націоналізм.