

“Third Rome” or The story about the Russian Orthodox Church as a weapon of “Russian world” and its love of nuclear bomb

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The Russian Orthodox Church, or Moscow Patriarchate (MP), is rather infamous all over the world. Its history includes corruption, ties to special services (FSB, and formerly the KGB), denial of the existence of sovereign countries beyond the “Russian world,” chauvinistic statements, dehumanisation of the LGBTQ+ community, rejection of evidence-based health care, coronavirus denial, as well as animosity towards other religious communities and denominations. Let us try to figure out how all of this exists in an orthodox church, which should theoretically be geared towards Christian love.

As a Ukrainian who grew up in Lviv and Odesa, in an environment of Orthodox culture with a strong influence of the Moscow Patriarchate, I refrained for a long time from writing about this branch of Christianity because I risked appearing biased. In fact, the moment for such reflection is long overdue.

The Orthodox Church, unlike the Catholic Church, does not have a supreme pontiff. The leadership is carried out by several local autocephalous churches. One such autocephaly is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), or the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). However, the ROC has not been satisfied with being just one church, not for a long time — it intended to spread its influence on orthodox churches in all countries that used to be part of the USSR, thus adopting the role of a “mother church,” imposing its laws and rules on a number of neighbouring countries. What is more, on December 29, 2021, the ROC Synod decided to establish [its own exarchate in Africa](#), which violated agreements between orthodox churches and effectively encroached on the canonical borders of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. We can consider this gesture a provocation towards the Ecumenical Patriarchate, aimed at the excommunication of the ROC led by Patriarch Kirill, for the sake of self-proclamation of the ROC as the only true Orthodox canonical successor of the Byzantine Church. To better understand the reasons for such aspirations and the political subtleties of the ROC leaders’ diplomacy, we must dive into history and explore the origins of the imperial idea within Russian Orthodoxy, which rings the bells of the “Russian world” and “Russian Spring” around the world.

The ROC mistakenly considers itself the successor of Rome and spreads the narrative that “Moscow is the Third Rome.” This is about the longevity of the Rome-Constantinople-Moscow tradition. Initially, until the second half of the 16th century, this narrative sounded like “Moscow is the second Kyiv” and hinted at the heredity of Russian Tzars and the Rurik dynasty. The latter were the Grand Dukes of Kyiv during the Kyivan Rus period, and Moscow, in turn, was founded by the younger Yurievich branch. Since the fall of Constantinople in the mid-15th century, new prospects emerged in Moscow to justify its own policies of aggression under the guise of the medieval idea of empire heredity.

It should be noted that diplomatic relations between Russia and Byzantium on religious issues developed along the lines of Constantinople-Kyiv, and Moscow was not mentioned originally at all because, historically, it did not even exist until the 12th century. According to

Byzantine chronicles, a separate archdiocese existed on the territory of (Kyivan) Rus as early as the 9th century. However, the official date of the Baptism of Rus by Prince Vladimir is 988, and the first metropolitan archbishop of Slavic origin in Rus is considered to be Hilarion of Kyiv (notably, not “of Moscow”). However, the official baptism of Kyivan Rus by Prince Vladimir is important for modern Moscow because it is trying to claim the ancestral connection to the Romanov family — Russian Tzars who were entitled to ruling the land as descendants of “he who baptised the Rus.” That is why the Moscow Patriarchate vehemently denies any version of history that claims the existence of Christianity on the territory of Kyivan Rus before 988.

In 1299, after the Mongol invasion of Rus in 1239-1240, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Kyiv moved to Vladimir-on-Klyazma (currently, the Russian city of Vladimir, which was founded by Grand Duke of Kyiv, Vladimir Monomakh). Later, in 1325, he migrated to Moscow, retaining the title of the “Metropolitan Archbishop of Kyiv and All of Rus.” Christian relics of Rus were also taken to Moscow and have not yet been returned to Kyiv. Since Constantinople did not want to recognize Moscow’s right to establish its own patriarchate, Moscow Tzar Boris Godunov forced Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople to recognize the Moscow Patriarchate. At the same time, there were no official documents [recognizing the Moscow Patriarchate](#). Despite Godunov’s insistence, the Metropolitanate of Kyiv continued legally to elect its leader, did not recognize the Moscow Patriarch (like the entire Orthodox world at the time), and joined Lithuania, where it began a process of rapprochement with the Western churches. This was the case until the capture of Ukraine by the Russian Empire in the 18th century, the appropriation of all religious achievements of Kyiv by self-proclaimed Moscow, and, hence, the destruction of cultural heritage.

During the reign of Peter I (1682-1725) and the transformation of the Tzardom of Moscow into an empire in 1721, the rector of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, a native of Ukrainian lands, Feofan Prokopovych, developed the idea of transforming Rus into so-called Russia, which would indicate throne heredity. In turn, Peter I introduced the “state eye,” which controlled the activities of the church and included it in the state apparatus of the empire.

Why is it so important for Moscow and the ROC to emphasize their legacy, allegedly tracing back to Byzantium? Symbolism with eagles and the idea of the “Third Rome” probably emerged because the Christianity of the Byzantine variety had an imperial nature. When Emperor Constantine proclaimed the Roman Empire to be Christian, held a Council, and severely eradicated all opportunities for dissent, he pursued only one goal: the spiritual unity of the empire, which testifies to its territorial integrity. All the dogmas of the Byzantine Church, carefully drafted by Constantine, led to the formation of Caesaropapism (supremacy of the emperor basileus over the church), and the idea of the “holiness” of power, anointing of the king, and imitation of the hierarchy of heaven in the profane world of the decaying empire.

“The servant of God” (or “the slave of God,” a phrase often used to refer to Christians at Orthodox masses) is, at the same time, a humble slave of the emperor, since the monarch’s power on earth is the continuation of God’s power in heaven. This is also the origin of the “little person” idea beloved by Russian novelists and the narratives currently disseminated in the Russian media: “What can I do?” and “God is punishing you.” Another interesting example of the power hierarchy approved by God rather than the people is the [sermon](#) delivered by Patriarch Kirill in the Main Church of the Russian Armed Forces on April 3, 2022. The churchman here manipulates the idea of a vertical in the works of John of the Ladder,

identifying spiritual uplift with service to the state. The ROC patriarch also hints that those higher up in the power structure are closer to God, which means they are not subject to criticism. Sanctions have also been mentioned since they shouldn't threaten the "majesty of the spirit." Meanwhile, the ROC is famous for [corruption](#), support of [religious consumerism](#), and the creation of a "[Christian Disneyland](#)" on pilgrimage sites. Patriarch Kirill himself loves expensive [Breguet and Ulysse Nardin](#) watches, costing [tens of thousands of dollars](#).

At the end of the April 3 speech, the Patriarch blesses the Russian army and calls the war "patriotic," which depicts the direct encroachment on the borders of sovereign Ukraine as part of the great empire of Russia. Recently, the term "Gundyaevshchina" has even appeared, named after Patriarch Kirill himself (whose name at birth was Vladimir Gundyaev). Gundyaevshchina represents the final integration of the ROC into the idea of the "Russian world," thus neglecting the borders of sovereign neighbouring states, as Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly reiterated, and supporting the so-called territories of "LPR" and "DPR," including terrorist criminals such as Strelkov (Igor Girkin). For Kirill, the boundaries of the "Russian world" are tied not only to the language of communication but also to the spread of the ROC's ideology beyond Russia's borders.

The imperial leanings of the Russian Orthodoxy are also evidenced by the inclusion of the Romanov family in the ranks of ["royal passion bearers"](#) and tolerating icons with the bloody [dictator Stalin](#). Interestingly, the [icon](#) that Patriarch Kirill gave to the leader of the Russian Guard is the August icon of the Mother of God, which shows Russian soldiers during World War I before their battle in Poland. The Mother of God on the icon blesses the soldier and points to the west. For the ROC, the West is a land of "fuss" that has no right to sovereign existence. Even disregarding the fact that icons depicting soldiers cannot be canonical in theory, Patriarch Kirill's gesture itself does not look very Christian.

In addition, during his sermon, Kirill [blesses Russian soldiers to kill](#).

Taking advantage of the freedom of religion and the fact that religious organizations do not pay taxes, the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine captured the main religious shrines: Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Pochaiv Lavra, Sviatohirsk Lavra, Mgar Monastery, and many others, turning them into feudal possessions with all the aforementioned flaws: corruption, chauvinism, and hate speech.

The remarks of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra governor and a prominent member of the ROC, Pavel (popularly, Pasha-Mercedes, for his love of expensive cars) have become a meme: He bragged to 1+1 journalists about his ability to curse anyone who disagreed with him: ["You'll all die before nightfall."](#)

The leaders of the ROC (Kirill and Pavel) also explain the coronavirus as the world's punishment for supporting the LGBTQ+ movement. Patriarch Kirill also justified the Russian occupation of the eastern areas of Ukraine by [not wanting to see gay parades in the Donbas](#). Amending the Constitution of the Russian Federation to formalize marriage as a union of a man and a woman, as well as resetting Putin's term in office, government propagandists used [homophobic videos](#), and on the other front, the ROC fueled the masses with hatred for the LGBTQ+ community. According to Putin and representatives of the ROC, only the incumbent

president could preserve traditional values, and international organizations would bring only evil and debauchery. The ad itself has since been [removed from YouTube](#).

In his lectures, Ukrainian church leader and theologian, Kyrylo (Hovorun), emphasizes that the secular processes of separation of Church and State and the Christ-centered concept (the importance of the figure of Christ and individual salvation of each person) serve as an opportunity for the Church to understand itself as a separate body. However, the ROC is trying to “fit in” with the state apparatus and become a quasi-military organization, which distances this structure from the ideas of early Christianity. In Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, unknown individuals [attacked journalists](#) asking questions about the war in Ukraine.

The Moscow Patriarchate has always tried to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, with its location in Russia and its center in Moscow. The idea that the Kingdom of God is already here was professed by Russian writers, philosophers, and politicians of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and now in modern Russia as well.

Russian philosophers such as V. Solovyov or M. Berdyaev preached the ideas of Russian cosmism and the transformation of humanity into “divine-humanity,” to which Russians believe to belong to this day (in the sermon on April 4, Patriarch Kirill offers people to serve in the army and thus receive forgiveness and spiritual purification, which is a manifestation of fundamentalism on the verge of extremism).

For the ROC, the death of an individual is not a tragedy, but only a sacrifice on the altar of a bloody empire that offers a distorted image of the Kingdom of God and trusts in the greatness of Russian “civilization.”

Communism as an ideology was a remarkable reflection of such chauvinism. Popular religions were banned as relics, and church authorities, transformed in 1943 by Stalin, came under the control of the KGB. Other religious denominations were banned in the USSR, and certain Protestant and New Age communities are [directly discriminated against](#) in Russia, and by the ROC itself, even today.

The leadership of the USSR saw itself as a modified “divine-humanity,” which is similar to the “Übermensch” of the Nazi propaganda. Most adherents to communist ideology in the 1920s and 1930s considered themselves to be the founders of paradise on earth, and Christianity — a pseudo-religion. In Sergei Eisenstein’s *October*, which has only been partially preserved, communists destroy churches, break icons, and the camera creates new faces over these people, iconizing the image of the fighter against pseudo-God.

The modern ROC is by no means a descendant of Byzantium or, as it would dream, of Kyivan Rus. It is a remnant of the pseudo-Christian formation restored by Stalin, which went from working with the KGB and justifying murder and torture by Russian soldiers, to the imperial narrative, tolerating sacrifice, punishment, inaction, and militarism.

Today, those in Ukraine who still support the ROC blame Ukrainians for their own deaths at the hands of the “noble Russian officer.” People like the wife of the infamous pro-

Russian MP Medvedchuk, [Oksana Marchenko](#), or the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate), [Metropolitan Onufriy](#), urge Ukrainians to accept pain and suffering for their sins (whatever they may be), brought by the Russian sword. In his [Annunciation](#) sermon (7 April 2022), Patriarch Kirill spoke about Ukraine, advocating for the preservation of the “Orthodox faith on the Ukrainian lands.” The next day, the Russian military fired cluster bombs with the cynical inscription “For Children” (“To avenge the children”) at the train station in Kramatorsk, where Ukrainian children, women, and men were waiting to be evacuated. The ROC will probably turn a blind eye to this hypocrisy, just like it did a few weeks before, when Russia was bombing the Sviatohirsk Lavra in Donetsk Oblast, or when it failed to notice that the blessed “special operation” ruined at least [80 orthodox churches](#) in eight oblasts of Ukraine, took thousands of lives, and caused immense grief and suffering to millions of Ukrainians.

The question is, how much longer will people listen to the ROC’s deceitful comments about the need for Christian forgiveness — after Bucha, Borodianska, Mariupol, and now Kramatorsk?