

The Use of Religious Arguments for the Justification of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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The Russian war against Ukraine has put a religion at the center of public perception and journalistic reporting that has so far remained largely under the radar of broad public attention: Orthodox Christianity and, more specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox churches in Ukraine. Nearly every

news outlet these days has shown at some point symbolic images of the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill and Vladimir Putin in a gilded church setting. And indeed, this war and the justifications given by the Russian president and the head of the church for the military aggression have made clear how closely the Orthodox Church and the state are linked in Russia. On the other hand, the critical reactions of the Orthodox churches in Ukraine and the Orthodox churches worldwide have also demonstrated that Orthodoxy is not *always* guided by a “symphonic” closeness of church and autocratic state but that there are also Orthodox voices that speak for democracy, peace, and liberal values.

In this blog post, I focus on the Russian church-state side of this story. For the critical reactions of global Orthodoxy to the Moscow Patriarchate, I refer the reader to the blog [Public Orthodoxy](https://publicorthodoxy.org/) (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/>) of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University and, in particular, to the recent post [“A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ \(Russkii Mir\) Teaching.”](https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/) (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>)

Since the end of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church has largely failed to define its own constructive role in Russian society independently from the state. It has become a vehicle for a nationalist ideology that religiously elevates Russia’s role in the world. Putin is (or was) considered by the Patriarch, but also by many of his “fans” in the West, to be the last defender of Christian traditional values because he passed laws against homosexuals and sent bombs to Syria on the claim of defending Christians. By 2012, when Putin began his third term as president with a clear commitment to a conservative values agenda, the bond between the Kremlin and the Patriarchy was sealed. The war in the Donbas since 2014 and the creation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 2018 have radicalized the Russian Orthodox Church from within. Since 2018, all moderate forces within the Church had actually fallen silent, and the view that an end-time struggle was taking place in the Donbas, between the forces of good and the forces of evil, moved from the extreme right fringe of the Church to its center. Today we hear arguments from the mouth of Patriarch Kirill that were previously heard only in radical circles.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Russian side has used two different religious arguments (besides political and geopolitical arguments) for justifying the military aggression and invasion: first, the “salvation” of Russian Orthodox believers in Ukraine from “religious persecution”; and second, the “defense” of the Orthodox flock in Ukraine from being harmed by Western and secular values.

First, the topic of “religious persecution” was cited by Russian President Vladimir Putin as a reason for invading Ukraine in his 21 February 2022 speech. [Andriy Fert](https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2022/03/03/pray-against-foreign-invasion-or-pray-for-peace-ukrainian-orthodox-churches-and-the-russian-ukrainian-war/) (<https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2022/03/03/pray-against-foreign-invasion-or-pray-for-peace-ukrainian-orthodox-churches-and-the-russian-ukrainian-war/>) and [Dmytro Vovk](https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2022/02/25/religion-and-the-russian-ukrainian-conflict/) (<https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2022/02/25/religion-and-the-russian-ukrainian-conflict/>) have discussed and criticized this argument in their entry in this series, and I will therefore not linger on it further. I only want to add one small detail to the observation that the Russian Orthodox Church has been pushing the “religious persecution” argument for many years. In 2014, the Representation of the Moscow Patriarchate to the Council of Europe created a website called orthodoxrights.org (<http://orthodoxrights.org/>). The website that claims to be “Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe” is still online, but it appears to have been actively maintained only until the end of 2020. The website is one further example of what I have called [“the moral conservative norm entrepreneurship](https://zenodo.org/record/2605250#.YixomujMKUk) (<https://zenodo.org/record/2605250#.YixomujMKUk>) of the

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Russian Orthodox Church." It is an example of how the Russian Orthodox Church over the last two decades has acquired expertise and skill to navigate international relations, human rights language and institutions, and social media. The website is professional and styled like that of any comparable human rights-watch NGO; the language is that of concern, liberty, and rights; and only once one digs into the content of the "annual" and "special" reports does one discover that this is exclusively about alleged violations of Russian Orthodox believers at the hand of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine or Ukrainian authorities. When Putin raised the claim of religious persecution in Ukraine in his speech, most Western observers did not understand what he was referring to. But as a matter of fact, from the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church and of Russian authorities, this was a well-rehearsed claim and a "confirmed truth."

The second argument that Patriarch Kirill used to justify the invasion of Ukraine, in his sermon on 6 March, was the necessity to protect the Orthodox flock from the "depraved Western world." Gay Pride events, the Patriarch said literally, are the West's test of loyalty, and a country unwilling to organize them would therefore become the target of attacks. Resisting such attacks, he said, is a matter of saving all humanity, a choice between salvation and damnation. The invasion of Ukraine, in other words, had a soteriological purpose, saving misled Orthodox brethren from a West that is trying to seduce them. The sermon was met with incomprehension in the Western media. The truth is, however, that the Patriarch was only repeating arguments that were already in circulation since 2014 around the religiously charged conflict in the Donbas. "Gayropa" and "Europe as the Antichrist" have been topics in circulation in Orthodox fundamentalists circles [for years](https://brill.com/view/title/55134?language=en) (<https://brill.com/view/title/55134?language=en>).

What I want to stress here is that the roots of this worldview are not only to be found in Russia but also in the West. The *culture wars* between progressive and conservative values have dominated the political landscape in Western democracies for many years, most notably in the United States. What used to be the dividing line between capitalism and socialism has today become a clash between a progressive, individualistic, liberal, and thus more heterogeneous view of society and a conservative, communal, and religious traditionalist understanding of society. Kirill does not refer to this ideological divide in his sermon by chance, but he does so on the basis of long-standing relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and conservative Christian groups, think tanks, and organizations in the West that by and large share his view of the culture wars. In the research project [Postsecular Conflicts](https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/postsecular-conflicts/) (<https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/postsecular-conflicts/>), we have studied transnational moral conservative networks and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church therein for many years. We have written about Russian involvement in the [World Congress of Families](https://zenodo.org/record/4286711) (<https://zenodo.org/record/4286711>), the [global homeschooling network](https://zenodo.org/record/3996930#.Yi5PC-jMKUK) (<https://zenodo.org/record/3996930#.Yi5PC-jMKUK>), and the [Russian pro-family policies at the United Nations](https://zenodo.org/record/2869896#.Yi5PI-jMKUK) (<https://zenodo.org/record/2869896#.Yi5PI-jMKUK>).

In several of these contexts, Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were part of events that also included Russian Orthodox activists who, on the one hand, were "learning" about the culture wars in order to translate topics and strategies for a Russian context and, on the other hand, were "acting" as part of the culture wars, presenting Russia and Orthodoxy as a stronghold of Christian values in the world.

Back in 2017, I had the chance to interview a representative of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York, and I asked him about his evaluation of Russia's diplomatic turn to pro-family values in the context of the United Nations Human Rights Council. He replied that every support of pro-family values was, in principle, welcome but that there were other things about Russia that were problematic, and he therefore preferred to keep some distance. "When we want to book a room at the UN headquarters for a pro-family event," he explained, "we prefer not to ask the Russians to do it." What was completely evident to my interlocutor and to me, as the researcher, was that conflict and tensions between progressive and conservative values are a reality in all contemporary societies, especially in the West; they are the reality of democracy, which would cease to be a democracy if each and everybody thought alike. Value conflicts are normal, they run right through societies, and that is why it is right to mobilize around them in the parameters of civility and constitutionality.

However, two weeks into the terrible war that Russia has inflicted on Ukraine, I realize that what throughout our research we saw as a largely metaphorical "war" has now become the pretext for a real war. The culture wars, which we thought about as a "war of opinions," has been turned by the Moscow Patriarch into a war over territory. This is devastating. I can only imagine that it is devastating also for those in the West who thought that the conservative standpoint in democratic debate could be strengthened by a strong Russian and Orthodox voice. The opposite is true. Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church have betrayed them also.

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