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OP-ED

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY

By Ina Merdjanova

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The atrocious war in Ukraine is advancing into its second month, and the official governmental channels of conflict mediation, known as “Track One” diplomacy, have so far only served to underline the cavernous gap between the belligerents.¹ As a result, peace scholars and policy makers have been pondering the possibility of “Track Two” diplomacy: unofficial, behind the scenes conflict-mediation initiatives. Typically, religious bodies play an important role here. Religious dialogue, in its various forms – intra- and inter-denominational, and at leadership, mid-level clergy and grassroots levels – has long been recognised as a method of peace brokering and peace building around the world.² Given that the majority of Russians and Ukrainians embrace Orthodox Christianity, one might argue that the Orthodox churches were particularly well positioned in this instance.

Sadly, it has become abundantly clear that the Orthodox churches are, in fact, not well suited to mediating in this conflict. There are a number of reasons to draw this conclusion, the most significant of which being that the Moscow Patriarchate openly supports President Putin’s war. This regrettable stance was perhaps to be expected, as the Russian Orthodox Church has consistently acted as a department of the state, rather than as an independent institution. Particularly since the fall of communism and the resulting re-emergence of religion in the public sphere, the church has steadfastly supported and promoted the Russian government’s political

¹ This op-ed initially appeared in Leipzig university’s KFG Multiple Secularities bulletin, May 2, 2022. It is inspired by my participation as Senior Fellow in the “Orthodoxy and Human Rights” project, sponsored by Fordham University’s Orthodox Christian Studies Center and funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and Leadership 100.

² See, among others, Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur, “Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peace-Building in the Balkans” (Continuum, 2009).

strategies, both domestically and internationally. In addition, it seems extremely unlikely that the Russian Orthodox Church would listen to overtures from its ‘sister churches’, given its posturing as the global leader of Orthodox Christianity. That there has been a cooling of relations within the Eastern Orthodox Church is illustrated in the Moscow Patriarchate having cut ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (historically honoured as “first among equals” in the global family of Orthodox churches) in 2018. This rift was triggered by the granting of autocephaly (self-governance) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Bartholomew has resolutely condemned the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine,³ and the churches in Romania, Georgia and Greece have followed suit. Orthodox churches with closer ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, in particular those in Serbia and Bulgaria, have taken more ambiguous stands. Significantly, the Metropolitan Onuphry, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate, issued a resolute call for President Putin to end his “fratricidal war”.⁴

What about potential ecumenical initiatives for peace? The Russian Orthodox Church has been a member of the World Council of Churches since 1961. Since 2010, the Moscow Patriarchate has, albeit cautiously, fostered closer relations with the Vatican – a thaw in relations following a long-held mistrust of Roman Catholicism. It has also embraced friendly ties with the Anglicans. Since the 2000s, the church has been exponentially more active in the international religious scene, using various soft power techniques to spread its newly embraced ideology of ‘traditional values’, and building alliances with conservatives around the world.

Alas, the Moscow Patriarchate’s exchange with international religious bodies since the beginning of the war in Ukraine has crushed hopes that ecumenical consultations could achieve something more than abstract prayers for peace. While Pope Francis has denounced the war as “unacceptable armed aggression”, he has failed to directly condemn President Vladimir Putin or Russia as the aggressors.⁵ His major peace initiative, the consecration of Ukraine and Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on 25 March 2022, has been seen by many Orthodox Christians as problematic.⁶ Furthermore, it appears that Patriarch Kirill’s online talks with Pope Francis and the

³ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/global-orthodox-church-leader-condemns-putins-war-in-ukraine>

⁴ <https://orthochristian.com/144642.html>

⁵ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/behind-frontlines-vaticans-ukraine-russia-strategy>

⁶ <https://religiondispatches.org/holy-father-youre-not-helping-the-problem-with-the-popes-plan-to-consecrate-russia-and-ukraine-to-the-immaculate-heart-of-mary/>

Archbishop of Canterbury were merely part of Kirill's efforts to further his own standing. He sought only to promote the Russian Orthodox Church's position on what he calls "the crisis in Ukraine", rather than any true pastoral engagement in peace brokering. The World Council of Churches convened a special session on Ukraine, in which it denounced Russia's military aggression. There has been an increasing wave of criticism of Kirill, and pressure to expel the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC, for its complicity in the war.⁷ Such a radical step would, however, completely foreclose the possibility of further cross-denominational conflict mediation with the Moscow Patriarchate.

The ongoing international efforts to put an end to the bloodshed in Ukraine have exposed the limits of faith-based diplomacy. This is particularly true when church and state embrace each other in a symbiotic alliance, in order to pursue their respective hegemonic ambitions.

⁷<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/04/12/world-council-of-churches-faces-calls-to-expel-russian-orthodox-church/>