

Theological statement on recent remarks and publications by Patriarch Kirill I.

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Patriarch Kirill I, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has recently sparked fresh theological and ethical controversies with his statements regarding clergy who reject the “Prayer for Holy Rus” he has prescribed, as well as regarding opponents of the war. Furthermore, with his new book “War. Beyond Visible Causes and Consequences”, in which he calls on Russia to demonstrate the will to win in the war in Ukraine and emphasises that the Russian people have ‘the power to win’ and must not shirk ‘the historic duty to victory’. In light of these developments, secretaries from the Ecumenical Centre of EKHN and EKKW in Frankfurt have drafted a statement offering a theological analysis and assessment of these statements and publications.

**It is precisely when faced with the unspeakable
that something must be said**

Theological statement on the warmongering theology of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill I

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When St Augustine (354–430) formulated his concept of the so-called ‘just war’ (particularly in “De Civitate Dei” art. 4, 14 and 19), one could not deny that his intentions were good: To curb wars and render them effectively impossible by ‘setting the bar as high as possible’ – that is, by restricting who has the right to wage war in the first place: only a legitimate authority. Furthermore, there must be a just cause and a just intention; war must be regarded only as a last resort; and, finally, the constant prospect of peace must be maintained. And not to be forgotten: respect for the law in wartime.

However – good intentions are often the opposite of good, and the more than 1600-year history of the concept shows that potentates and warlords have always found a reason to wage war and to legitimise it: Insofar as they adhered to the aforementioned criteria at all, these were twisted from the outset in such a way that even the most unjust war was – and continues to be – stylised as a ‘just’, or even ‘holy’ war. This is precisely why a paradigm shift has taken

place in theological peace ethics: it is not 'just war' but 'just peace' to which churches should commit themselves.

In the case of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Patriarch Kirill I, however, we are witnessing the opposite. Kirill is stoking the flames of war to such an extent – and is moreover sanctifying it through the creation of historical-theological myths – that one cannot but agree with Cardinal Marx's assessment (see reference 1): What Kirill is doing is heresy: the distortion of faith, truth and justice in the belief that he alone possesses true knowledge and is on the right track.

The ideology of the Crusades is alive and well, as can be seen from Patriarch Kirill's unspeakable outbursts and justifications of war – truly a "different gospel" (Gal 1:8), which he has been propagating not only in his latest book "War: Beyond Visible Causes and Consequences", but also repeatedly in his sermons since the start of the war in 2014 (see reference 2 – further essays containing analyses and translations of Kirill's war sermons by Prof. Joachim Willems are listed below as an appendix).

This recently culminated in a truly anti-Christian legitimisation of the Russian nuclear bomb (see reference 3).

However, Kirill's heresy does not relate solely to his theology of war; closely linked to this – indeed, underpinning it – is the intertwining of religion and national (Russian) identity.

Of course, the religious dimension of national or ethnic identity is by no means unique on a global scale; it manifests itself in various religious forms and is problematic in each case. But from a Christian perspective in Germany in particular, it must be cause for alarm that clergy from Russia living in exile point out that they view Kirill's actions as analogous to the heresy of the Deutsche Christen ('German Christians') movement in the Nazi era. A report on Katholisch.de (see references 4), for example, quotes an interview with the Russian Orthodox deacon Andrej Kurajew, who is in exile in the Czech Republic, who says that "when reading [Kirill's] book, it sometimes feels as though he were 'reading something from the NSDAP party press'. What the Patriarch writes comes across as an adapted translation of the guidelines of the National Socialist 'German Christians' faith movement."

Professor Regina Elsner, an expert on Eastern Orthodoxy from Münster, also points to the recurring use of conspiracy elements (ibid.): “Even the book’s title, ‘War: Beyond Visible Causes and Consequences’ illustrates [...] the ‘conspiracy-theory framework’ within which Kirill I. likes to argue. Only he – or rather, the ecclesiastical tradition of his church – is capable of interpreting what is actually happening. It is not politics, but the metaphysical dimension – the question of human salvation – that lies behind current events: in this way, the patriarch dismisses all factual arguments against the war – human lives, the destruction of land and nature, economic costs – as completely irrelevant.”

These are smokescreens from an old intelligence colleague of Putin’s: secret, sinister forces are allegedly behind the events, and only he – Kirill – sees the bigger picture: the basic pattern of all conspiracy ideologies. The structure is always the same – whether in Russia or here at home: one commits or turns a blind eye to injustice, only to then reverse the roles of perpetrator and victim; one sows division, only to subsequently cast oneself as the victim.

It fits in with Kirill’s self-image to accuse Kyiv, of all places, of Nazi ideology, whilst rejecting any colonial-imperial practices of conquest since the expansion of the Russian Empire by invoking the peaceful Orthodox faith (cf. Willems, “Russian Orthodox Politics”, p. 82–85). Kirill’s constant accusations of heresy against the supposedly ‘decadent Western churches’ also come to nothing. There are sound theological reasons why some Western churches, rather than having succumbed to ‘gay propaganda’, as Kirill constantly claims, have – following a long process – self-critically recognised that they wish to assess certain matters differently today. For they, too, have contributed to inflicting suffering on queer people and disregarding their status as children of God.

What is needed is a joint, ecumenical statement from as many Christian churches as possible against the ill-fated conflation of the Christian religion, national identity and the sacralisation of violence, as practised in Kirill’s crude religious adaptation of the Russkiy Mir ideology (Greater-Russian ‘peace’).

If, and because, Christ is the Saviour of the whole world, no one can lay exclusive claim to God – and certainly not for the sake of war!

For references please refer to the German version of this statement:

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