



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Critical analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate vision on the Russian–Ukrainian military conflict: *Ruskiy mir* and just war

Viorel Coman 

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium  
Email: [viorel.coman@kuleuven.be](mailto:viorel.coman@kuleuven.be)

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## Abstract

This article contrasts the teaching on just war as presented by the 2000 document, ‘Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church’ (Moscow Patriarchate), with the insights provided by a similar social document issued in 2020 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, ‘For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church’. The article argues that whenever religion is instrumentalised to justify the political ambitions of church and secular leaders, and especially when they are used as the main driving force behind military conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, it is the prophetic role of theologians and scholars to show that religion offers resources to deconstruct the weaponisation of Christian faith for political gain.

**Keywords:** just war; Orthodox Christianity; political theology; social ethics

After weeks of extreme tensions and diplomatic attempts from the side of the European Union and US political leaders to stop the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, President Vladimir Putin launched an unprecedented and unprovoked military aggression on a neighbouring country. In fact, the war is the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict that started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the Russian support of the separatist forces in the Donbas region, which includes Luhansk and Donetsk.<sup>1</sup> To justify the invasion, Vladimir Putin challenged Ukraine’s right to statehood, and claimed that the ‘special operation’ – as Putin and his political establishment call the war – seeks to de-militarise and de-nazify the country, which has been captive by extreme nationalist politicians who perpetrated crimes against Russian-speaking Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in Ukraine. When one thought that the Russian justification of the war could not become more shocking, Patriarch Cyril (or Kirill), the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, aligned his discourse with the pro-war rhetoric, supporting, blessing and justifying the political agenda of

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the newspaper article by Cyril Hovorun, ‘L’idéologie du “monde russe” sous-tend la guerre en Ukraine’, *Le Courrier d’Europe Centrale*, 12 March 2022. The short newspaper article is an interview with Cyril Hovorun by Gwendal Piégais.

the Kremlin and the military aggression in Ukraine. In a sermon on 6 March 2022 (which, ironically enough, was Forgiveness Sunday in the Orthodox Church – the final day before the fasting period that precedes Easter), Patriarch Cyril abandoned all caution and blessed the war, saying that the military intervention is a fight against the external and dark forces of the western liberal world, to which Ukrainian politicians have slavishly surrendered.<sup>2</sup> These forces, exemplified by the promotion of the rights of the LGBT community, alongside individualism, atheism, secularism, pluralisation and globalisation, have, he maintained, been imposed upon Ukrainians, destroying the Christian values of the country and encouraging a sinful life among its citizens.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the same church leader blessed partial mobilisation in Russia, encouraging people to fulfil their military duty: ‘Remember that if you die for your country, you will be with God in his kingdom, glory and eternal life’.<sup>4</sup> This looks like the invitation to a crusade or a holy war against the pagan West, with Patriarch Cyril comparing military mobilisation (sending young soldiers to death) with the sacrifice that God the Father made by sending his Son to death.<sup>5</sup> He even promised indulgence and forgiveness of sins for all Russian soldiers dying in Ukraine. What Patriarch Cyril has done since February 2022 onwards has been to shape the military conflict in terms of a justified war between the forces of good (Russia and its moral traditional values) and the forces of evil (the western world and its growing influence on Ukraine). Instead of using his position to stop the war and bring peace (as might be expected, since the Patriarch of Moscow was at the time the spiritual leader of many Orthodox Ukrainians), Cyril finds justifications for the military conflict, claiming that the aggressor is not Russia but the West and its un-Christian values, which have infiltrated Ukraine and pose a serious threat to the religious and cultural space of what he defines at the *Russkiy mir*: the ‘Russian world’, composed of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> The process of

<sup>2</sup>The sermon of Patriarch Cyril is available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html> (accessed 18 January 2023).

<sup>3</sup>Patriarch Cyril’s critique of modern secular values dates from much earlier than 2022. See Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, *Freedom and Responsibility: A Search for Harmony – Human Rights and Personal Dignity. Selected Addresses by His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2011); Métropolitte Cyrille de Smolensk et de Kalingrad, *L’Évangile et la liberté. Les valeurs de la Tradition dans la société laïque* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Patriarch Cyril urged soldiers not to be afraid of fighting in Ukraine during a sermon in Moscow on 21 September 2022. The sermon is partially available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5961645.html> (accessed 18 January 2023).

<sup>5</sup>Such a comparison between Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Russian soldiers in Ukraine was made by Patriarch Cyril in a sermon on 25 September 2022. The sermon is available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html> (accessed 18 January 2023). Serhii Shumylo calls Patriarch Cyril’s theology as ‘Orthodox Shahidism’. See Serhii Shumylo, ‘“Orthodox Shahidism” and Moscow Patriarch Kirill’s Neo-Pagan Theology of War’, in *Orthodox Times*, 11 December 2022. Shymylo’s article is available online at <https://orthodoxtimes.com/orthodox-shahidism-and-moscow-patriarch-kirills-neo-pagan-theology-of-war/> (accessed 18 January 2023).

<sup>6</sup>The 2018 decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is regarded by Moscow Patriarchate as an intrusion of the Patriarchate of Constantinople into the areas of Russian canonical and spiritual jurisdiction. For a detailed presentation of the 2018 event, see the following academic publications: Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning and Nadieszda Kizenko (eds), *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022); Nicholas E. Denysenko, ‘Explaining Ukrainian Autocephaly: Politics, History, Ecclesiology, and the Future’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 62/2–3 (2020), pp. 426–42; Thomas Bremer, ‘Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda – Missed Opportunities, Lost Chances,

westernisation of Ukraine is regarded by the Patriarch as a sinful corruption of the traditions and values of the territories that form the so-called *Russkiy mir*. For him, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is, therefore, justified as a means of defending the *Russkiy mir*.

Against this background, this article shows how in the discourse of the Moscow Patriarch the military conflict in Ukraine is identified as a just and admissible war, even a holy war. In doing so, the first section of the article looks at the document titled, *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, a comprehensive statement by the Moscow Patriarchate from 2000 that subscribed to the doctrine of just war. It is this Russian church document that offers Patriarch Cyril the supportive framework to turn the military conflict in Ukraine into a just war. The next section then details how the expansionist and imperialist ideology of the *Russkiy mir*, developed and promoted by Patriarch Cyril, who is also the man behind the social document, is used to elaborate a justification for the invasion and for sending Russian soldiers into Ukraine. The final section of the article explores an alternative Orthodox view on just war: the approach of the social document issued in 2020 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

### The social document of the Russian Orthodox Church on just war

In August 2000 the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church issued the document titled *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*.<sup>7</sup> It was the first time that the Russian Orthodox Church had adopted a comprehensive document that engaged the most relevant political and social issues at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. The document embraces a conservative approach and 'sets forth the basic statements of the Russian Orthodox teaching on church–state relations and a number of problems socially significant today'.<sup>8</sup> Divided into sixteen chapters, the social document explores issues such as church–state relationships, church and politics, labour, property, family values, bioethics, ecology, secular science and media.<sup>9</sup> Patriarch Cyril, at that time metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad and

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Bad Options for the Moscow Patriarchate', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 62/2–3 (2020), pp. 443–51; Radu Bordeianu, 'The Autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Its Impact Outside of Ukraine', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 62/2–3 (2020), pp. 452–62; and Thomas Bremer and Sophie Senyk, 'The Current Ecclesial Situation in Ukraine: Critical Remarks', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 66/1 (2019), pp. 27–58.

<sup>7</sup>The English version of the social document (hereafter SDMP) is available at <https://mospatusa.com/files/THE-BASIS-OF-THE-SOCIAL-CONCEPT.pdf> (accessed 18 January 2023). The French translation of the same document was published in 2007; see Église orthodoxe russe, *Les fondements de la doctrine sociale* (Paris: Cerf & Istina, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>The quote is taken from the introductory paragraph of the social document.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed analysis of the social document and the many themes it engages, see, for example the following publications: Pauliina Arola and Risto Saarinen, 'In Search of Sobornost and "New Symphony": The Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church', *The Ecumenical Review* 54/1 (2002), pp. 130–41; Olga Hoppe-Kondrikova, Josephien van Kessel and Evert van der Zweerde, 'Christian Social Doctrine East and West: The Russian Orthodox Social Concept and the Roman Catholic Compendium Compared', *Religion, State & Society* 41 (2013), pp. 199–224; and Venyamin Novik, 'Examen critique de quelques aspects du "document social" du Synode de Moscou', *Istina* 45 (2000), pp. 255–63. See also the commentaries to the social document that were included in Josef Thesing and Rudolf Uertz (eds), *Die Grundlagen der Sozialdoktrin der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche* (Bonn: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2001). In addition to chapters commenting on the social vision of the Russian Orthodox Church, this volume includes the German translation of the social document of the Moscow Patriarchate.

head of the Department of External Church Relations, was directly involved in the development of the social document. As Alexander Agadjanian has highlighted,

the work on the document involved about twenty-five people, including both clerical authors and lay experts, under the supervision of the then Metropolitan Cyril. The fact that the document was drafted in Cyril's office rather than in the Theological Commission of the Holy Synod speaks of the influence of the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad on the text.<sup>10</sup>

In chapter VIII, titled 'War and Peace', the social document details the Russian Orthodox Church's position on military conflicts via five relatively short subchapters, claiming that it reflects the basic principles of Orthodox tradition.

The authors of the social statement do not hesitate to emphasise in the opening lines of chapter VIII that 'war is a physical manifestation of the illness of humanity'. It continues in the same paragraph by saying that 'War is evil. Just as the evil in man in general, war is caused by the sinful abuse of the God-given freedom'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the document goes on to bring certain clarifications that seemed necessary for the drafters to nuance the statement that war is evil. The document points out that, 'while recognizing war as evil, the Church does not prohibit its children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbours and the restoration of trampled justice'.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it states that 'in all times, Orthodoxy has had profound respect for soldiers who gave their lives to protect the life and security of their neighbours. The Holy Church has canonized many soldiers...'.<sup>13</sup> To reinforce the idea that the Orthodox Church is not opposed to war, if the protection of the nation and its members is at stake, the social document refers to the ninth-century scholarly exchange between St. Cyril Equal-to-the-Apostles and a Muslim, in which the former rejects pacifism. According to St. Cyril,

we defend one another and give our lives in battle for our neighbours, so that you, having taken our fellows prisoners, could not imprison their souls together with their bodies by forcing them into renouncing their faith and into godless deeds. *Our Christ-loving soldiers protect our Holy Church with arms in their hands.* They safeguard the sovereign in whose sacred person they respect the image of the rule of the Heavenly King. They safeguard their land because with its fall the home authority will inevitably fall too and the evangelical faith will be shaken. These are precious pledges for which soldiers should fight to the last. *And if they give their lives in battlefield, the Church will include them in the community of the holy martyrs and call them intercessors before God.*<sup>14</sup>

Paragraph VIII.2 is not the only place in the social document that is at odds with pacifism and acknowledges a sort of a holy war (though without naming it as such). As Inga

<sup>10</sup>Alexander Agadjanian, 'The Social Vision of Russian Orthodoxy: Balancing between Identity and Relevance', in Jonathan Sutton and William van den Bercken (eds), *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 164, n. 2.

<sup>11</sup>SDMP, §VIII.1.

<sup>12</sup>SDMP, §VIII.2.

<sup>13</sup>SDMP, §VIII.2.

<sup>14</sup>SDMP, §VIII.2; emphasis added.

Leonova rightly observes, ‘the document further invokes the image of St. George killing the dragon as a metaphor for the rejection of pacifism’ and the reinforcement of the right to use force over evil.<sup>15</sup> By doing so, the social document subtly conveys the idea that a war that defends Christian faith and morality is just and blessed.

Without any reserve or constraint, the next sub-section of chapter VIII explicitly defends the theory of just war – a move which took many by surprise because eastern Christianity, unlike western Christianity, does not have a tradition of a just war doctrine. Matthew 26:52 (‘They that take the sword shall perish with the sword’) is used by the drafters of the document to biblically anchor the idea of just war. After praising Christianity for the development of high moral standards in international relations and military conflicts along with the idea of just war, the social document enumerates the criteria that would need to be fulfilled in order to name a war ‘just’, acknowledging their western Christian origin, which goes back to Augustine.<sup>16</sup> The theory of just war not only justifies a military campaign (*jus ad bellum*), but also sets the ethical limits of war and prevents extreme violence (*jus in bello*). Although the document admits that ‘it is sometimes difficult to distinguish an aggressive war from a defensive war’, and that ‘the question whether the Church should support or deplore the hostilities needs to be given a special consideration every time they are initiated or threaten to begin’, it maintains that there are situations when the use of force is justified to eliminate evil and restore justice.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, the document rejects pacifism and non-resistance to evil, stressing that ‘the Church has a special concern for the military, trying to educate them for the faithfulness to lofty moral ideals’.<sup>18</sup> The discussions on war are followed by a relatively long sub-section on peace, which concludes with the statement that ‘the Church also opposes the propaganda of war and violence, as well as various manifestations of hatred capable of provoking fratricidal clashes’.<sup>19</sup> As Leonova points out, this concluding statement sounds quite interesting given the instrumentalisation of the Moscow Patriarchate by the Russian political establishment, as well as the discourse of Russian church leaders in the months following the beginning of the war.<sup>20</sup>

Patriarch Cyril’s rhetoric on the war in Ukraine stays in line with the vision of the social document on admissible and justified military conflicts. His false identification of the aggressor (Russia) with the victim that needs defence and protection is deliberately manipulated to fit the scenario and the criteria of a just war, even a holy war: what happens in Ukraine is morally justified and serves a noble purpose (*jus ad bellum*). It has a just cause, which is self-defence: the protection and liberation of the Russian world and civilisation (of which Ukraine is presented as an integral part) from the colonisation

<sup>15</sup>Inga Leonova, ‘The Two Social Doctrines’, unpublished paper presented at the annual conference of the European Academy of Religion (EuARE), Bologna/Italy, 20–23 June 2022, p. 1. Leonova’s short paper can be consulted at [https://www.academia.edu/82898494/The\\_Two\\_Social\\_Doctrines](https://www.academia.edu/82898494/The_Two_Social_Doctrines) (accessed 19 January 2023).

<sup>16</sup>SDMP, §VIII.3. For an analysis of the notion of just war in western Christianity, see Eric Patterson and J. Daryl Charles, *Just War and Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2022); Gregory M. Reichberg, *Thomas Aquinas on War and Peace* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017); David D. Corey and J. Daryl Charles, *The Just War Tradition: An Introduction* (Wilmington, NC: ISI Books, 2012); John J. Mattox, *St. Augustine and the Theory of Just War* (London: Continuum, 2009); Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975).

<sup>17</sup>SDMP, §VIII.3.

<sup>18</sup>SDMP, §VIII.4.

<sup>19</sup>SDMP, §VIII.4.

<sup>20</sup>Leonova, ‘The Two Social Doctrines’, p. 2.

and enslavement by the aggressive forces of western liberalism and secularism. For Patriarch Cyril, the godless West and its corrupted agenda pose an existential threat to the integrity and stability of the Russian world, which is uncritically portrayed as the depository of morality and defender of authentic and traditional Christian values. Given the fact that after 2014 Ukraine has continuously tried to depart from the Russian orbit and embrace an identity shaped by foreign non-Christian values, Patriarch Cyril maintains that the military intervention needs to be wholeheartedly supported as a justified campaign against the degenerated West for the salvation of Holy Russia and its people. The defence of the Russian world is the main narrative used by Patriarch Cyril to justify the war in Ukraine and to inspire people to fight for its superior and world-saving cause. Since the concept of the 'Russian world' was not developed in the context of the war but is much older, and since it has turned out to be the driving ideological force behind the military conflict, the next section of the article takes a closer look at the notion of the *Russkiy mir*. Particular attention is paid to the development of the *Russkiy mir* doctrine and its dualistic worldview.

### The *Russkiy mir* ideology: a dualistic worldview

A comprehensive definition of the concept of the 'Russian world' is offered by the 2022 Declaration of Orthodox scholars denouncing the *Russkiy mir* as the driving ideology behind the war in Ukraine. Issued on 13 March 2022, at the initiative of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University and Volos Academy for Theological Studies, 'A Declaration on the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) Teaching' (DRWT) was signed by an impressive number of 1500 international scholars of various Christian confessions, reaching a global audience. According to the drafters of the declaration, the concept of the *Russkiy mir* refers to

a transnational Russian sphere or civilization, called 'Holy Russia' or 'Holy Rus', which includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan), as well as ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people throughout the world. It holds that this 'Russian world' has a common political center (Moscow), a common spiritual center (Kyiv as the 'mother of all Rus'), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow), who works in 'symphony' with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as upholding a common distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup>The English version of the 2022 declaration is available at <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/> (accessed 20 January 2023). The 2022 declaration has been translated into multiple languages: Russian, Ukrainian, Greek, Romanian, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Croatian, Hungarian, Estonian, Dutch, and Finnish. I will quote from the English version that was published by Brandon Gallaher and Pantelis Kalaitzidis in *Mission Studies* 39 (2022), pp. 269–76. The French translation of the declaration – *Sur l'enseignement du 'Monde russe'* – was published in 2022 in *Istina* 63/3 (2022), pp. 359–65. For a comprehensive introduction into the concept of *Russkiy mir* and its worldview, see the following publications: Kathy Rousselet, 'The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkii Mir', in *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations?*, pp. 121–44; Cyril Hovorun, 'Interpreting the "Russian World"', in Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (eds), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 163–71; Andrey Shishkov, "'Russkii mir", Orthodoxy and War', *Theological Reflections: Eastern European Journal of Theology* 20 (2023), pp.

Scholars define the notion of the *Russkiy mir* in various ways: a doctrine, a concept, an ideology, a neo-imperial project, a theory, a strategy, a series of norms, an imagined community, etc.<sup>22</sup> Kathy Rousselet speaks of the *Russkiy mir* as a post-secular rhetoric and strategy that ‘entwines the political, the cultural, and the religious’ to protect ‘the existence of a deeply rooted Christian civilization’ both in Russia and western Europe.<sup>23</sup> The *Russkiy mir* positions Russia as ‘a forefront of the Christian civilization’, a sort of global defender of religious faith and traditional or conservative values against western secularism and liberalism.<sup>24</sup> Cyril Hovorun prefers to define the *Russkiy mir* as another version of the ideology of ‘civilizational exceptionalism that has permeated Russian political thinking and Russian culture in general since at least the early modernity’.<sup>25</sup> The medieval Muscovite state, the Russian empire, and the Soviet Union saw themselves empowered with a special historical and messianic mission.

The definition provided by the DRWT captures the doctrine of the *Russkiy mir* in its final and most elaborated stage. However, the concept – as several scholars point out – has witnessed a certain development over the past three decades. In the 1990s the notion of the *Russkiy mir* was introduced in the public space to fill in the void created by the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, it was meant to comfort Russian people and revive their sense of cohesion and identity in times of political, social and economic uncertainty. In this context, the concept of the *Russkiy mir* was conceived of as a liberal project to unify Russian-speaking people, reinforce the link of the post-Soviet Russian diaspora with their homeland and show the contribution of Russia to a global civilization as a democratic state.<sup>27</sup> After 2000, by contrast, the concept of the *Russkiy mir* took a more institutional and religious direction, especially because both Kremlin and the church became interested in it. For Vladimir Putin, the notion served the development of the idea that Russia is a *sui generis* form of democracy, different from western democracies, which gradually paved the way for the emergence of his autocratic leadership style. Especially after 2004, the notion of the *Russkiy mir* evolved into an ideology that emphasised more and more Russian particularism and exceptionalism. And from 2006 to 2007 onwards, the evolution of the concept has been significantly shaped by the Russian Orthodox Church, especially by Patriarch Cyril, who has infused the ideology of the *Russkiy mir* with a religious, eschatological and messianic elements<sup>28</sup>: the *Russkiy mir* is defined by traditional and conservative Christian moral values, as opposed to the decadent West and its

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63–78; David G. Goodin, ‘The Rise of the Third Rome: Russkii mir and the Rebirth of Christendom’, *Journal of the Council for the Research on Religion* 2 (2021), pp. 71–88.

<sup>22</sup>Svetlana M. Aleinikova, ‘*Russkii mir*’. *Belorusskii vzgliad: monografiia* [Russkii mir. A Belorussian View: A Monograph] (Minsk: RIVSh, 2017), pp. 8–9, n. 1.

<sup>23</sup>Rousselet, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkii Mir’, pp. 122, 139.

<sup>24</sup>Patriarch Cyril, ‘Speech at the Plenary Session of the 20th International Educational Readings’. The speech is available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5928249.html> (accessed 20 January 2023).

<sup>25</sup>Cyril Hovorun, ‘Russian Church and Ukrainian War’, *The Expository Times* 134 (2022), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Cyril Hovorun, ‘Esta es una guerra de la santa Rusia contra el impio Occidente’, *La Vanguardia*, 12 June 2022. See <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20220612/8324959/guerra-santa-rusia-occidente-impio.html> (accessed 20 January 2023); Cyril Hovorun, ‘Russian World 2.0 and Putin’s Spirituality’, *Religion in Praxis*, 26 February 2022. The article is available at <https://religioninpraxis.com/russian-world-2-0-and-putins-spirituality/> (accessed 20 January 2023).

<sup>27</sup>Hovorun, ‘Interpreting the “Russian World”’, p. 164.

<sup>28</sup>Hovorun, ‘Russian Church and Ukrainian War’, p. 6; and Rousselet, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkii Mir’, pp. 129–34.

globalist, liberal and secular agenda.<sup>29</sup> Such an understanding of the *Russkiy mir* served the political goals of Vladimir Putin: the only solution for Russia to become again a world superpower is to defend the so-called traditional or conservative values that challenge the actual global political order and the dominance of liberalism and globalism. ‘The moralization of its message’ allows Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate to advance ‘global claims’ and unite under its leadership all political and religious structures that reject the unipolar world order imposed by the West.<sup>30</sup> The *Russkiy mir* concept is, therefore, key to understanding the nature of the war in Ukraine and its transformation into a defensive and just war by Patriarch Cyril and Russian politicians. Ukraine, which, according to the architects of this ideology, belongs *volens nolens* to the cultural, political and religious space of *Russkiy mir* – from which it tried to depart as a rebellious child seduced by the West – needs to be purified from foreign influences and brought back home. Hence, the war in Ukraine is justified because it saves and defends the entire space of the *Russkiy mir*.

Over the past decade, and particularly since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, scholarly criticism has mounted against the ideology of the *Russkiy mir*. For example, the DRWT takes a firm stance against the *Russkiy mir* ideology, condemning it from a theological perspective as a toxic and harmful heresy<sup>31</sup> – a ‘form of Orthodox ethno-phyletist religious fundamentalism, totalitarian in character’.<sup>32</sup> It is regarded by the drafters of the DRWT as profoundly un-Christian and un-Orthodox, especially because it substitutes for the kingdom of God earthly kingdoms and political systems that are expected to save and redeem the whole of humanity.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the *Russkiy mir* attributes divine authority to a particular (viz., Russian) culture, which assumes a messianic role. In addition, the *Russkiy mir* ideology shows the enslavement of the church by the state and the church’s failure to stand prophetically against all injustices and crimes. The church and Orthodox values are instrumentalised by the state to promote its political ambitions and goals.<sup>34</sup> The *Russkiy mir* ideology thus promotes a myth of

<sup>29</sup>For an excellent analysis of Russia’s embracing of traditional Christian values and its role in the global culture war that challenges the dominance of western liberal political order, see Dimitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022). See also Kristina Stoeckl, *Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), especially pp. 47–59; Mikhail Suslov and Dimitry Uzlaner (eds), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>30</sup>Kathy Rousselet, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church and the Global World’, in Giuseppe Giordan and Sinisa Zinskrac (eds), *Global Eastern Orthodoxy: Politics, Religion, and Human Rights* (Cham: Springer, 2020), p. 41.

<sup>31</sup>In his paper presented at the 2023 conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association (Volos, 11–15 January), Cyril Hovorun argued that the *Russkiy mir* is a heresy and compared its vision with that of the Pagan Graeco-Roman world. According to Hovorun, ‘both worlds seem to be dualistic and coercive, riding on the confusion between religion and politics’. He went on to argue that Irenaeus of Lyon defined these features as heresy: ‘These features had become embodied in the religious trends and movements which St Irenaeus and his like-minded contemporaries identified as heresies. In the same vein, I believe, we could approach the Russian world doctrine’. See Cyril Hovorun, ‘Is the “Russian World” Doctrine Condemnable?’, unpublished paper presented as part of the panel on ‘The Russian World’, chaired by Michael Hjälms. Hovorun’s conference paper is available at [https://www.academia.edu/94886791/Is\\_the\\_Russian\\_World\\_Condemnable](https://www.academia.edu/94886791/Is_the_Russian_World_Condemnable) (accessed 20 January 2023).

<sup>32</sup>Brandon Gallaher and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, ‘A Declaration on the “Russian World” (Russkii mir) Teaching’, *Mission Studies* 39 (2022), p. 271.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 274, 276.



purity that is uncritically ascribed to a particular political system and nation. This myth of purity adopts a dualistic and Manichaeic worldview, which divides everything into good and evil, in which the evil is always the other: non-Russian people, the West, etc. This myth of purity and moral superiority of Russian Orthodoxy and culture can easily be debunked simply by noting that 'on issues such as abortion, alcoholism, domestic abuse, political and economic corruption, the conditions in hospitals, in institutions for the elderly, the orphans, and the disabled, and in prisons, the overall situation in Russia and eastern Europe gives no reason for boasting'.<sup>35</sup> This is to say, the *Russkiy mir* doctrine does not create space for genuine self-criticism and self-questioning. Also, it is structured by a sort of determinism, which opposes diversity, human agency, change and evolution. Russians construct a fixed identity for the Ukrainians and for themselves, defined by certain values, which should always be part of who they are, regardless of what Ukrainians are and what they really want, think and believe.

This criticism is extremely important, because when religion is distorted, politicised and instrumentalised to serve military purposes, it is the role of theologians to show that religion can also be used to counter the war rhetoric of the Russian church leaders and politicians. However, it is not only the *Russkiy mir* ideology that should be targeted as a source of criticism; the idea of just war in eastern Christianity should not go unchallenged. In fact, the notion itself is simply rejected by many Orthodox churches, which claim that the language of just war has never been part of the eastern Christian tradition. The social document *For the Life of the World: Towards A Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, which was issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2020, is illustrative in this regard.<sup>36</sup>

### The social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on just war

The document titled, *For the Life of the World: Towards A Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (FLOW), was drafted in 2020 by a special commission of twelve Orthodox theologians coming from various regions within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.<sup>37</sup> All members of the commission were appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew with the blessing of the Holy and Sacred Synod in Constantinople. As John Chryssavgis noted, 'in many ways, FLOW complements the work and comprises part of the reception process of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church, which was convened in Crete, in June 2016'.<sup>38</sup> FLOW comprises nine chapters that address burning social questions such as the role of the church in

<sup>35</sup>Editorial: 'A Timer of Reckoning for the Church', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 66/1–2 (2022), pp. 6–7.

<sup>36</sup>A broader comparison between the two social documents has been offered by Heta Hurskainen, 'The Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Social Ethos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: A Comparison of Central Aspects', in *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations?*, pp. 73–95.

<sup>37</sup>See David B. Hart and John Chryssavgis (eds), *For the Life of the World: Towards A Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (hereafter FLOW) (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020). The entire document is available online at <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos?fbclid=IwAR2RSPrGyRrHPfAgT9p2iIQkd9wqtOYJ74Gtjnpmyq9xYdxshwqr6U1FJFiY> (accessed 23 January 2023). The social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate has already attracted the attention of theologians of various Christian denominations. See, for example, the entire issue of *Theology Today* 78/4 (2022); *Ecumenical Trends* 49/5 (2020); and *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35/2 (2022). See, also, the article by Nikolaos Asproulis, 'Doing Orthodox Political Theology Today. Insights from the Document *For the Life of the World: Towards A Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*', *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 13/1 (2021), pp. 16–30.

<sup>38</sup>John Chryssavgis, 'Guest Editorial', *Theology Today* 78/4 (2022), p. 344.

public space, secularisation, human rights, environmental issues, nationalism, poverty and violence, just to name a few.

The social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate engages the topic of war in chapter V, 'War, Peace, and Violence: For the Peace of the Whole World', which comprises eight paragraphs (§§42–8) of equal length. Unlike *Bases of the Social Concept*, which limits its discourse to the issue of war, the social 2020 document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate explores and rejects every kind of violence: sexual assault, domestic violence, abortion, hate-crimes, acts of terrorism, acts of war, etc. Chapter V opens with the idea that

the violence intentionally perpetrated by rational human agents, especially when organized and prosecuted on a massive scale as war between peoples or nations, is the most terrible manifestation of the reign of sin and death in all things. Nothing is more contrary to God's will for creatures fashioned in his image and likeness than violence one against another, and nothing more sacrilegious than the organized practice of mass killing. *All human violence is in some sense rebellion against God and the divinely created order.*<sup>39</sup>

FLOW adds in the next paragraph that any form of violence, war included, 'is sin *par excellence*. It is the perfect contradiction of our created nature and our supernatural vocation to seek union in love with God and our neighbor'.<sup>40</sup> Because it is intrinsically evil, 'the Orthodox Church cannot, naturally, approve of violence, either as an end in itself or even as a means for achieving some other end'.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, like the Moscow social document, FLOW acknowledges that even though violence is always and univocally condemned by the church, 'there are times when there are no perfectly peaceful means of cultivating peace for everyone'. The church is, therefore, deeply aware of the 'tragic necessity of individuals or communities or states using force to defend themselves and others from the immediate threat of violence'.<sup>42</sup> What FLOW emphasises is the idea that there are times when the protection of the vulnerable, the prevention and limitation of violence, as well as the promotion of peace, cannot 'be accomplished without the judicious use of force'.<sup>43</sup> Paragraph 46 is fundamental to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's approach to military conflicts: it rejects the theory of just war, even though it does not embrace pacifism. By doing so, it differs from the approach of the Moscow social document. FLOW states:

The Orthodox Church has not historically insisted upon a strictly pacifist response to war, violence, and oppression ... And yet *the Orthodox Church has also never developed any kind of 'Just War Theory'* that seeks in advance, and under a set of abstract principles, to justify and morally endorse a state's use of violence when a set of general criteria are met. Indeed, it could never refer to war as 'holy' or 'just'. Instead, the Church has merely recognized the inescapably tragic reality that sin sometimes requires a heart-breaking choice between allowing violence to continue or employing force to bring that violence to an end, even though it never ceases to

<sup>39</sup>FLOW, §42.

<sup>40</sup>FLOW, §43.

<sup>41</sup>FLOW, §44.

<sup>42</sup>FLOW, §45.

<sup>43</sup>FLOW, §45.

pray for peace, and even though *it knows that the use of coercive force is always a morally imperfect response to any situation.*<sup>44</sup>

To support such a statement, FLOW brings into discussion the devastating physical and spiritual harm inflicted upon those involved in war,<sup>45</sup> as well as the famous Canon 13 of St Basil of Caesarea,<sup>46</sup> which prescribes penitence for soldiers and invites them to stay away from the Eucharistic gifts for a certain period of time, even though that they are not considered criminals by the church:

even in those rare situations in which the use of force is not absolutely prohibited, *the Orthodox Church still discerns a need for spiritual and emotional healing among all persons involved.* Whether one suffers or inflicts violence, no matter what the cause, the whole person is always harmed, and this harm is invariably deleterious to one's relationship with God, neighbor, and creation. Hence, for example, St. Basil recommended that a soldier who kills in the course of fighting in a defensive war, *though not himself an intentional 'murderer', should nonetheless abstain from the Eucharist for a limited time, and undertake penitential discipline, as his 'hands are not clean.'*<sup>47</sup>

The position of FLOW on just war is not singular within the Orthodox Church. Many eastern Christian scholars who research the topic of war in the Orthodox tradition have reached similar conclusions. For example, Stanley Harakas, who explored in detail the topic of war in Orthodox Christianity, shows that 'there is an amazing consistency in the almost totally negative moral assessment of war in Eastern Christianity, coupled with an admission that war may be necessary under certain circumstances to protect the innocent and to limit even greater evils'.<sup>48</sup> However, Harakas immediately adds that, 'in this framework, war may be *an unavoidable alternative*, but it nevertheless remains an evil. Virtually absent in the tradition is any mention of a "just" war, much less a "good" war. For the Eastern Orthodox tradition ... war can be seen only

<sup>44</sup>FLOW, §46; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup>The same argument is also used by Aristotle Papanikolaou in his article 'The Ascetics of War: The Undoing and Redoing of Virtue', in Perry T. Hamalis and Valerie A. Karras (eds), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2017), pp. 13–35. Svetlana Alexievitch's book *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (New York, Penguin, 2018), also speaks about devastating experience of those involved in war, which harms their own being, as well as their relationships with their fellow humans. The original version of this book was published in Russian in 1985.

<sup>46</sup>St. Basil of Caesarea, *Canon 13*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. 162 vols. (Paris, 1857–1858), vol. 32:681C.

<sup>47</sup>FLOW, §47; emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup>Stanley Harakas, 'No Just War in the Fathers' (emphasis added). The short article is available at <https://incommunion.org/2005/08/02/no-just-war-in-the-fathers/> (accessed 23 January 2023). See also Stanley Harakas, 'The Teaching on Peace in the Fathers', in Hildo Bos and Jim Forest (eds), *For the Peace from Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace, and Nationalism* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), pp. 384–408. The article by Harakas was initially published in 1986. The French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément is of the same opinion: 'Historically, the Orthodox Church has accepted warfare sorrowfully as a sometimes-necessary evil, but without concealing that it is an evil which must be avoided or limited as much as possible'. Olivier Clément, 'The Orthodox Church and Peace: Some Reflections', in *For the Peace from Above*, p. 177.

as a “*necessary evil*”, and never as something good, holy or just.<sup>49</sup> As John A. McGuckin explicates, this does not mean that eastern Christianity was no guilty of inflicting violence on others throughout history; it rather means that ‘Eastern Christianity simply does not approach the issue from the perspective of “Just War” and endorses no formal doctrine advocating the possibility of “Just War”’.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it indicates that there should be no congratulatory theory on the morality of war, as it always remains an evil act. What Basil’s Canon 13 conveys is that ‘*a truly honorable termination of war, for a Christian, has to be an honorable repentance...* What this Basilian canon does most effectively is to set a “No Entry” sign to any potential theory of Just War within Christian theology’.<sup>51</sup>

It is not the goal of this section to offer a thorough investigation of the way eastern Christianity has approached war throughout the centuries. The references to the position of the social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on just war, coupled with the research findings of several experts in eastern Christianity, are meant to show that the Moscow Patriarchate’s subscription to the theory of just war is contested by many as un-Orthodox. Such a theory goes against the basic principles of Orthodox tradition that violence and war are inconsistent with the values of the kingdom of God. Even when circumstances render violence and war necessary and unavoidable, the shedding of blood is never justifiable from an Orthodox perspective. It is a manifestation of evil and sin, which, although necessary in certain circumstances, requires penitence and spiritual healing. However, even if the theory of just war were consistent with the teachings of Orthodox Christianity, as the Russian Orthodox Church claims, the military conflict in Ukraine cannot be approached in the way the Moscow Patriarchate frames it. First, the Moscow Patriarchate deliberately confuses the aggressor with the victim of aggression to fit the narrative that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a defensive and justifiable war. Needless to say, Ukraine’s embracement of the liberal values of the western world does not justify Russia’s use of military force against a sovereign and independent state. In other words, the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian political establishment fail to provide a just cause (*ius ad bellum*) for the invasion of Ukraine. Second, the theory of just war equally regulates the conduct of the parties engaged in an armed conflict (*ius in bello*). This aspect of the Just War Theory was completely and intentionally overlooked by the Moscow Patriarchate, which remained silent during the Butcha massacre and other atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the vision of the Moscow Patriarchate on the military conflict in Ukraine by paying attention to Patriarch Cyril’s justification of the Russian invasion, which is framed in the language of a just and even holy war. The first section of the article engaged with the 2000 social document of the Moscow Patriarchate to show how Patriarch Cyril’s reference to the war in Ukraine as a justified military conflict echoes the 2000 synodal teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church, which subscribe to the theory of just war. The second section critically explores the ideology of the *Russkiy mir* as the main narrative behind Patriarch Cyril’s justification of the war in Ukraine. This section was meant to show that the framing of the Russian military

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>John A. McGuckin, ‘Nonviolence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity’, in *For the Peace from Above*, p. 429.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 440; emphasis added.

invasion of Ukraine in terms of a just war relies on a false ideology that instrumentalises religious motifs, subordinates the church to the state, adopts a dualistic worldview and empowers a particular nation with divine and messianic rights. The last section of the article referred to the 2020 social document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to challenge the language of just war adopted by the Moscow Patriarchate in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

By way of conclusion, an essential aspect deserves to be highlighted: as the editorial of the first issue of the 2022 *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* rightly pointed out, the consequences of the Moscow Patriarchate's weaponisation of Orthodox faith are devastating, long-lasting and extend far beyond the boundaries of eastern Christianity. 'The moral cover' granted by the Moscow Patriarchate to the war in Ukraine is 'not only deepening the divisions within the Orthodox Church; it is sowing seeds of distrust, disillusionment, and even apostasy within the Church worldwide. We will all pay a high price in loss of credibility for generations'.<sup>52</sup> Because of this, whenever religion and religious elements are distorted and invoked to justify and back up the political ambitions of church and secular leaders, and especially when they are used as the main driving force behind military conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, it is the prophetic role of theologians and scholars to show that the same religion offers resources to deconstruct the false claims of the same leaders and their weaponisation of Christian faith for political gain. What is needed is sound theological reasoning to reject war propaganda that embraces a religious rhetoric. This article hopes to have contributed a bit to such efforts.

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<sup>52</sup>Editorial: A Time of Reckoning for the Church', p. 6.