

## **Introduction to 'Orthodox Christianity and War: A historical, ecclesial and theological deliberation in pursuit of peace and inter-Church conciliation'**

**Presented by: Dr Romina Istratii on 18 May 2022**

### **Logistics and consent to record**

Welcome everyone who is joining us online and physically here at SOAS. We are very grateful to be able to organise this roundtable today and to have numerous speakers and discussants able and interested to take part in this.

Before we proceed, please be advised that the event will be recorded. We have turned off the cameras on Zoom, but you are welcome to open them if you do not mind your face showing in the recording. We will also be recording the roundtable discussion, capturing the room so if anyone does not feel comfortable being recorded, please do let us know so that we re-arrange your seating (the camera does not capture the whole room). The recording will be archived on SOAS' YouTube channel subsequently.

With this in mind, we can now begin. I will now press the record button and introduce the event.

### **Introductions and event background**

Welcome everyone again. My name is Dr Romina Istratii. I am UKRI Future Leaders Fellow in the School of History, Religions and philosophies at SOAS and Honorary Research Associate to the Centre of World Christianity.

I am joined by my colleague Dr Lars Laamann, Senior Lecturer in the same department specialising in the history of China and Christianity, who is also Chair to the Centre of World Christianity.

We are both very glad to be able to hold this roundtable event, which is really the culmination of a series of more informal virtual discussions we have had in recent months with colleagues in the UK, Estonia, Russia, Ethiopia, Kenya and other parts of the world to discuss what we perceive as the unsettling role that Orthodox Churches (Eastern and Oriental alike) are currently playing in politically-motivated wars affecting countries such as diverse as Ethiopia and Ukraine.

As a way of background, I am a Moldovan by birth but was raised for the largest part of my life in Greece. My family has relatives in both Ukraine and Russia, while I personally happen to work and live in Ethiopia, where I have been based since the eruption of the conflict in Tigray in November 2020. Importantly, I also work with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church traditions and affiliated institutions and I have witnessed from very close the convergence of religious and political discourse in the current conflict that often underpins pro-war sentiment. One prominent example is found in the case of a preacher affiliated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) who acts as social affairs advisor to the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed during this war.

When the Ukraine crisis started, I found it interesting to see some of the same dynamics play out in the context of Russian politics, despite the differences in history and socio-cultural conditions. Not only is there a strong identification of political and Church leadership in Russia that favours the war in Ukraine, but religious identity is invoked as a distinctive characteristic of an 'eastern' or Russian identity in need of protection from encroaching Western expressions of secular modernity and (multi-)cultural polyvalence.

The political events unfolding have resulted in rifts and divisions between different Orthodox Churches, endangering Orthodox unity within both eastern and oriental Christianity.

Both contexts ascribe to Orthodox Christian traditions, despite their theological, ecclesial and cultural differences. What historical events have informed or prompted the convergence of political and religious discourse in each context? How has the Orthodox theology, one of self-sacrifice, love and *theosis* or achieving likeness to God, lent itself to politics of war? What has been the role of Church hierarchies in war politics and do their positions reflect those of the laity and clergy on the ground? How might we respond to rifts in the Orthodox Churches when ethnicity or nationalism-oriented sentiments seem to have prevailed over a faith that should have no material boundaries and make no differentiations or exclusions on the basis of material markers?

We thought it appropriate and urgent to have a reflective discussion on the relationship of Orthodox Christianity to war from both theological grounds and the perspective these different countries' lived historical experiences. Today we will focus on the Ukraine conflict and in a future roundtable we will turn to look at the case of Ethiopia.

The aim of this is not only to deliberate on the relationship of Orthodox Christianity and war, but also to improve understanding among those who have little or no familiarity with eastern or oriental Christian traditions wondering how a religion can be used to support war and indirectly human loss. We'd like to nuance the conversations and representations given by media outlets and to provide a platform for mutual education. In parallel we want, either as scholars of Orthodox Christianity or Orthodox practitioners, clergy or theologians to reflect on these dynamics together and to consider, at this pivotal moment in human history, whether there is a different way of responding to tensions and differences within and beyond Orthodox societies that is more in line with the history of the Church to respond to challenges as a collective in a spirit of sobornost and aligned with the *phronema* of the Church Fathers and Mothers venerated in the tradition.

In terms of structure, we will have a series of presentations by specialised speakers grounded in historical, theological, ecclesial and lived realities, which will take most of the first hour. We will have a break for refreshments and in the second hour we will have a roundtable with our invited discussants, which will also be open to the audience.

### **Contextualising the discussion**

As a way of contextualising the presentations and discussions, I'd like to say a few things regarding the Orthodox faith from the perspective of a religious ethnographer, before Lars provides a more detailed presentation on historical development of Orthodox Christianity in Russia and the East.

I would like first to place this tradition in a theological and socio-cultural context. This is evidently a rough delineation, which is certainly flawed, and I stand to be corrected by the speakers who will come after me.

For those who have little familiarity, Orthodoxy pertains to the upright (ortho-) faith or belief (doxa) which was revealed to the disciples of Christ at Pentecost. Part of this faith has been preserved in written form through the Holy Scriptures. However, in Orthodox tradition the unwritten Holy Tradition which was perpetuated through the life of the Church and embodied in the experience of the saints has been equally important and complementary to the written revelations. The Holy Scriptures validate the importance of the Holy Tradition, while the Holy Tradition confirms and reinforces the revelations of the Holy Scriptures. This Holy Tradition was not doctrinally altered, but has been preserved in its essence as inherited by Christ. It includes the teachings of Orthodox Church Fathers and Mothers, the Synodical decisions of the Church Councils and other elements that have defined the liturgical life of the ancient Orthodox Church.

At the core of this Holy Tradition is the very soteriological aim of the Orthodox faith to heal the corruption of the human nature that was incurred following the disobedience of the first-fashioned couple and their expulsion from heaven. In the Orthodox Church, the faithful aim to achieve likeness with God and salvation by achieving uninterrupted communion with God, participating in the Sacraments and living a life of Orthodox asceticism. Following St Maximos the Confessor, this therapeutic pathway has been described as purification, enlightenment and *theosis*. As the faithful undergoes purification, she or he begins to be enlightened and to obtain insight into divine mysteries. This awakening of the nous to the grace and wisdom of God is what the Orthodox tradition has identified with 'noetic' theology. In other words, theology in this tradition has not been predicated on reason or intellect, but rather on the enlightenment of the nous.

The Orthodox Church not only has a distinct theology, but has historically acted with a missionary spirit, engaging cautiously with pre-existing social and political systems with the aim to transcend them and to consolidate the Christian message among new converts.

Socio-cultural, economic and political realities specific to the histories of what have been traditionally Orthodox societies mediated both the ways in which theology was pronounced by Church hierarchies or communicated through the clergy and the extent to which the faithful could embody the Orthodox worldview in everyday life. For example, regarding the historically Russian Orthodox populations, Elisabeth Gassin has observed the following:

Although these cultures may be considered traditionally Orthodox, given the modern history of these lands—which includes domination by Islamic and Communist forces that often did not allow the Church to educate its children fully—one may question how deeply an Orthodox ethos has penetrated such societies.<sup>1</sup>

It should be recognised also that the traditional prominence of the Orthodox Church in these societies deemed religious discourse susceptible to appropriation by different parties for political, socio-cultural and other vested interests, contributing to further distortions. Still, such discursive deployments need to be differentiated from the historical experience-based Orthodox *phronema* which the Church Fathers and Mothers, the saints and true theologians of the Orthodox Faith, consistently embodied and conveyed in their works, despite each

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<sup>1</sup> See Elisabeth Gassin, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Men's Violence against Women" in *Religion and Men's Violence against Women*, A. Johnson, ed. (Springer: New York, 2015), 165.

having lived in different eras and societal conditions. It also needs to be differentiated from the lived experiences of the faithful, who may have an incomplete understanding of their religious traditions and all theological matters, but may also be distanced from the faith albeit identifying themselves as religious or Orthodox. What one must understand about most religious societies in the world, not only Orthodox societies, is that in tradition-oriented societies organised around a major Faith tradition, most vernacular practices, and what the faithful may identify with culture, will inevitably be framed in religious terms. These terms may or may not emerge from a theological understanding of the Faith, but may be an inherited understanding and a habitual replication of the religious tradition because it is deeply valued and is integral to one's identity.

One of the tendencies that we have seen in media since the outbreak of the Ukraine war is for the positions of the Moscow Patriarchate or Patriarch Kirill to be taken as representative of the entire Church or to be given exclusive primacy as an influential ideological force in current discourses. These representations either assume that the religious leadership in Moscow has substantive power over political decisions and that were this position to change or disappear, events could take a different direction, and other representations consider the religious hierarchy enslaved to political appropriations.

Most analyses of this nature have paid limited or no attention to the complex and nuanced realities that have defined the Church-state relations in Russia since the end of the monarchy, during Soviet times and in post-soviet times. In fact, neither has been the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia without any political agency and influence, nor has it been unrestricted by state powers and interests. The appropriation of Orthodoxy by state or political interests is neither a new phenomenon, nor one that has not been debated intensely within Russia and beyond. Orthodox Christian identity has been integral in the conception and the evolution of Russian nationalist imaginary of a national character. On the topic, Zoe Knox has written:

Many Russian nationalists regard Orthodoxy as providing the only basis for a post-Soviet social and political order. Tismaneanu identifies one feature of national chauvinism as 'apocalyptic salvationism', by which he means the resistance to alien forms through indigenous traditions. In the Russian context, this is drawn from Orthodox messianism, one of the central features of the link between Orthodoxy and nationalism in Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars of Russian nationalism report that highly nationalistic Russians will identify themselves as Orthodox and see the shared faith as one unifying and distinctive aspect to build a Russian identity on. It is then fair to ask: How have different visions of state-building in Russia in post-soviet times conversed with Orthodoxy and can the effects be seen in current war politics? What has been the influence of such discourses in society?

More importantly, positions expressed by a Patriarch or the Church leadership as a whole may not have primacy with the clergy and laity on the ground, especially those who are more critical of the position of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Ukraine crisis or those who have been critical of the Church-state convergence in soviet times. Many parameters will mediate, not least being how laity and clergy are processing the political realities around them, the extent to which they rationalise these through a faith-informed lens and their own understanding of the faith and practised Orthodoxy. It has been extensively reported that

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<sup>2</sup> See Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

Orthodox Russians may strongly identify with Orthodox Christianity but tend to attend Church scantily. What does the Orthodox faith mean for the faithful and how does its embodiment manifest itself in political realities? Oftentimes, within Orthodox lived experience, the faithful are more likely to be influenced or guided by spiritual elders, saints' words and prophecies around world-changing events, and their own spiritual fathers and mothers. The opinions and positions of these diverse actors have not been captured sufficiently in current discussions, but might be central in understanding wider sentiments and responses in the community of the faithful, not only in Russia, but also in Ukraine currently and in neighbouring states.

### **So what can we say about the relationship of Orthodox Christianity to war?**

While any discussion about Orthodox Christianity has to be grounded in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts for the reasons outlined earlier, it can be agreed that the Orthodox Faith takes a clear position against the use of violence, teaching its faithful to love their enemies. As reflected best in the Old Testament Law, the Orthodox teachings are adamantly against murder. In parallel, it is also understood within the faith that one should protect oneself when their life and their life of their neighbour is being threatened. Thus, the Orthodox Church has blessed what may be described as defensive or 'just' wars. Emperor Constantine's vision of the Cross prior to the battle against Maxentius is commemorated and well-known among Orthodox believers. There are numerous instances in the history of what have been traditionally Orthodox societies when priests took up arms to fight and gave their lives in an effort to protect their mother lands, their communities and their churches and monasteries from invaders and external threats.

Even in the event of defensive wars where citizens are called to pick up arms to protect themselves and their families and homeland from invaders, the Orthodox Faith neither teaches nor celebrates the use of violence. For example, the Quinisext Council of the Orthodox Church ratified two canons by St Basil the Great, one of which includes rules on excommunication for those who murdered in times of war attacks - even in defence. While it is open to exploration to what extent this canon has been enforced in each Church, it is significant that it exists. In the history of the Orthodox Church, many soldiers of a strong faith chose martyrdom instead of using their military skills to fight. These military men are venerated as saints precisely because of having chosen to sacrifice their lives, rather than take the life of another, even that of a non-Christian enemy.

Theologically speaking, the Orthodox Faith considers God – understood as being Love Himself and having omniscience - can bring perfect justice in the world in ways that human beings cannot. God is not against humanity using man-made justice systems to protect human life and to promote lawfulness in society, but He does not condone the use of violence among His children for the sake of establishing social justice. The faithful may believe that using violence to stop what is perceived to be a wrongdoing will bring justice, but the faith would argue that the enemy of humanity (the Devil) and his servants will find ways to use the opportunity to foster more evil-doing. The Orthodox Faith aspires to the cultivation of a humble awareness among the faithful of their own imperfections and limitations as sin-prone human beings and, thus, asks them to show love and understanding for others, for God to understand them and to forgive them for our sins. This is not to suggest that the faithful should not strive towards social justice, but rather to stress that this should be done guided by an Orthodox conscience ("*phronema*") – with compassion and concern for

humanity, avoiding the use of violence, by understanding that violence will only beget violence.

I find it apposite to conclude this very rough contouring of the relationship of Orthodox Christianity to war by echoing the words of one of the Church's most venerated hierarchs, Saint John Chrysostom:

*For such is our war: it does not render the living ones lifeless, but leads the lifeless ones into life, filled with tameness and much leniency.*

*My habit is to be persecuted and not to persecute; to be fought and to not fight.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> See John Chrysostom, Encomiastic Essay on the Holy Martyr Phocas and Against Heretics.