

Editorial: Orthodox Christian Churches and War Politics in Ethiopia and Ukraine: Historical, Ecclesial and Theological Reflections

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In November 2020 a conflict erupted in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Religious discourse was used to propagate ideas favourable to war by both members of the public and church-affiliated individuals, including close advisors to the Prime Minister. Soon ethnicity became a clear dividing factor in Ethiopian society and the Church, resulting also in the declared separation of the Tigray Diocese from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOTC). A convergence of faith and politics was also seen in the crisis that erupted in Ukraine in February 2022. Not only was there a strong identification of political and Church leadership in Russia from the beginning that favoured the 'special military operation' in Ukraine, but religious identity was invoked as a distinctive characteristic of an 'Eastern' identity in need of protection from encroaching Western expressions of secular modernity. In this case too, the political events resulted in rifts and divisions between Orthodox Churches in Russia and Ukraine, endangering unity in the broader Eastern Orthodox world.

From the outset of the war in Ukraine, the media conveyed the impression that the Moscow Patriarchate or, more specifically, Patriarch Kirill, either held substantive power over political decisions or was entirely enslaved to political leadership. Conversely, in representations of the Ethiopian conflict the EOTC has often been identified with either the Patriarch's isolated condemnation of violence against Tigrayans or the inflammatory pro-war narratives of visible Church representatives. In relation to both conflicts, we saw tendencies among observers to reduce complex relations and narratives to homogenising pro-/anti-war lines of thinking, not recognising psycho-political experiences on the ground characterised by struggles of consciousness, self-censorship in the face of stark repercussions and the pressures of group think.

Most analyses of this nature have paid limited or no attention to the complex and nuanced realities on the ground in Russia and Ethiopia. Both contexts ascribe to Eastern Christianity (Chalcedonian and pre-Chalcedonian respectively), and while each Church has been shaped by specific historical developments and exegetical traditions, they share the core Orthodox Christian teachings that admonish against murder and the use of violence and encourage love even for one's neighbours and enemies. One of the Church's most venerated hierarchs both in Eastern Orthodoxy and the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, St John Chrysostom (in Ethiopia known as Yoḥannēs 'Afäwäraq, ዮሐንስ አፈወርቅ, and in Russia as Иоанн Златоуст), is often cited in relation to waging spiritual warfare on oneself through meekness and leniency and opting to be persecuted than to persecute another.

Still, the Orthodox faith's position on violence must be distinguished from the socio-cultural, economic and political realities of the Russian and Ethiopian Orthodox communities. The emergence of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in the early centuries under persecution by Roman Emperors, and later occupations and foreign invasions that Orthodox Christian societies had to witness and respond to inevitably fostered a liberatory and defiant spirit among its adherents, resulting in a long list of honoured martyrs. Thus, Orthodox Churches have previously blessed what may be described as defensive or 'just' wars (but not murder in the context of war), and there are numerous instances in the history of both Russia and Ethiopia when both priests and laypeople took up arms to protect their motherlands, their communities and their churches and monasteries against external threats.

These societies' political developments also mediated State–Church relations, the ways in which theology was pronounced by Church hierarchies and communicated through the clergy, and the extent to which the faithful could embody the Orthodox worldview in everyday life. The traditional prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in their respective geographies, both seen for long historical periods as state religions, have defined Church—State relations since the end of monarchy in both societies and have deemed them susceptible to political forces. The appropriation of religious discourse and institutions by state interest is not a new phenomenon and has been debated intensely within both Russia and Ethiopia.

In the Russo–Ukrainian conflict, neither has the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia been without political agency and influence, nor has it been unrestricted by state powers and interests. Orthodox Christian identity has been integral in the conception and the evolution of Russian nationalist imaginary (Knox 2005). Highly nationalistic Russians are likely to identify themselves as Orthodox and see the shared faith as one unifying and distinctive aspect of Russian identity. This raises the question how different visions of state-building in Russia since the end of monarchical rule, during the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet times have conversed with Orthodox leaderships, institutions and tradition and how these interactions reflect in current war politics and discourses in the wider society. Positions expressed by Patriarch Kirill or the Church leadership as a whole may not have primacy with the clergy and laity on the ground, especially those critical of the position of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Ukraine crisis. It is routinely reported that Orthodox Russians may proclaim a strong faith, but attend Church scantily (Pew Research Center 2017). Within lived experience, the faithful are likely to be guided rather by spiritual elders, the words of saints and their prophecies concerning the world and their own spiritual fathers and mothers. The opinions and positions of these diverse actors have not been captured sufficiently, however central they may be for understanding the wider sentiments and reactions in the community of the faithful in Russia, but also in Ukraine and in the neighbouring states.

Similarly, in the context of the Ethiopian conflict, media representations rarely reckoned with the complex history of State—Church relationships during at least the last four political eras that have defined contemporary Ethiopian politics and society (Haustein, Idris and Malar 2023). On the ground, we saw many members of the Ethiopian Orthodox community employing religious discourse to present state-led military action as patriotic. Others remained silent, conflicted about the position they should take, because of struggles of consciousness or because they feared state violence and communal condemnation. Meanwhile, EOTC Patriarch Abuna Mathias, an ethnic Tigrayan, openly condemned the violence in Tigray, which was later framed by others as coming from a place of ethnicity rather than religion. These different positions suggest tensions in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and community and a lack of coherent visions as to how the Church should respond to the divisive politics experienced in recent decades in Ethiopia. They also raise important questions, including whether the response of the Church in the Tigray conflict reflects a continuation of or a deviation from the Church's historical response to political violence, how laity and clergy processed the political realities around them and to what extent they rationalised conflicts through a faith-informed lens, and ultimately the Church's ability to influence political realities and peacebuilding.

To nuance conversations, in 2022 the editors organised two roundtables at SOAS University of London that brought together regional specialists, theologians, clergy and scholars to deliberate on these questions. The Western media's disproportionate focus on the Ukraine crisis as contrasted to the war in Ethiopia, despite the unprecedented humanitarian emergency in the region, was another motivation. Informed by a decolonial reflexivity, we sought to create a platform for Ethiopians, Ukrainians and Russians and their international diaspora to share their perspectives and experiences in a manner that enabled contextual and comparative analysis. The current special issue builds on many of the points made in the two roundtables with the same contributors (except one), who are directly connected to the contexts they discuss as members of the clergy, academics and humanitarian observers. The papers employ a variety of methodological approaches, including ethnographic observations, historical analysis, theological reflection and reviews of journalistic accounts. In writing their papers, contributors were encouraged to centre their papers on their positionality and to reflect on their affiliations and relationships to State and Church to achieve more reflexive analyses.

THE CHALLENGES OF BRIDGING LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH ACADEMIC PUBLISHING STANDARDS

By means of shedding light on their subjective understanding of the wartime events, we hoped to overcome the chasm between academic knowledge and theorising with the realities on the ground. To achieve this, we supported our non-academic authors very closely to develop arguments and analyses that met standards of robustness as would be anticipated by an academic publisher, never expecting them to be academic researchers or political analysts. We

rather focused on 'translating' across cultures, languages, terminologies and disciplines and hoped to improve the papers' argumentation, clarity and rigour of evidence, while ensuring that the papers remained accessible to a wider public. Thus we hoped to honour the original opinions and understandings of the contributors (not necessarily those of the editors).

We also committed to centring the special issue on diverse representation, not only in relation to context, geographical location and job title, but also gender. Unfortunately, as opposed to the roundtables that featured numerous female speakers and discussants, the special issue is exclusively comprised of male authors. Most of the female contributors we approached did not send a submission, and one of our female contributors who agreed to submit a paper was unable to do so due to conflicting priorities. This gender imbalance is also partly due to the fact that three of our contributors are members of the clergy, who are all male in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. To counterbalance this gender bias, we approached female peer reviewers where we could, and we are glad to have worked with at least one female reviewer for four of the seven papers featured in this special issue. In order to safeguard their identity, reviewers opted to remain anonymous, and we are not able to give them their due credit here.

At peer-review stage, some academics based in Western universities appraised non-academic contributions, especially in the context of the Ethiopian conflict, critically if they were believed to perpetuate 'mythological' narratives about the history of Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia and its role in nation-building. A couple of reviewers expressed the concern that the papers did not acknowledge more recent research that had revised some accepted historical narratives about the development of the Church and the dominance of the Orthodox faith in nation-building. This was particularly relevant from the perspectives of historically marginalised religious or ethnic groups, such as Ethiopian Muslims and Oromos. Another concern was that Church-affiliated authors did not sufficiently acknowledge the co-option of religious institutions by political parties, tending towards an apologetic tone.

We engaged with this feedback conscientiously, but we also saw our role as being primarily that of a facilitator rather than a gatekeeper. As 'outsiders' to these societies, no matter our connections and long-term community engagements, we did not consider it appropriate to dictate whose narrative should be included or not, but rather to make evident the tensions, divisions and contradictions between the various narratives that our interlocutors espoused. Despite clear ideological lines upheld by pro-war advocates in both conflicts, in neither of the two conflicts have opinions been absolutely homogenous, with the sides affected invoking different historical constructions to justify their positions. Our aim was to bring these differences to the fore so that those who did not witness the events might start to understand what exactly happened and enabled the violence and the bloodshed we have seen in the twenty-first century involving populations that nominally express allegiance to a faith based on principles of non-violence, self-sacrifice and loving one's neighbour.

Additionally, since much of the history of the Church and the nation is being revisited in Ethiopia, but also to a degree in Ukraine and Russia, we did not want to take a conclusive approach to this, but rather to help the authors become more aware of contradictory historico-political accounts so that they might integrate them in their works. In our editorial comments, we actively encouraged the authors to see the situations they analysed from the position of those they opposed or criticised, to revise language that essentialised the other side, some of which they uncritically reproduced echoing dominant ideological positions in their surroundings. Our aim was not to alter our authors' convictions, but to foster an environment of critical thinking and writing that could open a genuine space for self-reflection and dialogue. One could say that as editors our contribution was mostly an intervention to foster more empathy and understanding between those divided by war.

It is equally important to note that most of our authors were still embedded in conflict-related politics while they worked on their contributions and some faced the risk of being seen as taking sides or betraying their affiliated groups. We strongly encouraged the authors to consider these risks carefully, offering them the option of anonymity or publishing under an alias. One paper was anonymised to minimise likely repercussions for the author. There were cases, however, where the trauma of war was so raw that authors could not see beyond their anger and grievance, making the publication of their (valuable) papers premature.

Ultimately, many of the challenges that we faced in bringing voices from the ground to explore sensitive political realities in real-time point to aspects that need to be prioritised in any efforts for peacebuilding in either conflict. Any such initiative should begin by recognising that different sides may start with different constructed (his/her)stories (less or more factually grounded) about the events. This special issue may be seen as an effort to render visible these narratives that can grant those directly affected a point of reference from which concrete dialogue in their local contexts can start.

THE ETHIOPIAN CONFLICT IN TIGRAY

While the 'military operation' that the Ethiopian state army launched on 4 November 2020 in the Northern region of Tigray came as a surprise to many, those who had followed closely the political developments in Ethiopia since the ascent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the tense relationship with the historically dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) party were watchful and on edge. The pretext of war may have been presented as recent, and in political narrative blamed on the TPLF, but the causes of war could be found over different historical and political eras that defined Ethiopian history from the end of the monarchy in 1974, namely the Derg regime's variant of socialism, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) ethno-federalist system and Abiy Ahmed's radical political reforms under the motto of

Ethiopian unity which were put in motion in 2018. Beyond the domestic conditions that fuelled the conflict, there were also regional and international dimensions, evidenced in the involvement of Eritrea as an ally to the Ethiopian government. While in 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF fought alongside each other against imperial monarchy, they became opponents during the Eritrea—Ethiopia border war in 1998. Ethiopia prevailed in that war, but the countries remained hostile to each other until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed travelled to Asmara and reconciled the two countries, earning a Nobel Peace Prize.

Ironically, in November 2020, the same man opted in favour of war that from the beginning had strong religious undertones, as had his political persona, with the government leveraging on the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and affiliated departments to sway the public and to inspire patriotism. However, one could not simplistically speak of co-option, as the Church institution became a microcosm of historical grievances and ethnicity-based ambitions and divisions, leading to a deafening silence on behalf of its leadership. While indiscriminate violence was reported against civilians in Tigray, including gang rapes of women and nuns and the looting of churches and monasteries, prominent Church affiliates made public pro-war declarations and called for the 'elimination' of the 'enemy'. Meanwhile, the pleas of the EOTC Patriarch were unsurprisingly silenced, symptom of his undermined authority over the Church. Subsequently, and despite the ceasefire agreement signed in late 2022, the Tigray Diocese announced its separation from the EOTC. The three papers referring to Ethiopia offer a necessary context for understanding these developments, while reminding us not to treat the recent conflict and violence as exceptional.

Fr Jossi Jacob's paper entitled 'The Dynamics between the Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Polity in Modern Ethiopia and Its Role in Establishing Peace in the Country' examines the historical and political developments in the country since 1930. In particular, Ethiopia's distinct form of secularism in relation to Church history is scrutinised to further our understanding of the EOTC's role in past, present and future peace restoration efforts. The paper offers a necessary historical contextualisation centred on the state—religion relationship. While Fr Jossi Jacob was exposed to the country mainly as instructor of theology, which may have inadvertently granted the author a perspective that is closer to the EOTC than those historically marginalised by the state religion, it is valuable because of the author's ethnicity-neutral identity.

The paper entitled 'The Challenges of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Leadership in the Restoration of Peace and Stability in Ethiopia' offers a window into the lived experiences of the Church and its internal struggles alluded to in Fr Jossi's paper. The author, an EOTC priest, argues that the Church should be at the forefront of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, but this is made difficult by members of the Church leadership's silence or complicity in pro-war politics. According to the author, this inactivity reflects a deeper internal crisis that has allowed ethnicity-based politics to prevail over a shared religious identity. Consequently, the

establishment of the See of Selama Kessate Birhan (Mänbärä Sälama; መንበረ ሰላማ) in Tigray, and the developments with the Oromiya ecclesiastical office (Yä 'Oromiya Betäkəhənät; የኦሮሚያ ቤተክርስቲያን) should be appraised within this internal—external dynamic that points to the importance of involving both political and Church leaderships in reconciliation efforts.

John Binns's contribution, 'How Churches Can Become Trapped by Violence and Hatred: The Example of Italy in Ethiopia', adds a valuable comparative dimension to the analysis of the current conflict in Tigray and should be heeded by those who might perceive the Church's involvement in the war as exceptional. Binns, who has published on Ethiopian Orthodox Church history, provides a review of Ethiopia's Italian occupation between 1935 and 1941 characterised by intense and violent attacks on the Ethiopian Church. As Binns reports, these were supported by many in the Church in Italy with no condemnation from the papacy. Binns's parallelism seeks to act as a warning to churches and other religious institutions as to how easy it is to slip into violence and hatred.

THE RUSSO–UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

When forces under the command of the Russian Federation entered the northern and eastern parts of the Republic of Ukraine in February 2022, accelerating a conflict which had already been taking place in Crimea, Donbas and Luhansk for almost a decade, reactions ranged from shock to patriotic fervour. One unenvisioned consequence was the consolidation of Moscow's opponents, both in Ukraine and within an expanding NATO. Whereas the Russian leadership reinforced its conservative policy against phenomena labelled as 'non-Russian' ('нерусский'), Ukraine committed itself to a cultural reorientation towards Western 'liberal' values. Part of this cultural bifurcation was the fissuring of the Orthodox Church. In late 2018, a pan-Ukrainian Orthodox Church synod united the two major hierarchies in Ukrainian Orthodoxy: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate – УОС-КР (Українська Православна Церква-Київський Патріархат – УПЦ-КП) – and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church – УАОС (Українська автокефальна православна церква – УАПЦ). In protest against the Russian assault, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (Українська православна церква) severed its links, which, however, did not protect it from Ukrainian allegations of siding with Moscow. Ukrainian autocephaly had since the end of Tsarist Russia acquired strong political overtones, and it is thus not surprising that the response of the Moscow Patriarchate was anything but accommodating. The Russian Orthodox Church (Русская православная церковь), with Patriarch Kirill as the head of its hierarchy, refused to recognise Ukrainian autocephaly and was hence excluded from the latter's list of fraternal primates. In other words, the hostility between the political entities representing Russia and Ukraine found its mirror image in the mutual rejection of their Orthodox Churches, both inextricably entwined with the political processes in both states as well as with their governing elites. Our four contributions on this topic analyse both the underlying reasons and the consequences of this at once political and psychological conflict.

Bruno Husquinet illustrates in 'The Tradition of Russian Independent Theological Thought: A Complex Interplay between Believers, the Orthodox Church and the State in the Case of the Conflict in Ukraine' the importance of the Orthodox Church for Russia as well as for the construction of the Russian State. Russian identity not merely possesses deep traits of the Orthodox tradition, but the entirety of Russia's traditions can only be understood by means of engaging with its Orthodox past. Moscow's aspiration of becoming the 'Third Rome' was hence transposed into the Soviet dream of becoming the centre of a rather different type of the True Faith. In today's Russia, the messianic perception of the Church is intrinsically tied up in a political and ideological union between the Kremlin and the Patriarchate, both being firmly opposed to any resistance from ordinary Christians and clergy.

The article 'The Motives of the Russian War on Ukraine: Corruption, Empire, Philosophy, Raison d'état and Religion' by Anthony Govorov takes the current animosity between Moscow and Kyiv one step further, by interpreting the war as an instrumentalisation by Moscow's governing elite. Akin to the messianic role of both Church and State analysed by Husquinet, warfare assumes the distinctive function of transitioning the Russian state into a state of nature rather than of social contract, where government policies can easily be transferred to territories beyond Russia's borders.

The same problem of moral conflict is being analysed in 'Eastern Orthodox War Justification and Ecclesial Dilemmas Arising from the War in Ukraine' by Yuri Stoyanov. The pressure by both the state and the Moscow Patriarchate is exemplified in the religious justification of Russia's military campaign, whereby pacifist protest within the Russian Orthodox Church is interpreted in terms of treason against the State, which the Church has vowed to defend. Support for the war has had serious consequences throughout the Eastern Orthodox world, effectively breaking the unity of all Orthodox communities. Stoyanov posits that the current war may be 'the first religious war of the twenty-first century' and evaluates whether religious terminology is being used to sacralise the war and the 'Russian imperial project', along post-Soviet trajectories.

Underlining Stoyanov's statement that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has had global ramifications, the article 'The Russian Orthodox Church in Africa – For Political or Ecclesial Reasons?' by Evangelos Thiani explores the consequences of Ukrainian autocephaly on the Orthodox missions in Africa. Whereas the See of Saint Mark in Alexandria has long been the sole canonical Eastern Orthodox Church present in Africa, other Orthodox traditions are legitimate, under the jurisdiction of the local Alexandrian clergy. This consensus ceased when in December 2021 the Patriarchate of Moscow created two dioceses in Africa, in reaction to Alexandria's support for Ukrainian autocephaly. Thiani's article thus evaluates the relative importance of ecclesiastical and of plainly political factors in the African schism.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Taken together, the contributions of the current special issue demonstrate the importance of placing the analysis of Church involvement in political warfare into the context of each Church's historical development, nation-building processes and communities' religio-political realities.

The contributions related to the Ethiopian conflict best evidence the inevitability of political and religious convergences given the historical role of the EOTC in state identity-building which was defined either within or against the Church tradition. While it is agreed that the EOTC played an important role in cultural life and national development over certain historical periods, it is also recognised that its prominent role, combined with a decentralised structure and problems of internal coherence, has left it exposed to state-led 'divide and rule' politics.

Within the empire of the Russian tsars, being baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church meant that an indissoluble link with the Russian state was created early on. From Alaska to Karelia, the Moscow Patriarchate guaranteed protection and continuity – from Vladimir in 988 and until Lenin in 1917. As implied by all authors, the resurrection of the Church after the end of the Soviet system created a uniquely strong bond of mutual dependence between the worldly and the spiritual leaderships of Russia. In Ethiopia, the post-Derg EPRDF regime rather ascribed to a State—Church separation and a degree of religious plurality that both maintained the centrality and anticipated the weakening of the EOTC in the era of Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party.

Religious discourse is constructed within cultural and societal forces and, subsequently, cannot eschew political influences. The type of religious invocation in state-led political violence as seen in Ethiopia and Russia should not be identified with the embodied experience of faith communities or with the core teachings of the Orthodox faith. Still, the susceptibility of religious tradition and leadership to political 'divide and rule' tactics raises questions about the spirit of the faith in times of crisis.

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