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RUSSIA’S FALSE CLAIMS TO HOLINESS AND SPIRITUAL SUPERIORITY

Among the many reasons given by President Putin and Patriarch Kirill, the secular and spiritual heads of the Russian Federation, for waging a totally unnecessary yet exceedingly cruel war against Ukraine is that Ukraine is allegedly a front for the corrupt and voracious West which aims to partition Russia. These two and their retinue claim that their synthesis of holiness and moral superiority is destined to cleanse the world of decadence. Their joint ambition is to expand the Russian empire geopolitically and to become the controlling influence in the Orthodox civilization. They have literally weaponized the concept of the “clash of civilizations” by provoking a barbaric scorched-earth invasion of a neighboring sovereign country, hinting that it is merely a prelude to further occupation of other adjacent countries—and beyond.

The perversion of the ancient Byzantine Christian concept of “symphonia” between the secular and spiritual leaders can be traced to Putin’s and Kirill’s backgrounds. Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is not a puzzle. His moral perspective was obtained at Leningrad University and from the KGB’s Leninist-Stalinist training that all is permissible in the attainment of power, even in indiscriminate genocidal attacks as displayed in Ukraine, but also elsewhere, like in Chechnya and Syria. The only transition in Putin’s life was from an atheist communist comrade to an aspiring, but some would say, failing elderly pseudo-tzar with the obsessive goal of expanding the colonial empire.

The source of the ethics of Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev, the secular name of Patriarch Kirill, is a greater mystery. Both his grandfather and father were Orthodox priests who were persecuted during the communist period. He was

educated at the Leningrad Seminary and the Leningrad Theological Academy. Upon graduation he climbed the ecclesiastic ladder to the very top but had taught Dogmatic Theology at the institutions from which he graduated. One can only wonder what kind of theology he taught which seems so devoid of basic Christian ethics. How can he endorse a savage military attack on his own flock as the majority of Ukrainians were members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was part of the Moscow Patriarchate? This strikes me as a case of filicide by a person who is supposed to be the moral paragon of his faith.

Vladimir Putin is the KGB colonel who is wearing the emperor's clothes and fakes that he is a pious Orthodox believer. Vladimir Gundyayev-Kirill wears the elaborate patriarchal robes and fakes being the canonical father who embodies those higher clergy who betray their calling by embracing the temptations of worldly power, and for that reason urges Russian soldiers to kill his flock.

Ironically, their given names in translation mean Rule of Peace. But the Russian word *mir* also means world. Clearly the two Vladimirs tragically prefer the second meaning of their given names. Vladimir-Kirill wants to be the preeminent patriarch of the Orthodox world while Vladimir Putin seeks victory at all cost, as he threatened in a speech on February 2, 2023, on the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad.

Putin views Russia as a land of traditional moral purity which will destroy the perversions of the Western world. If so, he should first start at home. It is true that citizens of many if not most countries think of their culture as being better than it really is. That includes the U.S.A. Putin seems unaware that this is also the case for Russia. The moral vices which he associates with the West have been and continue to be massively present among Russians. Gangsterism, corruption, murder (especially of political opponents of the regime), exploitation, prostitution,

pornography, theft, vandalism, and other vices are perhaps not worse but are certainly not better than in most Western societies, though they may be somewhat less public. The documented behavior of Russian soldiers in Ukraine is so cruel that the International Court in the Hague will likely conduct numerous trials against crimes against humanity and genocide. Mind you, these are crimes not against “an alien” enemy but against a people who have lived along and with Russians for over a millennium. Most of them share the same religion and a very similar language and are intermingled with each other. But Putin sends not only young poorly trained conscripts against them but also mercenaries such as the “Wagner group,” consisting of many convicts who are certainly not inclined to wage a war following the Geneva Conventions. Nor do other Russian armed forces.

The top leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church—the church whose patriarch until recently was also the supreme “Father” of the majority of the Orthodox in Ukraine—are not merely quiet but justify and promote the war. Patriarch Kirill, imitating medieval Christian and Muslim rulers, promises to Russian military personnel that should they get killed in the war (and they are doing so in very large numbers), they will go straight to heaven with all their previous sins forgiven. Using that calculus one may presume that those non-Russians going to heaven since February 24, 2022, would be overrepresented by the multitude of Russian “saints.”

Kirill could have and should have decoupled himself from Putin. Many church leaders around the world have actively promoted peace and opposed their governments’ options for war. During the war in Vietnam, a strong organization functioned in the U.S., named “Clergy and Laity Against the War in Vietnam” which engaged in various forms of opposition to the war. The World Council of

Churches and regional councils of churches mediated in a number of wars on different continents. In the case of the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s it wasn't only the international religious agencies but even the heads of the four most prominent religious communities, Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish issued declarations against the wars and encouraged local religious organizations to seek and end to the conflict.

Not so Patriarch Kirill. Instead he demotes the few clergymen who speak out against the war or are insufficiently enthusiastic in their support of it. He combines the use of the ambiguous term “*Russkiy mir*” (Russian world), which aims to encompass all who share a broadly defined common language and culture with his ecclesiastical claim of canonical territory, and spurious “Third Rome” claims in order to assert his specific interpretation of the Orthodox Christian religion. This is a militant Orthodoxy which might be understood if Russia was invaded (for example the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941). But it was Russia who carried out the invasion.

Kirill's posture is creating an enormous schism in the Orthodox world. A recent book edited by Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning, and Nadieszda Kizenko, *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations* convincingly argues that the Orthodoxy as interpreted by the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate is much more authoritarian than the more inclusive, tolerant, consultative, and collaborative interpretation of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople and the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, which received its autocephaly by the latter. These two manifestations of Orthodoxy will not easily reconcile.

The history of Ukrainian lands in the last millennium and its geographical position provides it with an opportunity to link its future either with Russia to its east or the rest of Europe, mostly to its west. There were long periods when Russia

did not give Ukraine an option, but since the implosion of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has become an independent nation (with the consent of Russia in 1991) and since then the large majority of Ukrainians have trended westward toward joining the European Union and perhaps even NATO.

There was a possibility that Ukraine would have had good relations with both East and West. But Putin and Kirill decided to prevent it by launching an invasion that presumed Ukraine's quick and easy submission, a miscalculation that underestimated the Ukrainian people's resolve. Unsurprisingly the effect was exactly the contrary; Ukrainian self-identity was greatly bolstered by the cruelty and shock of the invasion (the tragic anniversary of which is this month), and citizens of Ukraine, even those of Russian ethnicity, are surer of not wanting to be in a state union with Russia than ever before. Thankfully they were not left to fend for themselves alone. Not only NATO countries but many others have decided to provide humanitarian aid and military support in weapons and advice to prevent this independent-minded nation from falling captive to their larger neighbor.

Christian churches and followers of other religions have given Ukraine spiritual, material, and financial support. The Roman Catholic papacy and the leadership of the World Council of Churches encountered a dilemma of how to support the Ukrainians from being forcefully annexed by Russia (like Crimea and portions of eastern Ukraine) while not completely sever relations with the churches and religions of Russia. Their followers have no such dilemma; we pray individually and at worship services for Ukraine and its people. To this author it looks like a dilemma between what is morally right and what is expedient, and some church leaders do not know which option to choose.¹ What complicates this ambivalence is the danger of the war expanding into a much wider world war or

¹ The need to avoid the indecision of Pope Pius XII in regard to Hitler and the Holocaust.

even a nuclear Armageddon. Yet the danger of being too cautious in providing necessary equipment for the Ukrainian armed forces is that it might arrive too late, when the Ukrainians are so decimated and exhausted that they can't sustain the defense. It seems that this is what Putin and Kirill ultimately hope for.

Then they can keep marching on. Russia is neither holy nor morally superior but will continue to be a predatory colonizer and make its neighbors captive again.

We mustn't let that happen.

Paul Mojzes, editor-in-chief