

Orthodox Christian Unity Broken by 'Russian World' Heresy

Orthodox clergy, lay people and scholars condemn Moscow Patriarch Kirill.

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Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Orthodox churches, clergy and congregants inside Russia and abroad are breaking with the Russian Orthodox Church and its patriarch over the war in Ukraine and the ideology of the “Russian world” that underpins it.

This weekend the Russian Orthodox parish of Saint Nicholas of Myra in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, requested “a canonical dismissal” from the Moscow Patriarchate and asked to be received into a diocese under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In a [notice posted](#) on its website, the clergy said it was “no longer possible for them to function within the Moscow Patriarchate and provide a spiritually safe environment for our faithful.” The Amsterdam Orthodox Parish of Saint Nicholas of Myra, founded in 1974, has congregants of more than 20 nationalities.

This was the first time a Western Orthodox Church [has broken](#) with the Moscow Patriarchate over the war in Ukraine.

At the same time an open letter in Russian signed by almost 300 Orthodox clergy in Russia and abroad called for an immediate end to the hostilities. While not addressed to any religious or secular individual, the signatories called upon “everyone who has the authority to stop the fratricidal war with Ukraine to begin reconciliation and immediately cease hostilities.”

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The clergymen mourned “the trials that our brothers and sisters in Ukraine have been undeservedly subjected to” and felt compelled to remind the authorities that “each human life is precious and a unique gift of God, and for that reason we want all the combatants – both Russian and Ukrainian – to return to their homes and families in safe and sound.” They also noted that they respected “a person’s God-given freedom and believe that the people of Ukraine must make their own decision independently, not at gunpoint, without pressure from West or East.”

The “false teaching’ of the Russian World

On Sunday scholars and clergy at the orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies published a scathing “Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ Teaching.” This ideology is, they write, “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 “Russian World” ideology has been cited by both Vladimir Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill over the past two decades. It asserts, the theologians write, 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.”

The ideology asserts that Moscow is the political center and Kyiv — the “mother of all the Rus” — is the spiritual center. Russian is the common language and the Russian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate is the common religion. In this 'world,' they write, the Patriarch “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.”

This spiritual center stands against what its adherents consider “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’.”

The scholars accuse the Russian Orthodox Church of “ethno-phyletism” or “religious nationalism” — a practice outlawed by an Orthodox church council in 1872 as ecclesial heresy. The council ruled that the Orthodox Church must not be connected with the fate of a single nation or race.

“Therefore,” they write, “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.”

The letter was signed by more than fifty prominent theologians from all over the world.

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