

A Declaration on the “Russian World” (*Russkii Mir*) Teaching

Coordinators of the Drafting Committee

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Abstract

On March 13, 2022 (Sunday of Orthodoxy), Orthodox theologians and scholars from around the world issued an unprecedented theological declaration that draws on both the Barmen Declaration (1934) and the Synodikon of Orthodoxy, and is directed against the ethnophyletist and nationalist “Russian world” ideology that serves as the religious underpinning for Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This ideology, fundamentalist in character, was developed by Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) of Moscow and both Putin and Patriarch Kirill repeatedly reference it in their active support of the Russian invasion. Having briefly outlined the Russian world ideology, the Declaration identifies the ideology’s main propositions, which are declared “heretical” from an Orthodox theological perspective. By contrast, the Orthodox scholars systematically outline affirmations drawn from Scripture and the Holy Tradition of Orthodox Christianity. Finally, the declaration calls all to be mindful of the theological principles outlined in their decisions in church politics.

Keywords

war – Orthodoxy – Barmen – Ukraine – Russian world – *Russkii mir* – nationalism – Moscow Patriarchate

March 13, 2022 – Sunday of Orthodoxy¹

Dear Friends,

In the wake of Vladimir Putin's unconscionable and horrendously destructive invasion of Ukraine, Orthodox Christians across the globe must face a difficult question: how can a nation whose majority embraces Orthodox Christianity possibly justify attacking and killing the people of a sibling nation, who almost all share the same faith?

How, at the beginning of Great Lent, when our tradition calls us to forgiveness, fasting, and prayer, can Orthodox Christians unleash violence and bloodshed against their brothers and sisters in Christ?

The painful truth, but one that we need to confront in this time of repentance, is that our own leadership, and specifically, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, has developed and promoted a false teaching known as "Russkii Mir" or "Russian World," providing Mr. Putin with the religious "blank cheque" that underwrites his heinous invasion and annexation of Russia's peaceful, democratic neighbors: Ukraine.

During this sacred season, Orthodox Christians throughout the world need to declare in no uncertain terms that the "Russian World" ideology is both false and destructive, feeding violence and bloodshed, causing scandal and division in the Church. Nor can we fool ourselves that this ideology is an exception in the history of Orthodoxy: we must condemn all Orthodox ethno-phyletist

1 The Declaration was initially simultaneously published by the Orthodox Christian Studies Center (OCSC) at Fordham University (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>) and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies (<https://www.polymerwsvolos.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>). The text has obtained unprecedented media attention globally for a theological text, inspired multiple international initiatives to respond to the Russian Church's involvement in the war in Ukraine and has been translated as of late April 2022 into nineteen languages, and these translations are available on the same sites. The Drafting Committee, of which Drs Gallaher and Kalaitzidis were the Coordinators, was Pan-Orthodox in character and consisted of a large international group of theologians and scholars of American, British, Canadian, Greek, Russian and Ukrainian backgrounds. The core Drafters of the text were John Chryssavgis, Brandon Gallaher, Cyril Hovorun, Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Paul Ladouceur, Richard René and Georgios Vlantis (who had the initial idea for the text). There was also an equally essential group of initial core organizers and facilitators of the project who were Nikolaos Asproulis, Sergey Chapnin, George Demacopoulos, Costis Drygianakis, Inga Leonova, Aristotle Papanikolaou, Ekaterini Tsalampouni, Gayle Woloschak and Nathaniel Wood. The English text is republished here on permission of the Coordinators of the Drafting Committee and courtesy of the OCSC and the Volos Academy in lieu of a statement of the Editorial of Mission Studies on the Russian War in Ukraine.

ideologies akin to the false teaching of the “Russian world” in every age, nation and culture.

Orthodox scholars and theologians have drafted a powerful Declaration (attached) concerning the theologically condemnable “Russian World” ideology. We urge you to read this Declaration, sign it, and share it with those around you.

We urge you to pray for repentance for those who propagate this evil teaching, which continues to feed the megalomaniacal ambitions of Vladimir Putin. Pray also for the repentance of every Orthodox Christian, for our own complicity in this evil through silence, obfuscation, and denial.

Only if we confront this evil, which thrives both within and outside us, bowing low in repentance with the simple words of the Canon of St. Andrew of Crete – “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me!” – can we truly reaffirm our divided, bloodied community as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, united only by our broken and contrite hearts in the person of Jesus Christ, who alone is with us in adversity.

The Coordinators of the Drafting Committee

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is a historic threat to a people of Orthodox Christian tradition. More troubling still for Orthodox believers, the senior hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church has refused to acknowledge this invasion, issuing instead vague statements about the necessity for peace in light of “events” and “hostilities” in Ukraine, while emphasizing the fraternal nature of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples as part of “Holy Rus;” blaming the hostilities on the evil “West”, and even directing their communities to pray in ways that actively encourage hostility.

The support of many of the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate for President Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine is rooted in a form of Orthodox ethno-phyletist religious fundamentalism, totalitarian in character, called *Russkii mir* or the *Russian world*, a false teaching which is attracting many in the Orthodox Church and has even been taken up by the Far Right and Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists.

The speeches of President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) of Moscow (Moscow Patriarchate) have repeatedly invoked and developed *Russian world* ideology over the last 20 years. In 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea and initiated a proxy war in the Donbas area of Ukraine, right up until the beginning of the full-fledged war against Ukraine and afterwards, Putin

and Patriarch Kirill have used *Russian world* ideology as a principal justification for the invasion. The teaching states that there is a transnational Russian sphere or civilization, called Holy Russia or Holy Rus', which includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan), as well as ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people throughout the world. It holds that this "Russian world" has a common political centre (Moscow), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv as the "mother of all Rus"), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow), who works in 'symphony' with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as upholding a common distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture.

Against this "Russian world" (so the teaching goes) stands the corrupt West, led by the United States and Western European nations, which has capitulated to "liberalism", "globalization", "Christianophobia", "homosexual rights" promoted in gay parades, and "militant secularism". Over and against the West and those Orthodox who have fallen into schism and error (such as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and other local Orthodox churches that support him) stands the Moscow Patriarchate, along with Vladimir Putin, as the true defenders of Orthodox teaching, which they view in terms of traditional morality, a rigid and inflexible understanding of tradition, and veneration of Holy Russia.

Since the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in 2009, the leading figures of the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as spokespersons of the Russian State, have continually drawn on these principles to thwart the theological basis of Orthodox unity. The principle of the ethnic organization of the Church was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 1872. The false teaching of ethno-phyletism is the basis for "Russian world" ideology. If we hold such false principles as valid, then the Orthodox Church ceases to be the Church of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Apostles, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Ecumenical Councils, and the Fathers of the Church. Unity becomes intrinsically impossible.

Therefore, we reject the "Russian world" heresy and the shameful actions of the Government of Russia in unleashing war against Ukraine which flows from this vile and indefensible teaching with the connivance of the Russian Orthodox Church, as profoundly un-Orthodox, un-Christian and against humanity, which is called to be "justified ... illumined ... and washed in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God" (Baptismal Rite). Just as Russia has invaded Ukraine, so too the Moscow Patriarchate of Patriarch Kirill has invaded the Orthodox Church, for example in Africa, causing division and strife, with untold casualties not just to the body but to the soul, endangering the salvation of the faithful.

In view of the "Russian world" teaching that is devastating and dividing the Church, we are inspired by the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Tradition of His Living Body, the Orthodox Church, to proclaim and confess the following truths:

1. "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here." (John 18:36).

We affirm that the divinely-appointed purpose and accomplishment of history, its *telos*, is the coming of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, a Kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, a Kingdom attested by Holy Scripture as authoritatively interpreted by the Fathers. This is the Kingdom we participate in through a foretaste at every Holy Liturgy: "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages!" (Divine Liturgy). This Kingdom is the sole foundation and authority for Orthodox, indeed for all Christians. There is no separate source of revelation, no basis for community, society, state, law, personal identity and teaching, for Orthodoxy as the Body of the Living Christ than that which is revealed in, by, and through our Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God.

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching that seeks to replace the Kingdom of God seen by the prophets, proclaimed and inaugurated by Christ, taught by the apostles, received as wisdom by the Church, set forth as dogma by the Fathers, and experienced in every Holy Liturgy, with a kingdom of this world, be that Holy Rus', Sacred Byzantium, or any other earthly kingdom, thereby usurping Christ's own authority to deliver the Kingdom to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24), and denying God's power to wipe away every tear from every eye (Revelation 21:4). We firmly condemn every form of theology that denies that Christians are migrants and refugees in this world (Hebrews 13:14), that is, the fact that "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," (Philippians 3:20) and that Christians "reside in their respective countries, but only as sojourners. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land" (*The Epistle to Diognetus*, 5).

2. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21).

We affirm that in anticipation of the final triumph of the Kingdom of God we acknowledge the sole and ultimate authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this age, earthly rulers provide peace, so that God's people might live "calm

and ordered lives, in all godliness and sanctity” (Divine Liturgy). Yet, there is no nation, state or order of human life that can make a higher claim on us than Jesus Christ, at whose name “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10).

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching which would subordinate the Kingdom of God, manifested in the One Holy Church of God, to any kingdom of this world seeking other churchly or secular lords who can justify and redeem us. We firmly reject all forms of government that deify the state (theocracy) and absorb the Church, depriving the Church of its freedom to stand prophetically against all injustice. We also rebuke all those who affirm caesaropapism, replacing their ultimate obedience to the crucified and resurrected Lord with that of any leader vested with ruling powers and claiming to be God’s anointed, whether known by the title of “Caesar,” “Emperor,” “Tsar,” or “President.”

3. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

We affirm that division of humanity into groups based on race, religion, language, ethnicity or any other secondary feature of human existence is a characteristic of this imperfect and sinful world, which, following the patristic tradition are characterized as “distinctions of the flesh” (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 7*, 23). Assertion of superiority of one group over others is a characteristic evil of such divisions, which are entirely contrary to the Gospel, where all are one and equal in Christ, all must answer to him for their actions, and all have access to his love and forgiveness, not as members of particular social or ethnic groups, but as persons created and born equally in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching that attributes divine establishment or authority, special sacredness or purity to any single local, national, or ethnic identity, or characterizes any particular culture as special or divinely ordained, whether Greek, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, or any other.

4. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:43–45).

Following the commandment of our Lord, **we affirm** that as St Silouan the Athonite declares, “The grace of God is not in the man who does not love his enemies”, and that we cannot know peace until we love our enemies. As such, the making of war is the ultimate failure of Christ’s law of love.

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching that encourages division, mistrust, hatred, and violence among peoples, religions, confessions, nations, or states. We further condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching that demonizes or encourages the demonization of those that the state or society deems "other," including foreigners, political and religious dissenters and other stigmatized social minorities. We reject any Manichean and Gnostic division that would elevate a holy Orthodox Eastern culture and its Orthodox peoples above a debased and immoral "West". It is particularly wicked to condemn other nations through special liturgical petitions of the Church, elevating the members of the Orthodox Church and its cultures as spiritually sanctified in comparison to the fleshly, secular "Heterodox".

5. "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13; cf. Hosea 6:6 and Isaiah 1:11–17).

We affirm that Christ calls us to exercise personal and communal charity to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the refugees, the migrants, the sick and suffering, and seeking justice for the persecuted, the afflicted, and the needy. If we refuse the call of our neighbor; indeed if instead we beat and rob, and leave our neighbor to suffer and die by the wayside (Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25–37), then we are not in Christ's love on the path to the Kingdom of God, but have made ourselves enemies of Christ and his Church. We are called to not merely pray for peace, but to actively and prophetically stand up and condemn injustice, to *make peace* even at the cost of our lives. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9). Offering the sacrifice of liturgy and prayer while refusing to *act* sacrificially constitutes a sacrifice to condemnation at odds with what is offered in Christ (Matthew 5:22–26 and 1 Corinthians 11:27–32).

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any promotion of spiritual "quietism" among the faithful and clergy of the Church, from the highest Patriarch down to most humble layperson. We rebuke those who pray for peace while failing to actively make peace, whether out of fear or lack of faith.

6. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31–32).

We affirm that Jesus calls his disciples not only to know the truth but to speak the truth: "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." (Matthew 5:37). A full-scale invasion of a neighboring country by the world's second largest military power is not just a "special military operation", "events" or "conflict" or any other euphemism chosen to deny the reality of the situation. It is, rather, *in fact* a full-scale military invasion

that has already resulted in numerous civilian and military deaths, the violent disruption of the lives of over forty-four million people, and the displacement and exile of over two million people (as of March 13, 2022). This truth must be told, however painful it may be.

We therefore condemn as non-Orthodox and reject any teaching or action which refuses to speak the truth, or actively suppresses the truth about evils that are perpetrated against the Gospel of Christ in Ukraine. We utterly condemn all talk of “fratricidal war”, “repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy” if it does not explicitly acknowledge the murderous intent and culpability of one party over another (Revelation 3:15–16).

We declare that the truths that we have affirmed and the errors which we have condemned as non-Orthodox and rejected are founded on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Christian faith. We call all who accept this declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in church politics. We entreat all whom this declaration concerns to return to “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).