

Russian Church-State Partnership Divides the Faithful

The Wired Word for the Week of May 8, 2022

In the News

Some Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) congregations in the Russian diaspora are leaving the ROC over its support of Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine. This follows hundreds of ROC congregations in Ukraine which have left the ROC to affiliate with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which has been recognized as self-governing (autocephalous) by most other Eastern Orthodox churches. Andrey Sinitsyn, a Russian living in Italy, worships at one of the churches that have broken ties with the Moscow patriarchate and are realigning with the Orthodox Church based in Istanbul, whose leader opposes Russian aggression.

"Kirill [Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' and Primate of the ROC since 2009] got too close to the government," Sinitsyn says. "It's unacceptable. The church should be independent."

Sergei Chapnin, who once worked for Kirill, said the patriarch is after "power and influence, but because of the war, he actually loses it."

Fr. Ioann Burdin, a priest from a parish outside Moscow, said it isn't only Ukrainians who are jumping ship; people in Russia are also leaving the church in protest over Putin's war, which has forced nearly 8 million Ukrainians from their homes. At great personal risk, hundreds of Russian Orthodox clerics signed a letter calling for an end to the war. Burdin was interrogated, fined and threatened with legal action after he described Russian military movements as "fratricidal conflict."

Global affairs columnist, Janine di Giovanni, of *Foreign Policy*, writes, "Putin has woven nationalism, faith, conservative values, and the restoration of the *Russky mir* ('Russian world')." She calls Kirill Putin's wingman. Kirill characterized the rise in authoritarianism in Russia as "a miracle of God." Both men have publicly supported each other's rise to power in their respective spheres of influence. Some might find the body language of the men in [the photo in this article](#) revealing, as it appears to show Kirill bowing to Putin.

In Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg, the Russian president has been depicted as an angel blessing the city and as a Roman emperor. Some ROC sects even pray to Putin, whom they exalt as a kind of patron saint or the reincarnation of the apostle Paul. Many Russians see Putin as the nation's spiritual father, sent by God to Russia as a kind of messiah. One senior Russian government official declared last year that "If there's Putin -- there's Russia, if there's no Putin -- there's no Russia."

Speaking at a March rally in Moscow to celebrate the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea eight years ago, Putin said his motive was "to liberate people from the genocide ... in Donbass and in Ukraine," adding his version of Jesus' words from John 15:13, "there's no other love other than if someone that gives their soul for their friends."

According to Fr. Cyrill Hovorun, a University College Stockholm professor who used to work in the Moscow patriarchate, Putin is supplying the guns for the attack, while "the church is the main supplier of the ideology" he uses to justify his actions.

Patriarch Kirill has characterized the Russian invasion of its neighbor as a holy war against an evil and morally corrupt West with its "excess consumption" and "gay pride parades" that could lead to an "apocalypse." In a March sermon, Kirill said that nothing less than "human salvation" is at stake. Under these circumstances, there could be no doubt in his mind that God is on the side of Russia.

Kirill has trumpeted Russian propaganda that Ukraine wants to eradicate Orthodox Christianity and has committed "genocide" against ethnic Russians in Ukraine's Donbas region. He has also parroted the Kremlin's line that Ukraine is a part of the ROC's "canonic territory," that Ukraine is part of Russia, which poses no military threat to anyone. Even after the Bucha massacre on April 3, Kirill praised Russian soldiers and insisted that Russia is "peaceful."

Paul Coyer, a contributor to *Forbes Magazine*, wrote in 2015 that the ROC played a critical role in "publicly conflating the mission of the Russian state under Vladimir Putin's leadership with the mission of the Church." The patriarch and president have worked closely together, Coyer said, "to sacralize the Russian national identity ... based upon a shared, theologically-informed vision of Russian exceptionalism" that was used in the past to bolster the rule of "the Holy Orthodox Czar."

Tatiana Bondarenko, a 53-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox Christian, lost her home in Donetsk in the 2014 war, and her husband, who was killed in the current conflict in Mariupol in March. Homeless again,

Bondarenko said, "Please, my God, Patriarch Kirill has blessed this war, he is not the one who has a moral right to tell us that 'God is love,'" her eyes flooding with tears. "He has blessed Putin's friend, commander [Victor] Zolotov and the Russian soldiers to kill us, Orthodox believers of Ukraine."

Ukrainian Orthodox Church clergy are calling for an international ecclesiastical tribunal to hold Kirill accountable for what they term the "heresy" of blessing "the physical destruction of his flock by Russian troops."

"We ... can't continue to remain in any form of canonical subordination to the Moscow patriarch. This is a command of our Christian conscience."

Russian pastor Andre Furmanov told *World* correspondent Jill Nelson that religious minorities in Russia face hostility from the ROC as well as from the government. "My church, we literally have been kicked out of every place we ever rented. We bought a place and it was destroyed by the pro Orthodox extremists who would actually call us extremists," he said. Some pastors have been arrested and churches raided, as efforts to curb dissent have increased, he added.

More than 15,000 anti-war protesters have been arrested since the war against Ukraine picked up momentum in February. Anyone who describes the military operation in negative terms faces a possible 15-year prison sentence. Under such circumstances, it isn't easy to fight state-sponsored repression, Furmanov stressed, but he wants Ukrainians to know that Russians love them and pray for them, and that they are trying to counteract the false narratives promoted by the government and the official church dogma.

"The responsibility of what is happening now lies on all of us," the Russian priest, Burdin, said.

The Big Questions

1. Where do you see evidence of "unholy alliances" between government agents and religious figures in the Bible? Where have alliances between government and religion in the Bible been more positive?
2. What factors contribute to unhealthy church-state relationships, and how can those factors be minimized?
3. How might church-state partnerships be formed that could be beneficial to society, as well as useful to religious and governmental organizations?
4. How should church leaders hold themselves and one another accountable to teach the truth and to live out the ethics of Jesus Christ?
5. When church leaders betray the Lord and fail to protect those under their care, what should the people of God do?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Mark 12:13, 17

Then [the chief priests, the scribes and the elders] sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ... Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him. (For context, read [Mark 11:27-33](#); [12:1-17](#).)

Luke 23:2, 10-12

They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." ... The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. (For context, read [Luke 23:1-25](#).)

John 18:36-37

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (For context, read John 18:28-40.)

Matthew 4:8-9

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (For context, read Matthew 4:1-11.)

Matthew 16:24-26

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (For context, read Matthew 16:21-28.)