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PUTIN'S INVASION OF UKRAINE: WHAT'S RELIGION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

By Mark R. Elliott

Mark R. Elliott, retired professor of history, earned a B.A. cum laude from Asbury University (1969) and an M.A. (1971) and Ph.D. (1974) in modern European and Russian history from the University of Kentucky. He is the author of *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation* and *The Arduous Path of Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education*. He also served as editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* for 25 years (1993-2017) and now serves as editor emeritus. Elliott's first trip to Ukraine in 1974 included Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Lviv, and Uzhhorod. His most recent trip to Ukraine involved visits to sites of five greenhouses donated to evangelical charities and churches in the Kyiv, Zhytomyr, and Vinnytsia regions. Data collected from the sites formed the basis for his study, *Greenhouse Gardening for the Purpose of Self-Sustaining Ministry in the Former Soviet Union* (2019). He does not yet know the fate of an alcohol rehab center and greenhouse in the heavily shelled and contested Kyiv suburb of Bucha. Mark is an Advisory Editor and frequent contributor to OPREE.

Summary

- *As of February 24, 2022, as Russian air strikes, missiles, and tanks began pouring into an outmatched Ukraine, the Byzantine calculus of symphonia, of a mutually interdependent church and state, devolved into an unholy alliance joining at the hip a predatory Putin and a sycophantic Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill.*
- *Especially over the past decade Patriarch Kyrill has tied the fate of his church to that of his patron Putin, the same tragic mistake made by the same church in its defense of tsarist Russia in its death throes.*
- *Since his accession in 2009, and emphatically since Russia's moves against Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in 2014, Patriarch Kyrill has sought to enshrine the principle of "Russky mir," the "Russian World," which he understands to mean the spiritual and ecclesial union of the Eastern Slavs.*
- *Following the demise of Marxism, Russian Orthodoxy emerged as a substitute state ideology, not only giving the Russian Republic a sacred purpose for its existence, but also energizing the dream of the reconstitution of the old Russian/Soviet empire.*
- *Presuming an East-West spiritual and moral divide, Putin increasingly sees all things Western, including Catholicism and Protestantism on Russian soil, as a threat to Russian Orthodoxy, which is one of the underpinnings of his regime.*
- *In close proximity to notions of the "Russian World" and Orthodox triumphalism is the attendant messianic belief that Patriarch Kyrill and Putin are the world's last best hope for the preservation of traditional Christian family values, and this in the face of their obscenely lavish lifestyles and out-sized hubris.*

- *Tragically, the Russian Orthodox Church, far from being a check on Putin's war against Chechnya, anti-Assad forces in Syria, and now Ukraine, supports the Russian autocrat wholeheartedly.*
- *On March 6, 2022, Orthodoxy's Forgiveness Sunday, in Moscow's palatial Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Patriarch Kyrill outdid himself going so far as to equate Ukraine with the Prodigal Son.*
- *On February 28, 2022, Kyrill declared in vain that a guarantee of "fraternal relations" would be "our united Orthodox Church represented in Ukraine by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by His Beatitude Onuphry." Yet four days prior, on the very day the Russian invasion began, Metropolitan Onuphry had already boldly condemned Russian aggression. For the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in communion with Moscow a Russian war against Ukrainians is "a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy."*
- *On March 2, 2022, this author received an "Appeal to Compatriots" signed by 81 (at the latest count, 380) individuals, mostly Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists and some Pentecostals, condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine in the strongest of terms: "We assess what is happening as a grave sin of fratricide—the sin of Cain, who raised his hand against his brother Abel," the identical biblical condemnation Ukrainian Orthodox Metropolitan Onufry had laid at the feet of Putin.*
- *As of March 6, nearly 300 Russian Orthodox priests had signed a petition of their own in opposition to the war in Ukraine. Like Ukrainian Metropolitan Onufry and Russian Protestants in their Appeal, the petition of these exceptionally brave Russian Orthodox priests—but no Russian metropolitans—references Cain's murder of his brother Abel.*
- *Among those who signed the Evangelical Appeal are dear friends I have known for decades for whom I now have reason to fear. They will suffer for this unless Putin is dethroned.*
- *There is also good reason to fear for the safety of any believer of any persuasion other than Russian Orthodox in any additional Ukrainian territory occupied by Russian forces.*
- *Manifestations of a reign of terror in Ukrainian lands occupied by Russia or its minions in 2014 are numerous and sobering: press slander, fines, harassment, deportations, raids on worship services, robberies, forced closures of church-based orphanages, rehabilitation centers, charities, and seminaries, interrogations utilizing psychological and physical torture, and murder.*
- *Russian Republic violations of freedom of conscience pale before the draconian theocratic regimes now in place in Crimea and the Donbas. Unfortunately, the experience of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk is very likely what is in store for believers not beholden to Kyrill in any additional lands Russian forces wrest from Ukraine.*
- *At present Putin, with Kyrill in tow, is about the destruction of a democratic, religiously tolerant state that is home to arguably the most robust Christian population of any country in Europe. Ukraine, with a population of 44 million, is home to more Orthodox churches than Russia with a population more than three times that of Ukraine (146 million). And the same is true for other Christian confessions and denominations. Despite its smaller size, Ukraine is home to far more energetic and growing populations of Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists than is Russia.*

- *Two words in Old Church Slavonic, three words in English, are voiced repeatedly in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy: Gospodi pomilui, Lord have mercy. As Ukraine appears on the brink of descent into another Golgotha of Russian captivity, and as Russia, Eastern Europe, and the West all appear to be entering into a time fraught with the greatest danger to world peace since World War II, we cannot repeat too often, Lord have mercy.*

As of February 24, 2022, as Russian air strikes, missiles, and tanks began pouring into an outmatched Ukraine, the Byzantine calculus of *symphonia*, of a mutually interdependent church and state, devolved into an unholy alliance joining at the hip a predatory Putin and a sycophantic Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill. The backdrop of recent decades saw Ukraine by fits and starts increasingly favoring the European over the Russian orbit. That has driven to distraction a Kremlin kleptocrat and a politically motivated prelate fearful of the prospect of the loss of power and wealth that that shift entails.

Especially over the past decade Patriarch Kyrill has tied the fate of his church to that of his patron Putin, the same tragic mistake made by the same church in its defense of tsarist Russia in its death throes. Back on February 12, 2012, female punk rockers momentarily coopted the sacred space of Moscow's mammoth Cathedral of Christ the Savior, protesting in song Putin's repressive regime and the Moscow Patriarchate's collusion with it. Sadly, Kyrill defended the harsh two-year sentences meted out to three women in August 2012, ushering in the precise opposite of what the punk rockers intended—an intensified, retrograde collaboration of church and state, not reflective of the ideal of *symphonia*, but rather reflective of ancient caesaropapism, the subordination of church to state. The Orthodox Church's ready acceptance of a heavy-handed court punishment of young female dissidents seemed to confirm the growing defensiveness of church and state, drawing Russia's patriarch and president into an ever-tighter embrace.¹

Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is his second act of military aggression against, as he sees it, a wayward "Little Russian" child. Large scale public protests in 2011-12 against Putin's suspect reelection victory and the 2012 toppling of tyrants in Middle East color revolutions, unnerved Putin. No doubt it also re-enforced his opposition to Kyiv's 2013-14 Maidan Revolution, which saw the ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. Putin alleges these developments

¹ Mark R. Elliott, "The Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on Religious Life in Ukraine and Russia," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 22 (Summer 2014), 8; Eliot Borenstein, "The Cathedral of Christ the Savior as Scandal and Haunted House," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 22 (Spring 2014), 7-8. Lawrence Uzzell, "Punk Rockers in the Cathedral: Another View," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 23 (Winter 2015): 16, 15.

were Western-inspired. In response he moved militarily in 2014 against Ukraine, annexing Crimea, fomenting successful revolts by pro-Russian separatists in portions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, and attempting—unsuccessfully—pro-Russian takeovers in Kharkiv, Odesa, and other Ukrainian cities.

As a result, Patriarch Kyrill found himself in a painfully awkward position. Could he simultaneously support Kremlin aggression in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk without so alienating the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate that the latter would choose to sever its ties with Russian Orthodoxy? Alexei Malashenko, religion specialist at the Carnegie Moscow Center, laid out the Russian Orthodox predicament: “gradually losing Ukraine if it just goes on repeating word for word the Kremlin line, it risks becoming only a national church of Russia. If Kirill loses out in Ukraine, he also becomes less attractive for the Kremlin.”²

How did Kyrill attempt to simultaneously satisfy Putin and his coreligionists in Ukraine? Rendering unto Caesar, in Kyiv back in 2010 he had blessed Ukraine’s pro-Russian President Yanukovich. Later, on March 19, 2014, in a session of the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod, with Russian forces in full control of Crimea, Kyrill fudged that an “internal political crisis” was what was threatening Ukraine’s territorial integrity.³ The next month, on April 7, 2014, he likened the Maidan Revolution to the violence of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 which “was accompanied by outrage and terrible injustice under slogans for achieving justice.”⁴ Twelve days later on Easter eve, in a service in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, with President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev in attendance, Kyrill declared that God should put “an end to the designs of those who want to destroy holy Russia.” Ukraine, he said, stood in need of officials who are “legitimately elected,” parroting the Kremlin position that Kyiv’s post-Maidan government lacked legitimacy.⁵

At the same time, Patriarch Kyrill sought to minimize tensions with the pro-Maidan Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) for fear of losing its loyalty. On March 18, 2014, he chose not to attend the signing ceremony incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation.⁶ And the next day in a meeting of the Holy Synod he declined to transfer UOC

² Elliott, “Impact,” 8.

³ Gabriela Bacznka, “Russian Orthodox Church Sings from Putin Hymn Sheet on Ukraine,” Reuters, March 7, 2014.

⁴ “Patriarch Kyrill Compares Events in Ukraine to 1917 Revolution,” Interfax, April 7, 2014.

⁵ Elliott, “Impact,” 8.

⁶ Vladislav Maltsev, “Brother Slavs and Mother Church; Conflict of Russia and Ukraine Places Moscow Patriarchate at Brink of Schism,” NG-Religiia, March 5, 2014; William Yoder, “Weeping with Those Who Weep; Hot and Cold Showers in Ukraine and Russia,” press release, April 21, 2014; rea-Moskva.org.

MP parishes in Crimea to the Russian Orthodox Church. On the one hand, Kyrill claimed “The Ukrainian people must determine its own future by itself, without outside interference.” On the other hand, “The brotherhood of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian peoples” should “determine our future.”⁷ The patriarch’s tightrope performance involved juggling the appearance of respect for Ukrainian sovereignty while championing a concept that frightened many Ukrainians—the idea that Russian-Ukrainian spiritual and political union is indivisible.

Since his accession in 2009, and emphatically since March 2014, Patriarch Kyrill has sought to enshrine the principle of “*Russky mir*,” the “Russian World,” which he understands to mean the spiritual and ecclesial union of the Eastern Slavs.⁸ “Whatever development that political [Russian-Ukrainian] confrontation takes, the unity in faith and brotherhood of people baptized in one and the same baptismal font cannot be deleted from their past.”⁹

The fact is that Kyrill could not avoid contradictions in his awkward balancing act: Either “the Church is above these differences and cannot identify itself with any particular point of view” or “We know that every time that enemies have attacked our fatherland, the chief thing that they have wanted to do is divide our people, and especially to rip the southern and western Russian [sic] lands from the single world.” In the end, for Kyrill, Ukraine’s sovereignty and its “wish to build independently its own national life” was to be trumped by a cherished ‘common spiritual space,’ that is, “the brotherhood of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian nations...hard won by history and many generations of our ancestors.”¹⁰ Kyrill seemed to hopelessly intertwined spiritual and political considerations and caromed erratically between Great Russian patriotism and conciliatory gestures toward Ukrainian Orthodox whose fealty he hoped to retain.¹¹

Not only Kyrill, but Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov subscribe to the notion of the Russian World, a geopolitical concoction that conflates Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus into a single entity in which “Great Russians” are said to have played and, henceforth forevermore, are to play the leading secular and spiritual role in Eurasia. Here was a latter-day iteration of might makes right, descended from the tsarist imperial mantra of “Moscow the Third Rome.” The story

⁷ Maltsev, “Brother Slavs.”

⁸ Sophia Kishkovsky, “Ukrainian Crisis May Split Russian Orthodox Church,” Religion News Service, March 14, 2014.

⁹ “Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church,” March 20, 2014; http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/orthox/Moscow_patriarchy/55802.

¹⁰ “Patriarch Kirill: Ukraine’s Sovereignty Should Not Destroy Russian World,” *Religiia v Ukraine*, March 14, 2014.

¹¹ Maltsev, “Brother Slavs.”

goes: the fall of ancient Rome was followed by the emergence of a second Rome, Constantinople, which in turn fell prey to the Ottoman Turks. In its stead arose Moscow, the Third Rome, destined to be the ultimate, forever protector of Christendom.

Following the demise of Marxism, Russian Orthodoxy emerged as a substitute state ideology, not only giving the Russian Republic a sacred purpose for its existence, but also energizing the dream of the reconstitution of the old Russian/Soviet empire. Thus, in the words of political commentator Paul Goble, “What is going on in Ukraine is not just a political struggle between those in Ukraine who want to become part of Europe and those who oppose such a step by preferring to link their fates with Moscow. Rather, the [Russian] imperialist defenders...argue that the Ukrainian crisis represents a clash of civilizations between Western Christianity and Russian-led Eastern Christianity.”¹² Consequently, the concept of the “Russian World” presumes and expects there to be civilizational and spiritual components to conflict between Orthodoxy, meaning correct worship, and Western Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, both considered schismatic.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov contends the successful 2014 Maidan Revolution and Ukraine’s pivot to the West were the handiwork of the U.S. and Europe, which recruited Ukraine to oppose Russia’s return to its “traditional spiritual values.” In an address to the Russian World Affairs Council in Moscow, Lavrov complained that the West “attempts to impose Western values on everyone,” which he contended are “evermore detached from their own Christians roots.”¹³

Also presuming an East-West spiritual and moral divide, Putin increasingly sees all things Western, including Catholicism and Protestantism on Russian soil, as a threat to Russian Orthodoxy, which is one of the underpinnings of his regime. Representative of this mindset is Archpriest Andrey Novikov, an anti-Maidan cleric who relocated from Odesa to Moscow in 2014: “Russia has always been spiritually opposed to the West, repulsing Catholic and Protestant expansion. Now, Russia is opposing the complete destruction of Christian morality.”

Political commentator Goble rightly concludes that “such statements tap into some of the deepest levels of Russian paranoia” and “make it even more difficult for the country to escape from its

¹² Paul Goble, “Moscow Seeing the Ukraine Conflict as a Spiritual Struggle,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 22 (Fall 2014), 5.

¹³ Goble, “Moscow,” 5.

current wave of obscurantism and oppression of all faiths except the favored Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.”¹⁴

In close proximity to notions of the “Russian World” and Orthodox triumphalism is the attendant messianic belief that Patriarch Kyrill and Putin are the world’s last best hope for the preservation of traditional Christian family values, and this in the face of their obscenely lavish lifestyles and out-sized hubris. Particularly astounding is the fact that a former KGB agent who has succeeded in destroying every check on his power, who to that end has been responsible for the death of untold numbers of Russians, Georgians, Syrians, and now Ukrainians, and who has robbed state resources wholesale to the tune of billions in offshore accounts, is touted as the preserver of traditional Christian values, not only by the Russian Orthodox Church but by too many conservative commentators and Christians even in the United States.¹⁵

Tragically, the Russian Orthodox Church, far from being a check on Putin’s war against Chechnya, anti-Assad forces in Syria, and now Ukraine, supports the Russian autocrat wholeheartedly. And in the bargain its priests even bless with holy water military hardware, including nuclear missiles.¹⁶ On Thursday, February 24, 2022, the day of the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kyrill declined to call it such, in keeping with the Kremlin propaganda line, instead tepidly referencing a crisis in “current events” in which casualties on both sides were to be minimized.¹⁷

By way of contrast, Russia’s Catholic bishops, ever vulnerable to charges of disloyalty to Mother Russia and complicity with the West, nevertheless immediately on the day of the invasion risked giving offense to the Kremlin by forthrightly calling for hostilities to cease and laying blame: “Let our contemporaries know that they will have to give strict account of the military actions they have taken.... And we also appeal to all people, especially fellow Christians, to resist lies and hatred.”¹⁸

Tacking a different course from Russia’s Catholic prelates, Kyrill, in his Sunday homily, February 27, dropped any pretense of neutrality in a war pitting Orthodox against Orthodox,

¹⁴ Goble, “Moscow,” 5.

¹⁵ Anthea Butler, “Why White Evangelicals Are Putin’s Biggest American Fan Base,” MSNBC, March 1, 2022.

¹⁶ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ George E. Demacopoulos, “The Orthodox Response to Putin’s Invasion; From Complacency to Clear Condemnation,” *Commonweal*, February 27, 2022.

¹⁸ “Russia; Address of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia about the War in Ukraine,” *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, March 7, 2022.

declaring, “God forbid that...the evil forces that have always striven against the unity of Rus’ and the Russian Church gain the upper hand.” And what territory does the Patriarch’s plea for prayer for “Russian land” encompass? He meant by it the lands “Russia and Ukraine and Belarus.”¹⁹ Most recently, on March 6, Orthodoxy’s Forgiveness Sunday, in Moscow’s palatial Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Patriarch Kyrill outdid himself in defense of Putin and Russia’s war to save Ukraine from alleged Nazism and Western decadence. The Patriarch went so far as to equate Ukraine with the Prodigal Son. Might the head of the Russian Orthodox Church better request forgiveness for defending a war that is taking the lives of untold, innocent civilians?²⁰

Ukrainian Orthodox Deacon Tim Kelleher reacted negatively to Kyrill’s “fervent prayer for the earliest restoration of peace.” He writes, “The earliest restoration of peace would be the instant Vladimir Putin says, *Stop!* The patriarch has his president’s phone number. He should call it.” Otherwise, Kyrill “is on the brink of turning...into the accomplice of a war criminal.” Kelleher continues, “President and prelate are working from the same book [but] it’s not a prayer book.”²¹

March 7 another Orthodox cleric, but this one Russian far from the safety of a Western address, dared pray on the internet:

Help Ukrainians who defend themselves and others to stand.

Help Ukrainians who are weak and powerless to take refuge in safe countries, to survive in bomb shelters and basements.

Help Ukrainians in the midst of shelling and fires to keep hope for life, for truth, for victory.

Help humanity to help Ukrainians, and last, please help me, too, not to go crazy, not to seek comfort in hatred, but to seek comfort in You, Heavenly Father, in Your Son the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

American Greek Orthodox deacon and scholar George Demacopoulos has explored his confession’s mixed responses to the Russian war against Ukraine to date.

1. Orthodox laity, within and without Russia, are united “in a sense of shared horror and concern,” while responses of bishops have been mixed.

¹⁹ “Patriarch Kyrill Urges to Pray for Peace in ‘Russian Lands,’” Interfax Religion, February 28, 2022; www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=16449.

²⁰ Tenzin Zompa, “In Sunday Sermon, Orthodox Bishop [sic] Kirill Backs Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” The Print.in; <https://theprint.in/world/in-sunday-sermon-orthodox-bishop-kirill-backs-russias-war-against-ukraine/862058>.

²¹ Tim Kelleher, “The Scandalous Silence of Moscow’s Patriarch,” *National Review*, March 3, 2022.

2. Hierarchs adamant in opposition to Russia's war against Ukraine are Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens.
3. The Romanian Orthodox Church has called the invasion of Ukraine a war against a sovereign state, while Metropolitan Tikhon of the Orthodox Church in America has declared Putin the instigator of the conflict and has called on him to cease and desist.
4. The Orthodox Church of Finland declared that it "strongly condemns the military actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine," stating as well that "There is no justification for war."
5. In contrast, the autocephalous Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Jerusalem have declined to take sides.
6. Metropolitan Hilarion of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in New York (not to be confused with the metropolitan of the same name in Moscow) has referred to conflict in "'Ukrainian land' (a deliberate slight that denies Ukraine's sovereignty)," but has avoided use of the word *war*. This, Demacopoulis suggests, "indicates the extent to which many of the leaders of the Russian Church (whether inside or outside of Russia) have been infected by Putin's nationalistic propaganda."

Demacopoulus concludes that global Orthodox opposition to Russia's war on Ukraine may grow, "especially if the violence continues for a prolonged period. It is also possible that a drawn-out war will hasten the move of Orthodox in Ukraine away from the Moscow Patriarchate and into the new autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine."²²

The latter is already the case. On February 25 the Lviv Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate declared for the non-commemoration of the prayer for Kyrill in the Divine Liturgy. Likewise, as of March 1, the Sumy Diocese of the same church, adjacent to the Russian border and subjected to Russian shelling from the start of the invasion, was omitting from the Divine Liturgy the customary prayer for the Russian Patriarch.²³ On February 28, Kyrill declared in vain that a guarantee of "fraternal relations" would be "our united Orthodox Church

²² Demacopoulos, "The Orthodox Response."

²³ "Movement of Noncommemoration of Patriarch Kirill Has Begun in U.P.Ts.M.P. Dioceses," Religious Information Service of Ukraine, March 1, 2022; "Patriarch Kyrill Calls Reluctance of Some Ukrainian Priests to Commemorate Him in Prayers for Political Reasons Sin," Interfax-Religion, March 3, 2022; "Lvov Diocese of U.P.Ts.M.P. Requests Calling of Bishops' Council for Declaring Independence of Church from Moscow," Religious Information Service of Ukraine, March 4, 2022.

represented in Ukraine by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by His Beatitude Onuphry.”²⁴ Yet four days prior, on the very day the Russian invasion began, Metropolitan Onuphry had already boldly condemned Russian aggression and called on Putin to “immediately stop the fratricidal war.” Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne correctly sees this as

something surprising. Very surprising indeed. It is the fact that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, i.e., according to Putin, the very Church that Russian troops went to defend in Ukraine against the ‘persecution’ of the majority Orthodox Church and the government, not only did not support the invasion but took a very tough stance against.... Note that this is a church including a majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, giving the lie to the theory that Russian-speaking Ukrainians support the invasion.²⁵

Metropolitan Onufry further declared that his flock was to extend its “special love and support to our [Ukrainian] soldiers who stand guard and protect and defend our land and our people. May God bless and guard them!” For the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church *in communion with Moscow* a Russian war against Ukrainians is “a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy. Such a war has no justification.”²⁶

On March 2, this author received an “Appeal to Compatriots” signed by 81 (at the latest count, 380) individuals, mostly Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists and some Pentecostals and other Protestants, condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine in the strongest of terms: “Our army is...dropping bombs and rockets on the cities of our neighboring Ukraine. As believers, we assess what is happening as a grave sin of fratricide—the sin of Cain, who raised his hand against his brother Abel,” the identical biblical condemnation Ukrainian Orthodox Metropolitan Onufry had laid at the feet of Putin. The startlingly bold Russian Evangelical Appeal went on to declare, “While we still have a chance to avoid punishment from above and prevent the collapse of our country, we need to repent for what we have done, first of all before God, and then before the people of Ukraine. We must give up the lies and hatred. We call on the authorities of our country to stop this senseless bloodshed!”²⁷

As of March 6, nearly 300 Russian Orthodox priests had signed a petition of their own in opposition to the war in Ukraine and the arrest of Russians protesting the invasion. Like Ukrainian

²⁴ Massimo Introvigne, “Orthodox United Against Putin,” *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, March 2, 2022; <https://bit.ly/3K3ye02>.

²⁵ Introvigne, “Orthodox United.”

²⁶ Demacopoulos, “The Orthodox Response.”

²⁷ https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1aNpjzui3uMeOWepUhWzgg0WEjPQrE8A2AMQNI8dZAAs/viewform?edit_requested=true.

Metropolitan Onufry and Russian Protestants, in their Appeal, the petition of these exceptionally brave Russian Orthodox priests—but no Russian metropolitans—references Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, quoting Genesis 4: 10, “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground; and now you are cursed from the earth.” Imagine the courage that attends priests who dare to, in essence, call out Putin as accursed for leading Russia into the present war. This is out of character in Russian Orthodox history and greatly to be praised.²⁸

Among those who signed the Evangelical Appeal are dear friends I have known for decades for whom I now have reason to fear. Upon receipt of the Appeal, I immediately wrote *Christianity Today*, which had first forwarded the appeal to me, “This is an extraordinarily courageous step compared to evangelical timidity previously under Putin. Upon receipt of the “Appeal” I am amazed and heartened that these brave people are defending Ukraine. They will suffer for this unless Putin is dethroned. Lord have mercy.”

There is also good reason to fear for the safety of any believer of any persuasion other than Russian Orthodox in any additional Ukrainian territory occupied by Russian forces. For those who may think such a prediction is an exaggeration, consider conditions since 2014 in Crimea and in Russian separatist-held territories in Luhansk and Donetsk. Overwhelming evidence documents Russian religious repression of non-Moscow Patriarchate believers in these regions surpassing anything being endured in Russia proper by people of faith who are not beholden to Patriarch Kyrill. The findings of Russian Academy of Sciences religion specialist Roman Lunkin, who traveled to Crimea in 2015, support this claim. There Muslims have faced sharp discrimination by being blocked from required state reregistration.²⁹ Many non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox in the peninsula have seen their churches closed or have seen them forcibly transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church. Many, as well, have fled, while authorities have also deported uncooperative Evangelical and Muslim clergy.³⁰ Academician Lunkin continues:

Methods of discrimination against religious minorities include invalidating leases for quarters for worship, preventing the purchase of land for new churches, and making official registration cumbersome or impossible.

The consequences of Crimea joining Russia were the most tragic for the peninsula’s Pentecostals and Baptists. Hundreds of their churches and thousands of their believers have suffered discrimination in the transition.

²⁸ Elise Ann Allen, “Russian Orthodox Priests Call for Immediate End to War in Ukraine,” *Crux*, March 6, 2022.

²⁹ Roman Lunkin, “Religious Politics in Crimea, 2014-2016,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 25 (Spring 2017), 10.

³⁰ Lunkin, “Religious Politics,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 25 (Winter 2017), 1.

In an atmosphere of Russian xenophobia and patriotism...all Protestant churches (together with Catholics, Greek Catholics, and the UOC KP) are seen as symbols of Western influence, which has led to persecution and suspicion for these churches. Some of these church communities have been destroyed while others have survived, but with their influence and strength noticeably weakened.³¹

As early as 2016 Russian rule in Crimea witnessed a fifty percent reduction in “functioning religious associations,” with favored Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches representing the vast majority of still-functioning parishes.³² A recent study found that Crimean courts in 2021 found 22 individuals guilty and fined for violations of Russia’s “anti-missionary” laws.³³

Conditions endured by disfavored believers have been mild in Crimea and Russia proper compared to Russian separatist Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” where as late as mid-February 2022 Russian Republic authorities maintained a low profile. With no authority from Moscow reining in local separatist hot heads and owing to a lack of any international monitoring of human rights, violence and wholesale discrimination against religious minorities have been the norm.³⁴ Innumerable flagrant infringements upon freedom of conscience have been perpetrated by a “Russian Orthodox Army” and a “Cossack Army.” “Evidence has come to light,” one Ukrainian human rights study notes, “that several priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate have, to varying degree, supported these unlawful paramilitary groups in their campaign against representatives of Protestant, Evangelical and Catholic Churches and Orthodox believers who do not recognize the Moscow Patriarchate.”³⁵

Manifestations of a reign of terror in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine are numerous and sobering: press slander, fines, harassment, deportations, raids on worship services, robberies, forced closures of church-based orphanages, rehabilitation centers, charities, and seminaries, interrogations utilizing psychological and physical torture, and murder.³⁶ Not a single church other than Russian Orthodox remains open in the Luhansk “People’s Republic” and precious few in the

³¹ Lunkin, “Religious Politics,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 25 (Spring 2017), 8-10.

³² Lunkin, “Religious Politics,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 25 (Spring 2017), 10.

³³ Felix Corley, “Crimea: 23 Fines under Russia’s ‘Anti-Missionary’ Laws in 2021,” *Forum 18*, February 22, 2022; www.forum18.org.

³⁴ Institute for Religious Freedom and Mission Eurasia, *Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine*, Kyiv IRF, 2018.

³⁵ Aleandra Novitchkova et al., *When God Becomes the Weapon: Persecution Based on Religious Beliefs in the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine* (Kyiv: Center for Civil Liberties and International Partnership for Human Rights, 2015).

³⁶ Mission Eurasia, *Religious Persecution in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea 2014* (Irpen, Ukraine: 2014), 2-6; http://www.irs.in.ua/files/publications/2015.04_Report_Religious_persecution_in_occupied_Donbas_eng.pdf.

Donetsk “People’s Republic.”³⁷ Kharkiv, though predominately Russian-speaking, has nevertheless fiercely resisted its “liberation” by Russian troops, no doubt in part with nightmarish separatist misrule in the neighboring Donbas in mind. Is it any wonder that some scholars have likened separatist Donetsk and Luhansk to “Orthodox mini-theocracies?”³⁸

For decades I have followed closely the ever-increasing restrictions imposed upon believers in the Russian Republic who are not part of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. Especially discriminatory religious legislation was passed by the Duma in 1997 and 2016.³⁹ Still, Russian state violations of freedom of conscience pale before the draconian theocratic regimes now in place in Crimea and the Donbas. Unfortunately, the experience of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk is very likely what is in store for believers not beholden to Kyrill in any additional lands Russian forces wrest from Ukraine.

In response to the wholesale violations of freedom of conscience in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia and Russian separatists in 2014, the widespread targeting of civilian populations in Russia’s present war in Ukraine, and the craven support for Putin’s war on Ukraine by Russia’s religious leaders, one Western NGO now proposes sanctions against the Kremlin’s coopted and complicit religious leaders. Willy Fautre, director of Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers, “recommends that the EU, the UK and the US put on their lists of sanctions...religious revisionist leaders and entities endorsing the rhetoric of President Vladimir Putin about the ‘non-war’ and the ‘non-invasion’ of Ukraine,” namely Patriarch Kyrill of the Russian Orthodox Church; Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Dionisy of Voskresensk; the Spiritual Council of the Russian United Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals); Berl Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia; Albir Krganov, Head of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia; Talgat Tajuddin, Head of the Central Spiritual Muslim Board of Russia; Ismail Berdiyev, Head of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of North Caucasus; and Damba Ayusheyev, Head of the Russian Buddhist Traditional Sangha.⁴⁰

³⁷ Corley, “Crimes.”

³⁸ Introvigne, “Orthodox United.”

³⁹ Articles by Mark R. Elliott: “The 1997 Russian Law on Religion: The Impact on Protestants” (With Sharyl Corrado), *Religion, State and Society, the Keston Journal* 27 (March 1999), 109-34; “A Quarter Century Reflecting on Soviet and Post-Soviet Christianity,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 26 (No. 1, 2018), 14-16; “Increasing State Restrictions on Russian Protestant Seminaries,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40 (No. 4, 2020), 1-31; “Latest Developments Affecting Russian Protestant Seminaries and Churches,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 41 (No. 6, 2021), 91-101.

⁴⁰ *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, March 5, 2022.

At present Putin, with Kyrill in tow, is about the destruction of a democratic, religiously tolerant state that is home to arguably the most robust Christian population of any country in Europe. Ukraine, with a population of 44 million, is home to more Orthodox churches than Russia with a population more than three times that of Ukraine (146 million). And the same is true for other Christian confessions and denominations. Despite its smaller size, Ukraine is home to far more energetic and growing populations of Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists than is Russia. In addition, Ukraine boasts one of the largest, if not the largest, number of missionaries of any country in Europe, many, ironically, serving in Russia.⁴¹

Two words in Old Church Slavonic, three words in English, are voiced repeatedly in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy: *Gospodi pomilui*, Lord have mercy. As Ukraine appears on the brink of descent into another Golgotha of Russian captivity, and as Russia, Eastern Europe, and the West all appear to be entering into a time fraught with the greatest danger to world peace since World War II, we cannot repeat too often, Lord have mercy.

⁴¹ John White, "Factors behind the Ukrainian Evangelical Missionary Surge, 1989-1999," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 25 (Summer 2017), 3-8.