An Alternate Modernity for Orthodox Christianity? Two Challenges from Western Modernity – Sexual Diversity and Nationalism

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Abstract

The essay explores two modern Western challenges (sexual diversity, nationalism) and creative theological responses to them in Orthodox Christianity. The first case study looks at the Exeter-Fordham project, "Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Identity and the Challenges of Pluralism and Sexual Diversity in a Secular Age" (2018-20), and its attempt to respond constructively to sexual diversity. The second case study looks at "A Declaration on the Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) Teaching" drafted in critical reaction to the nationalism of Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church in its ideological underwriting of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is argued that we should not imagine that the Orthodox Church and its cultures will embrace Western (post-)modernity but it must strive to articulate an "alternate modernity" (with responses to key issues) unique to Orthodox ethos, teaching and history.

Key-Words

Orthodoxy, Sexual Diversity, Nationalism, Modernity, Secularism, Pre-Modernity, Russian World, Homosexuality, Ukraine

1. Introduction

In this study, I will explore how recent Western challenges to modern Eastern Orthodox Christianity of the Chalcedonian tradition have caused considerable conflict in Orthodox ecclesial and theological circles and forced some Orthodox theologians to envision an alternate or creative form of modernity that is more in tune with Orthodox Christian history, ethos and religious teaching. As an illustration of this quest, I shall briefly look at two recent case studies of projects illustrating both the challenges and the opportunities of sexual diversity and nationalism and the attempt by

some contemporary Orthodox to respond creatively and critically to these issues and forge what I have described elsewhere as an Orthodox "alternate modernity" (Gallaher 2016a: 808, 2018: 225, 2022: 122 and Ladouceur/Gallaher 2024: 303-305, 319). What I want to argue is that, while the Orthodox Church and Orthodox societies are generally now more fully exposed to and influenced by Western secular democracy, we should not imagine that the Orthodox will proceed inevitably to embrace the exact same forms of (post-)modernity and reach the same conclusions regarding social issues as Western societies have done of late. Sociologists of religion, inspired by the "multiple modernities" thesis of Shmuel Eisenstadt, now largely agree that there is no one identical path of modernization, with one privileged Western cultural programme of increasing secularization, with one relationship of religion to the secular allowing for the privatization of religion, the existence of a neutral public sphere, and one normative morality assuming some version of Mill's harm principle and a common modern ethos. There are instead multiple modernities and secularities in multiple global contexts, often at odds with one another in their basic structure and content and often involving wholly different relationships of church and state. We often take for granted how this fundamental trajectory of pluralization in modernity has resulted in multiple forms of modern Western Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has modernized in light of Vatican II and that church's ongoing modern challenges as well as its multiple international contexts and contrasting papacies are quite different than the many global Protestant communions. Moreover, within one Protestant church tradition, you will get quite different forms of modernization. The "established" or state affiliated Anglican Church of England in its practices and teachings on sexual diversity, which reflect Britain as a post-religious country, is radically different than the non-established Anglican Church of Nigeria with its much more conservative and multi-religious society. This "polycentric" nature of religious modernization and the diverse structures of modernity – with a consequent need for a new comparative history of world Christianity, tracking its interactions and connections, given the fact that ancient and modern Christianity is radically plural in character – has been famously explored by the Munich School led by Klaus Koschorke (Koschorke and Hermann 2014, Koschorke 2016 (and the whole issue dedicated to his work and the Munich School of World Christianity), and Koschorke 2022). Orthodoxy, as an Eastern tradition of churches, and its multiple national and cultural contexts are no exception to this extremely varied picture of modernization with religion. The various societies in

which Orthodoxy is a significant reality are still struggling to define their identities in (post-)modernity, often and, in fact, increasingly in reaction to the West, with "secularization" as a strong point of attack. I want to propose the need to articulate a vision of modernity unique to Orthodoxy, which I refer to as an "alternate modernity" and "alternate secularism." I hope that it might be in harmony with Orthodox sensibility and aid Orthodoxy's multiple local churches in a *positive* and creative process of modernization and secularization (compare Kalaitzidis 2025). This proposed positive and creative form of religious modernization in global Orthodoxy, retaining its "Eastern" Christian cultural otherness in the stream of modernity, takes place in a world that is increasingly dominated, despite critiques and resistance to hegemony, by the West and aspects of its modern culture from global capitalism and entertainment to technology and the ideal (if not the reality) of democracy. It will be argued in this study that Orthodoxy, just as is the case with other non-western religions and cultures, can construct an alternate modernity and secularism, a new modern Orthodox identity, that respects its "Eastern" pre-modern identity and is in organic continuity with tradition, but is non-reactionary and in dialogue with "Western" modernity. The challenges sketched in the case studies outlined below can be viewed as precisely the arenas by which Orthodox thinkers and church people are articulating a new Orthodox alternate modernity.

In order to begin the process of articulating what I call an "alternate modernity" for Orthodoxy, one must first be clear on the context of such an endeavour. Any study of the quest for an Orthodox alternate identity is concerned with Eastern Orthodox identity *in* Western modernity. To understand why there is a need for what I call an alternate Orthodox modernity, one requires a work of ecclesial psychology, that is, an attempt to plumb the contemporary psychological profile of the Orthodox Church in light of its modern challenges. Sexual diversity and nationalism are simply the most iconic of a whole variety of modern western challenges to Eastern Orthodox identity as a pre-modern religious tradition in search of its modern identity. As we shall see with these two issues, part of the new modern Orthodox identity which is being formed is a) one which, out of compassion, tolerates difference on certain contested issues while neither fetishizing those differences into sacrosanct identities nor fundamentally changing the character, practices and beliefs of the community to accommodate these new identities; and b) to privilege ecclesial and dogmatic unity over ethnic and historical identities. Yet there also exist other modern challenges to Orthodoxy including religious diversity, technology

(bioethics, transhumanism etc.), religious authority (the non-democratic governance of all Orthodox churches) and liturgical ossification.

2. *Eastern Orthodoxy, Modernity and Pre-Modern "Liturgical Consciousness"*

Eastern Orthodoxy, I would argue, is only partially modernized as a varied religious tradition. On an institutional level, Eastern Orthodoxy has never experienced wholesale, systematic "reformation." It has remained largely untouched by the Reformations that swept Western Europe in the sixteenth century and it has never implemented a church-wide modernising liturgical and dogmatic programme like the Catholic Church's Vatican II. While this does mean that the Orthodox Church maintains the fundamental elements of a pre-modern religious and cultural tradition different from the West, it does not follow that every aspect of the Church's received teaching, discipline, and practice is equally ancient. Orthodoxy, and this has been no exception for the many contrasting forms of its modern theology, exists in cultures that have undergone massive change since the advent of modernity and, therefore, it has not been isolated from or uninfluenced by intellectual trends from western modernity, despite claims to the contrary. The last century has seen multiple attempts to articulate an Orthodoxy both ancient and modern – as well as theologians characterized by anti-modernism, anti-westernism, and anti-secularism – that have often rejected core elements of Western modernity, including human rights and democracy.

The struggle of modern Orthodox theologians to articulate an Orthodox identity in the modern West is a direct result of Orthodox Christianity not being Western in its origin, but drawing its identity from the history and traditions of the Byzantine civilization whose ethos, while in continuity with Western Christendom in multiple areas, including its affirmation of the faith articulated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, has multiple profound discontinuities ranging from its profound "liturgicocentrism" to its hesychastic spirituality. For its doctrinal language, ritual practices, institutional structures, and overall ethos, Eastern Orthodoxy still looks primarily to pre-modern sources and practices, including the Bible, writings of the (primarily) Greek Church Fathers, conciliar and canonical decrees, icons and other ritual objects, architecture, and the ascetical and hesychastic spirituality of the Jesus Prayer (shared alike by monastics and the laity). With, and in some sense over, these elements stands the liturgy, which is the

principle source of the religious and cultural self-consciousness of most Orthodox faithful and the hallmark of all Orthodox theology. Indeed, Eastern Orthodoxy constructs its identity as much, if not more, through practices of prayer and liturgy than through doctrine. Belief follows prayer, rather than prayer and practice conforming to an abstract and predetermined creed. Many of the liturgical texts and practices of Orthodoxy, known by scholars as the "Byzantine Rite," were, in fact, only crystallised and codified in the (late) Middle Ages under the influence of Ecumenical Patriarch Philotheus Kokkinos (c.1300-1379). The texts of the Byzantine rite, including the eucharistic Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, were printed for the first time in Early Modern Italy (mostly in Venice and some in Rome) in the 16th century and then the books became dispersed in general use across the Orthodox world in the 17th century, displacing ancient liturgical diversity (See Taft 1992). The texts of the liturgy, in particular, have changed little since then as there is no central institutional or political mechanism to enforce liturgical revision or conformity – and, indeed, little appetite for it. As Kallistos Ware wrote: the Orthodox tradition is believed to be "handed down to [the Orthodox Church] in a mystery" that is "preserved above all in the Church's worship. *Lex orandi lex credendi*: our faith is preserved in our prayer" (Ware 1997: 205). It is due to this unique historical and sociological development that the self-identity of Orthodoxy formed from its liturgical consciousness remains fundamentally pre-modern, unlike, for example, the Catholic Church, which has continuously revised its liturgy since the Council of Trent (1545-63) and radically so after Vatican II (1962-65). Thus, if one visits an Orthodox church, in Athens or Zanzibar, one will – more or less – find that the basic content of the texts and rites and even the style of worship is in many cases the same (even if there are differences in language and music) and has been so since the 14th century. Modern Orthodox theology is marked by a major difficulty of being caught in between the ancient and the modern: its identity as Orthodox is both pre-modern and modern. It is pre-modern in its liturgical sense of itself and the world presupposed by that climate of worship in its practices of private prayer, aesthetics, church polity and doctrine, but it is also modern in that Orthodox theology finds itself in multiple societies that have been modernized and it has inevitably been influenced by them.

Orthodoxy certainly has been affected by one crucial aspect of modernity, which is the various forms of nationalism and ethno-phyletism, being products of the very modern notion of the state as well as such modern notions as "ethnicity" (See Kalaitzidis 2014, Leustean 2014). Nationalism has

been the scourge of Orthodoxy – the great Russian American historian and theologian John Meyendorff (1926-92) is alleged to have called nationalism Orthodoxy's "original sin" – but it arguably has only become particularly acute since the late 18th and early 19th century with the birth of the modern nation state and the discovery and cultivation of ethnic identity and nationalist ideology. Much of this growth of nationalism must be understood with the background of the rise of the nation state and nationalism in early modernity but also of the history of the Ottoman empire.

3. The Ottoman Empire

Almost all traditionally Orthodox countries were under Ottoman rule, excepting the Russian Empire. In many cases, this rule lasted for over 600 years, right up until the early 1920's (Kalaitzidis 2014). The Ottomans, after defeating the Byzantine Empire and with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, worked to break Orthodoxy and bend it to their will, beginning with turning Hagia Sophia, the main Orthodox Cathedral in Constantinople, into a mosque. They crushed local identities and controlled very different local and religious peoples (at first, just Christians and Jews) by bundling them into general religious "nations" (millet) under a single religious leader who, with a civil service, would order the people using their own laws and customs, under the overarching rule of sharia law. In regard to the Orthodox, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-81), the first Ottoman ruler of the defeated Byzantines, selected a new Ecumenical Patriarch, Gennadios Scholarios (c.1400-c.1473). Gennadios, and all subsequent ethnically Greek Ecumenical Patriarchs, served as ethnarchs for the "Rum Millet" ("Roman nation") or "Christian nation." Ethnarchs were the supreme ecclesiastical and political leaders over often competing Christian groups and nationalities (see the classic work of Runciman 1968 but more recently McGuckin 2020: 167-168 and 192-208). Until the establishment of the Armenian millet in 1461 (with the Archbishop of Bursa serving as ethnarch) (Shaw 1976: 153, Sharkey 2017: 85), the Ecumenical Patriarch not only ruled over such diverse ethnic and religious groups as Greeks, Romanians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Georgians, Arab Melkites but even Armenians, Copts, Assyrians, Syriac Non-Chalcedonians, Latins and Maronites.

The civil power of the Ecumenical Patriarch as supreme ethnarch, but also the other patriarchates and metropolitans under him, primarily concerned taxation to support the empire. The Church also had a severely

limited and *ad hoc* autonomy regarding administration of civil and criminal law, with the parties in a legal matter having the ability to turn to Ottoman Islamic courts and to dispute an ecclesiastic ruling (Kenanoğlu 2011: 35-38). In short, the argument, favoured since the 19th century and obtaining its classical statement in the great English historian Steven Runciman (1903-2000), that the millet system allowed "empires within the empire" is an exaggeration (van den Boogert 2012: 33). Rather, this system was a way of raising tax revenue and controlling (but also giving limited autonomy to) non-Muslim minorities. The position of these ecclesiastical leaders was wholly dependent on their paying the Ottomans a yearly lump sum payment and they obtained these monies through taxing their peoples through their wide land holdings throughout the empire as well as taking fees for weddings, funerals, baptisms and monies from saints' festivals. Religious leaders were essentially, then, a species of imperial "tax farmers" (*mültezim*) assigned their roles by the Sultan and his officials. Their ecclesiastical estates were, by extension, like "tax farms" (*iltizam*) in the Ottoman millet system. These church rulers ran vast networks where they extracted high (and often exorbitant) tolls from the locals in their "millet" or nation to pay the Ottomans for the right of rule. These millet specific religious taxes were different from the general Ottoman tax (*cizye*), which was levied on "dhimmis" or protected non-Muslim subjects under Islamic law and which was roughly equivalent to modern state taxes (See Papademetriou 2015: 107-175).

Recent scholarship has argued that the power of the Ecumenical Patriarch as ethnarch of the *Rum millet* and his ecclesiastical underlings were severely limited in regards to ruling on civil and criminal matters and it appears, though the limits of the legal jurisdiction is ill-defined, that what came into their legal purview were matters of family law (marriage) and property rights (inheritance), particular to their millet (Papademetriou 2015: 111-112, 163-165; van den Boogert 2012: 32-33). However, as mentioned above, ecclesiastical rulings were not legally mandatory and could be contested by an appeal to Imperial law and courts (Kenanoğlu 2011: 36). Furthermore, we now know that the various other patriarchates (Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem) often served as independent and competing power centres within the Ottoman empire, even undermining the Ecumenical Patriarch (See Çolak 2015, Çolak/Bayraktar-Tellan 2019), as they competed for favour with the Sultan and his government in Istanbul.

The millet system collapsed religious authority with civil and ethnic leadership and meant that ecclesiastical roles were subject to the same

financial competition as all civil administrative posts. Until today, this history has created, for many Orthodox, a church/state confusion, a certain apolitical tendency and a sacralization of civil authority, especially of an autocratic stripe. Moreover, the Ecumenical Patriarch and those who were in his court in the Greek quarter of Istanbul (i. e. the Phanar) – the higher ecclesiastical and civil Phanariot colonial class he controlled – imposed a policy of Hellenization over their different peoples in the empire with Greek style liturgy and culture being predominant (McGuckin 2020: 168-169, 197, 205-207). This policy of Phanariot Hellenization of those Orthodox peoples under their power, whether they were Greek or not, has, arguably, resulted in the tendency, found in many traditionally Orthodox nations, to sacralize secular culture. The ethnic, the tribal and the secular is collapsed with the sacred and leads to rampant ethno-phyletism. The Ottoman period has become widely known by the Orthodox as the "Great Captivity" (McGuckin 2020: 169).

In every case, over the long years of servitude under Islamic Ottoman domination, the local Orthodox churches, beginning with the lower clergy, gradually became the protector and, in some cases, directly the "mother" of the emerging nation as, one by one, countries, like Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece, gained their independence with the disintegration of Ottoman rule (McGuckin 2020: 202-203, Kalaitzidis 2014). Until today, many of the Orthodox churches have remained the propagators of a sacral nationalism. More damaging still, under the Ottomans, the Orthodox were forbidden to preach or teach their faith outside a liturgical context, which led to a focus on liturgy above all other aspects of religious and civil life. This "liturgism" encouraged ritualism and a disinterest in doctrine and Scripture and, with it, missionary work, but also an apathy towards politics and wider cultural life, apart from a religious perspective. In addition, the obsession with the exact performance of ritual led to the preservation of the past becoming the highest value ("tradition" as an exact "handing over" (*tradere*) of sacralized customs from one generation to the other) along with a negative reaction to all change. This general cultural trajectory lasted until the advent of Enlightenment Western ideas creeping into Orthodoxy in the 18th century and the independence movements of the 19th century (McGuckin 2020: 207). Higher tertiary education or formal centres of Greek letters collapsed after 1453, during the Ottoman period, with the loss of Greek aristocratic patrons. This dearth of higher education in the Greek world went along with a more critical attitude to the past in light of the emerging early modernity. Monasteries came to have an outsize role

in education and keeping learning and culture alive, but they rarely encouraged openness to the West and modern ideas (McGuckin 2020: 205). It must be admitted that the ritualistic, tribally ethnic, narrowly traditional and autocratically monastic Orthodoxy that resulted from the Ottoman period often seems a barely Christian "religion" and is reminiscent of Adolf Von Harnack's damning judgement on what he called "Greek Catholicism," which, he opines,

> takes the form, not of a Christian product in Greek dress, but of a Greek product in Christian dress [...] if certain words, like Christ, etc., are omitted, there is nothing left to recall the original element. In its external form as a whole this [Orthodox] Church is nothing more than a continuation of the history of Greek religion under the alien influence of Christianity [...] [it is] the natural product of the union between Hellenism, itself already in a state of oriental decay, and Christian teaching (1901: 221).

4. *The Russian Empire, "Liturgical Autocracy" and the "Yoke" of Communism*

In the same period, the Russian Empire, where Orthodoxy was ostensibly "free" for almost 200 years, through Peter the Great (1672-1725), had an official policy which collapsed the nation, defined by autocracy, into Orthodoxy and created the Church into a special department of state (McGuckin 2020: 190) with its own clerical caste (Freeze 1977, 1983). From 1721 to 1917, the Russian Church was ruled by a civil administrator ("Ober-procurator") who headed the Synod of Bishops for the Czar. Peter the Great refused to allow the election of a new Patriarch for the Church of Russia and the Metropolitan of Moscow was not elevated to this traditional office. This autocratic and secular approach to religion led to widespread dissatisfaction amongst the people and the clergy as well as periodic unsuccessful attempts to "resacralize" autocracy (Freeze 1996). The autocratic and secularized Orthodoxy of the Russian Empire, which to some extent is now being revived in Vladimir Putin's Russia, is well summarized by the famous phrase, "*Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'* [Orthodoxy, autocracy, na-

tionality]."[1] These words were the slogan of Czar Nicholas I's government ideology of "official nationalism" created in 1832 by Count Sergey Uvarov (1786-1855) (Chamberlain 2020).

Besides these external political factors which shaped Orthodoxy, there existed within many traditionally Orthodox cultures certain highly influential Byzantine ideals of the relationship of church and state that were decisive in the formation of modern Orthodoxy. The Russian czar, for example, was viewed, following Byzantine tradition (from the words of the Emperor Constantine the Great), as "a bishop appointed by God over those outside" who "exercised a bishop's supervision over all his subjects, and pressed them all, as far as lay in his power, to lead the godly life" (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine,* 4.24 in Cameron/Hall 1999: 161) by defending the faith and keeping order in the empire so that the Orthodox faith, which is required for the good health of the empire, can flourish. This Byzantine idea was further developed in medieval Russia by Joseph of Volokolamsk (1439/1440-1515) with the notion that the czar was head of the Church on earth, the anointed vicar of Christ, who both protects and rules the Church with unquestioned God-like authority (Raeff 1949). In church service books of the later Synodal period, the name of the Czar and the imperial family was printed double the size of all other words. One cannot but think of the Russian Imperial Family when one hears the obsequious prayers for Vladimir Putin regularly offered at liturgy by the Russian Orthodox Church.[2]

1 *Narodnost'* is usually translated as "nationality" but it is far stronger. It is the Russian term for *Volkstum* and refers to the particular national character of the Russian people (*narod*) and the fidelity to it so it might better be translated as "nationhood" or "national spirit".

2 "We give thanks with fear and trembling, as worthless servants, to Your mercy, our Savior and Master, Oh Lord, for Your blessings which You have poured out abundantly on the President of our country, Russia, now of the same name [as St Vladimir] Vladimir Vladimirovich, and we fall down and bring glory to You, as God, and we tenderly cry out: deliver from all troubles the now honored President of our country, Vladimir Vladimirovich, and always, as You are merciful, fulfill the desire of all of us in good things, we diligently pray to You, hear and have mercy […] Lord Jesus Christ, our God, God of all mercy and bounty, whose mercy is immeasurable and whose love for mankind is an unfathomable abyss! We fall down before Your Majesty, with fear and trembling, as unworthy servants, we humbly offer thanks to Your compassion for Your good deeds on the President of our country, now of the same name [as St Vladimir] Vladimir Vladimirovich" (V den' pamiati ravnoapostol'nogo kniazia Vladimira [On the Saint's Day for the Equal-to-the-Apostles Prince Vladimir] 2024).

Combined with these notions of sacred autocracy is the Byzantine notion of theo-political harmony (*symphonia*) (Hovorun 2022: 92-97). It was held that a harmony (*symphonia*) and interdependence exists between the divinely appointed and anointed emperor and the likewise God-chosen clergy, with each taking care of their different appointed areas: church and state (Justinian, *Corpus iuris civilis, J. Nov.* 6.pre. in Miller/Sarris 2018: 97-98 and Hovorun 2022: 95-96). At its mildest, the ideal of *symphonia* encouraged a close cooperation between the church and the state. At its strongest, it led to the near collapse of the church and secular government with the transcendent political leaders having a quasi-sacral role and the state being the creator then chaplain of a "civil religion" (Kalaitzidis 2014 and Hovorun 2018: 47-87). The strength of this symphonic ideal of church-state relations can be seen in the fact that it now forms a model (albeit rethought for modern times) for the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the state for the Moscow Patriarchate (*Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* 2000: III.3-4). This symphonic and sacralized vision of Orthodoxy's relationship to the state has been kept alive within Orthodox worship until today as a sort of "liturgical autocracy." Given the centrality of its pre-modern "liturgical consciousness" in modern Orthodoxy, the perils of this mindset need more detailed unpacking so the sheer difficulty of modernization in Orthodoxy and its cultures is appreciated, especially when it comes to the issue of nationalism.

The Orthodox hierarchical/episcopal liturgy is a tissue of sacralized political forms borrowed from Byzantine court ritual and is now used for the glorification of the bishop who stands in the place of the emperor (often, in practice, civil authority as such). Thus, during the hierarchical liturgy, the people proclaim to the bishop: "*Eis polla eti, despota*!" ("*Many years!, O, Master*"). This tradition of liturgically elevating the hierarch originates from the Byzantine pastime of acclaiming and glorifying their sovereign (the Emperor) at imperial processions and civil festivals and, indeed, such rituals predate Byzantium and have ancient Roman origins with the deified emperor being acclaimed by his people. In the Byzantine court ceremonial, the Emperor was introduced by the Master of Ceremonies by the cry, "Acclaim [*Keleusate!*]!" and then hailed by his people with an acclamation similar to that now given to Orthodox bishops in the Divine Liturgy: "Many good years [*Eis pollous kai agathous chronous!*]!" (Agamben 2011: 185). This co-opting of the acclamation for the bishop is extremely late and comes from roughly the 14th/15th centuries and emerges from the period of the disintegration of the Byzantine empire, which finally collapsed in 1453.

Once the emperor disappeared or started to fade in significance then his monarchical role was left to the Patriarch of Constantinople who eventually passed it on to all bishops and, under the Ottoman period, this "episcopolatry" (sc. bishop worship) was entrenched as the patriarch was made the ethnarch under the period of the Rum Millet (Larin 2010: 149-150, 252ff.). As Giorgio Agamben notes, the signature of glory is the "central mystery of power," insofar as the sovereign obtains his authorization as a legitimate authority, Kingdom becomes actualized in government, through his own acclamation and glorification by the people (Agamben 2011: xii, 171-172 and 253ff).

The whole hierarchical liturgy, with its "ritual perpetuation of a monarch-figure" by adopting imperial ceremonial and gradual solemnification (Larin 2010: 254) or sacralizing of secular power is simply the eternal filling in for the emperor's empty shoes (Congar 1959: 103, n.16), with the present day civil authorities reaping the benefit in "Orthodox" countries and sacred nationalism often being one of the results. Similar imperial origins can be found in the colourful episcopal *mantiia* or mantle which is like the emperor's golden *manduas*; the two-horned staff of the bishop which descends from an imperial honour bestowed on the patriarch; the eagle rugs or *orlitzi* which the bishop stands on which were an imperial honour; the *epigonation* or *palitza* (a hanging piece of folded cloth worn by bishops and some priests) which comes from certain knee-pads worn by Byzantine dignitaries under their swords; and the *sakkos* which was the emperor's distinctive vestment (first used before by Roman consuls) and was taken on by the Patriarch as an honour in the 11th century and eventually by all other bishops (Larin 2010: 153, 155, 156-159, 211-212 and 213-214).

All of these imperial pre-modern sacral symbols associated with the episcopate in Christian East (though their meaning has been lost to view) still have an unconscious power as archetypes of political and sacred order in traditionally Orthodox cultures. Yet these symbols are not that of the "evangelical service" to which the Christian bishop is dedicated. They are "countersigns" to the Gospel (Congar 1964: 128), signatures of secular power with a patina of liturgical glory and need to be gradually shed or even purged as the Church finds a new mode for its life in the post-secular age, which I have called an "Orthodox modernity." Orthodoxy might here follow the liturgical symbolic lead of Catholicism in its modernization when it laid aside after Vatican II the papal *triregnum* (triple crowned tiara) and *sedia gestatoria* (portable papal throne).

All these things considered, there was very little time for the emerging Orthodox nations of the 19th and 20th centuries to develop an independent civil society outside of the pre-modern mentalities they had inherited from Ottoman rule and from the inherited memory of Byzantine political-ecclesial ideals reenvisioned through 19th century nationalist ideologies of the sacred nation with its autocratic leader before the rise of Communism. The vision of sacred autocracy has been kept alive within Orthodox liturgical consciousness until today, despite Communism. With the exception of Greece and Cyprus, all traditionally Orthodox countries until 1989 suffered under the "Communist Yoke" and most of these churches were under the domination of atheistic regimes. Serbia was even under a revamped version of the Communist Party until 2000. More often than not, Communism was intent on the church's annihilation and generally did not encourage national or ethnic self-expression as the communist ideal was for the universal identity of the proletariat and international revolution. In short, all traditionally Orthodox countries have had very little time to develop civil societies that valued pluralism and secularism as social and political ideals or to understand their own identities as being in any way separate from Orthodoxy (Kalaitzidis 2014, Hovorun 2018: 47-87). In the last 30 years, Orthodoxy as a religious tradition, as if it were caught between the modern and pre-modern, is encountering severe difficulties because it is now forced to theologically and institutionally come to terms with western challenges, above all sexual diversity and nationalism. Quite simply, the Orthodox Church is being forced to decide what sort of modern church it will become, yet its liturgical traditions, teachings on the relationship of the secular to the sacred and inherited symbolic world are continually pulling it backwards.

5. Orthodoxy Waking Up to Modernity: Hans Solo and Hibernation Sickness

Eastern Orthodoxy, especially that found in "Eastern Europe", I like to tell my Western students, who are completely unfamiliar with Eastern Christianities, is a bit like the character "Hans Solo" at the beginning of George Lucas' last original *Star Wars* trilogy film, *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) (Lucas/Kasdan 1995). At the end of the film before *The Return of the Jedi*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Solo, the smuggler hero, is frozen in carbonite in suspended animation of twilight sleep by the evil Sith Lord Darth Vader then given to the crime lord Jabba the Hut to hang on the wall

of his fortified desert palace on the planet of Tatooine. While in carbonite, Solo's biological functions are slowed in a sort of long-term hibernation in order that his physiology is preserved. When Hans is finally unfrozen years later, at the beginning of *The Return of the Jedi* by his disguised paramour Princess Leia in Jabba's fortress, Solo is confused, his senses as well as sense of time and place being completely thrown off. Indeed, it is said he has "hibernation sickness," which the online encyclopaedia, the *Wookieepedia* helpfully tells us involves "exhaustion, weakness, dehydration, dizziness, memory loss, and temporary blindness" (See *Wookieepedia*).

Much of the Orthodox world is now like Hans Solo awaking in confusion with "hibernation sickness" after 1989 from 75 years of Communism, and, arguably, from a sort of enforced sleep in its subjugation under the Ottomans and Imperial Russian control of the Church. The local Orthodox churches in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc, especially Russia and Romania, have undergone a period of both spectacular and completely unmediated growth (Burgess 2017 and Alexander 2021) – mass baptisms, the building of new (often massive and garish) churches, little, and often inaccurate, catechism and poor education of clergy – making for prolonged confusion, distortion of Orthodox teaching as well as anger directed at the West. The West is regarded by some as having brought about the evils of Bolshevism with its creating of Communist ideology and, in addition, there is the common belief that the West has capitulated to the evils of "radical secularism" (e. g. disputes over businesses refusing to serve gay couples, banning crosses, gay marriage, the "death of the family", gay sex, transgender "confusion" etc.) (See Gallaher 2016a, Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2022). There has been a reverting in many of these Eastern European countries to forms of ethnic nationalism that echoes the 19th century rhetoric of Tsar Nicholas I's nationalist doctrine mentioned earlier of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy (read: Putin's "managed democracy") and Nationality." This is arguably seen, for example, in the Moscow Patriarchate policy of *Russkii mir'* (see below). Hans Solo as the Orthodox world, therefore, returning to our earlier metaphor, becomes not a Commander of the Rebel Alliance after he reawakens in our scenario but a "Hyperdox" (i. e. ultra- Eastern Orthodox) follower of the Empire and its evil Emperor, with Solo growing a long beard, attending even longer services, and a longing for a lost holy land with a strong hatred of gays and immigrants.

6. The Light that Failed: the context of the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe

Liberalism or Liberal democracy in Eastern Europe was not successful. We see this brilliantly argued by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes in their 2019 book of "political psychology" (drawing on the thought of René Girard), *The Light that Failed* (Krastev/Holmes 2019). The West's ideology, which, at first, seemed "inevitable" and "unanswerable", was simply not persuasive in the East as it was regarded as arrogant and the West was thought to be in love with itself. Moreover, it treated the peoples of the former Soviet Bloc as second-class Westerners. Western triumphalism of the much heralded "we defeated Communism" variety bred a resentment that sunk all hopes of liberal democracy taking root in the newly liberated "East." Post-1989, with the fall of the Berlin wall, and then with the collapse of Communism in 1991, you see a brief age of Eastern (often traditionally Orthodox) countries attempting to slavishly ape or imitate the West with attempts to replicate or imitate the culture, values and even legal frameworks of Western countries. Krastev and Homes describe this period (drawing on Girard) as the "Age of Imitation" involving "modernisation by imitation and integration by assimilation" (Krastev/Holmes 2019: 7). Yet the Eastern elites (who simply changed their clothes) soon realized that they always would-be second-class Americans, "Brits" and Germans. To properly ape the Western countries, they were expected either to move to them (which millions did, resulting in a brain drain in the East) or to become "knock off" replicas of the higher value original. The imitators began to resent the imitated who always reminded their lesser colleagues that they both needed to catch up with the West and always already hadn't caught up. Furthermore, the conservative society these Eastern folk were looking for was simply not apparent in the West as all the West had to offer, as they saw it, was radical individualism, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, secularism, gay marriage, transgender and queer identities and what was perceived as demographic death, with a swamping of the West by immigrants (particularly with the 2015 migration crisis) and haemorrhaging of the populations of these Eastern countries by their best and brightest moving to the West itself. In response, the West's model for a new post-communist society and its vanguard in Eastern liberal reformers (often educated in the West) was rejected and buried after the chaos of the 1990's in many of these now Orthodox countries and it had the last coffin nail pounded into it with the cynical defence of the liberal elite after the financial crisis of 2008.

Instead of continuing to desire to become "cut rate" and "cut throat" Westerners, something impossible that only bred resentment, many people in Eastern Europe began to turn to an identity that offered a unitary notion of an essentially different "Easternness", xenophobic suspicion of the other in all its forms (especially, "the gays") combined with a nostalgia for a pre-revolutionary holy land. Much of Western modernity, its vaunted values of tolerance, the rights of the individual, social equality, access to justice and government responsiveness to the demands of its people, a clear delineation of the secular and the sacred, was rejected in favour of nationalist authoritarianism and a strong, even overbearing, role for the often quasi-state Orthodox Church. In the words of Krastev and Holmes,

> Political opposition is demonised, non-government media, civil society and independent courts are denuded of their influence and sovereignty is defined by the leadership's determination to resist pressure to conform to western ideals of political pluralism, government transparency and tolerance for strangers, dissidents and minorities (2019: 19).

Krastev and Holmes, in this context, quote the political writer John Feffer who sums things up: "For the World War II generation in Eastern Europe, communism was the 'god that failed.' […] For the current generation in the region, liberalism is the 'god that failed'" (Krastev/Holmes 2019: 20). This is the historical, sociological and political context of the vast majority of the Orthodox churches in the former Soviet Bloc as they come to grips with Western modernity. More particularly, this is the contemporary context in which these churches struggle with the issue of sexual diversity which is understood as a Western plague and have expressed their Orthodox identity through nationalism of a trenchant variety.

7. Multiple Modernities and Secularities

It might be thought at this point that what must happen to these societies in order for them to "grow up", to modernize, westernize, would be to become more like counties like United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, throwing off the shackles of traditional religion and antiquated notions of sexuality, family life and the centrality of the nation in personal identity. However, modernity does not come in one flavour. Nor should it be seen as something which is wholly western. Sociologists and political theorists have come to see, especially from the late 1980's and early 1990's, that

the process of modernization, notably in societies outside the West, is far more complex. The older secularization thesis – being that, as societies modernize, they become less religious, more disenchanted, seeing the world as no more a magical place filled with gods, more intent on individual development rather than community – needs drastic amending. This modernization thesis (which attainted the apex of its popularity in the 1970's) is simply that, one *thesis* amongst many other competing theses trying to account for social and religious change. Here the ideas of the Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt (1923-2010) are important, especially, his notion of "multiple modernities", which assumes, that the initial paradigm of Western modernity is an exceptional if paradigmatic reality. Modernity itself is irreducibly plural and as a plural reality it constitutes the Second Axial Age that developed out of sectarian elements in Christian Europe, as one of the Great Axial Age Civilizations (Eisenstadt 2003: 493-494, 501 and 670). Quite simply, modernity and Westernization, secularism, the secular and secularization and the West are not coextensive. In being taken outside of Western Europe, modernity has been continually constituted and reconstituted in a "multiplicity of cultural programs." These "on-going reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns" are moved forward by multiple different social actors in conjunction with different social, political and intellectual activists as well as different social movements which all pursue "different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern" (Eisenstadt 2003: 536, see Stoeckl 2011 as applied to Orthodoxy). Non-western cultures, in particular, and here one thinks of the first non-western cultures, which were in Asia, who appropriated modernity – as seen in Japan, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia which were then followed by Middle Eastern countries and most recently Africa – wished to "dissociate Westernization from modernity, denying the Western monopoly on modernity, rejecting Western cultural program as the epitome of modernity" and saw their own form of modernization as one which will both respect and celebrate their "traditions and 'civilizations'" (Eisenstadt 2003: 548-549, 557).

If we apply this thinking on multiple modernities to secularism, it becomes clear, as the Spanish sociologist José Casanova has argued, that "modern secularism [.] comes in multiple historical forms" with different normative models for legal-constitutional separation of state and religion and with radically differing types of relationships between science, philosophy and theology and, finally, having different models of "practical

differentiation among law, morality, and religion" (Casanova 2011: 55, see Calhoun et al. 2011: 5ff.). And should this be a surprise? Indeed, what we see in the modern period, following the Reformation in early modernity, is the explosion of diversity in the multiple forms of Western Christianity. This not only takes shape in Protestantism, with its in-born fissiparous nature (*semper reformanda*), but also Catholicism which has encouraged, following Vatican II, a bewildering variety of ecclesial traditions – from Charismatic to Latin rite and the various *sui iuris* Eastern churches – and religious vocations from the older monastic and mendicant orders to new ecclesial movements like Focolare and Communion and Liberation. Modernity appears to have within it an inborn drive to ever greater diversification in religion which, of course, has the contrasting danger of a complete absence of unity.

Part of the reason so many historians and sociologists have abandoned the older secularization theory – with the idea that, as societies become more modern, religion is radically privatized or eventually withers away – was the fact that it made no real distinction between religion, religiosity and the hybridity of these concepts. It could not be verified and falsified as there were no other alternative stories to compare to it to determine whether it was the best. Therefore, critics have moved towards simply acknowledging that as a monolith secularization theory no longer can function as a master narrative, but only exists as a broad based body of descriptors for part of the story of modernization (Cox 2003: 209, Brown 2003: 41ff.). Religion has, by no means, withered on the branch in places like Turkey, Ukraine, Syria and Romania in comparison to the UK, Germany and Sweden. Just because religion is more of an active factor in politics and culture in the first set of countries does not make them more or less modern and does not mean that secularity does not exist in one context, but rules in another. Europe, in the phrase of Grace Davie, is an "exceptional case" in marginalising religion (Davie 2002).

Thus, we can move from the American situation where the separation of church and state has actually encouraged religious diversity and surveys show that being religious is identified with being a modern citizen in the mind of many to the situation in Turkey where, in order to protect the secularity of the state, religion (until recently) was heavily controlled by a huge government department that makes all clerics government employees and even forbids them from wearing identifying garb. Given this plurality of secularism in practice, the form of ideological secularism that arose

out of European Latin Christendom[3] is, when viewed globally, a minority position, or even, as Casanova and Dipesh Chakrabarty have contended, "provincial" (Casanova 2011: 64, Chakrabarty 2000). But if the Western forms of modernity and secularity are no longer treated as normative, might one not then consider alternate forms of the modern and secularity in quite different global cultures with quite different relationships to religion? Here enters in the possibility to hypothesize alternate Orthodox modernities to understand how one might keep religion at the centre of contemporary culture while being able to respond non-reactively to contemporary western modern challenges still acknowledging religion as a guide in these areas.

8. Case Study 1: Sexual Diversity

So let us attempt to apply these ideas to an Eastern Orthodox context (See Gallaher/Tucker 2019 and 2020 which this section summarizes). Let us look briefly at two case studies of attempts by Orthodox theologians and church people to forge an alternate Orthodox modernity. The first case concerns the issue of "sexual diversity", which is the term I am using for the reality reflected in the acronym LGBTQ+ or the existence of multiple sexual and gender identities: sexual and gender fluidity in contrast to the traditional (for Orthodoxy) vision of a male/female binarism, in which only heterosexual relations are regarded as sanctioned or normative and that only in a Christian marriage. Today, the Orthodox Church remains, for the most part, committed to conceptions of gender, sexuality and sexual disciplines which were formulated before the advent of modernity. These disciplines include, among other things, an understanding of marriage as the union of a male and a female and the restricting of sexual activity to vaginal penetration by a male of his wife. The occasions for sexual intercourse are limited by the Church's fasting practices for the reception of Holy Communion, the ecclesiastical calendar, and the wife's menstrual cycle. The Church's commitment to its pre-modern sexual disciplines holds true both for the majority of clerics, who are charged with teaching the Orthodox faith and cultivating observance of practices which cohere with it, and for the laity, who broadly support the Orthodox Church's teachings

3 Taylor calls this "exclusive humanism" (Taylor 2007: 245) where we subtract religion from the equation of our lives, leaving the public sphere a neutral space.

on controversial social issues (according to research by the American Pew Research Center 2017: §4). Most publications on topics of sexual diversity from a specifically Orthodox perspective seek to undergird the received practices and identify theological explanations for them and, more recently, tend to attack the phenomenon of sexual diversity as the toxic by-product of "secular culture."

Many Orthodox accept the Church's teachings and disciplines on sexuality as part of a complete package of received traditions which cannot be subjected to individual or collective scrutiny. In contexts in which Orthodoxy exercises religious and ethical influence within society in general and ambient cultural views broadly align with those of the Church (e. g. in Eastern Europe, the Orthodox "old world"), the teachings and disciplines of the Orthodox Church may not appear particularly distinctive and there may therefore be little cause for most people to reflect on the Church's stances. In other contexts, in which Orthodoxy is a minority tradition, and especially when there are many ideological converts (especially, North America), the teachings and disciplines of the Orthodox Church on sexuality may be prized precisely because they stand in opposition to prevailing social views, which are considered to be morally bankrupt, and they are thus an important constitutive feature of a distinctively Eastern Orthodox identity.

Alternative sexual and gender identities, whether publicly acknowledged and actualized or not, are broadly condemned as sinful, deviant, and unnatural by the Orthodox Church. The sexual diversity of modern society is condemned specifically in the documents of the 2016 Council of Crete. Same-sex unions are highlighted as being completely at odds with the teaching of the Church and authentic Orthodox Christian identity ("The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments" 2016). The Orthodox Church works consistently in many parts of the world to ensure that its moral vision is broadly supported by law wherever possible. For countries within the European Union or adjacent to it, this effort is frequently pursued with zeal since the legal protections afforded to LGBTQ+ people which have swept the EU over the last decades are perceived to be a pressing threat to received moral order. Orthodox hierarchs and theologians frequently comment in the public sphere in opposition to the extension of rights and freedoms to LGBTQ+ persons, both in traditionally Orthodox countries and in places where the Orthodox Church represents a small minority.

In 2015, in reaction to the US Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage, the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA

issued a statement saying the court had "overstepped its purview by essentially re-defining marriage... It is immoral and unjust for our government to establish in law a 'right' for two members of the same sex to wed" (Assembly of Bishops 2015). In October 2018, Romania, driven by its then socially conservative government, held a referendum on a constitutional amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage, even though under its civil code, same-sex marriage and civil partnerships are not legal. The referendum was the result of a campaign led by a "Coalition for the Family" which collected 3 million signatures in a petition. The most powerful member of this group was the Romanian Orthodox Church. The referendum was an attempt to pre-emptively cut short any future pro-gay legislation. In the end, the referendum, which required a 30 Percent threshold of voter turnout to be valid, was legally null as only 20.4 Percent turned out – this was perhaps the result of a successful campaign by human rights activists to boycott the vote. The failure of the vote points to the instability of the power of the heavily authoritarian Orthodox Church, led by the nationalist and conservative Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea. 90 Percent of those who did turn out voted in favour of the proposition (Economist 2018). The coalition against same-sex marriage was well-funded and consisted of some far-right organizations, many of which had close ties to the political forces of Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, which, as an institution, has collaborated across the Orthodox world with the World Congress of Families to promote anti-LGBT+ political agendas (World Congress of Families). In Greece, there remains great dissension in society and an outcry from its state Church because in October 2017 the centre-left government passed legislation that enabled Greek citizens from the age of 15 to determine their gender identity without (as was previously required) undergoing enforced sterilization. This was denounced by the Holy Synod of the official state Church of Greece as a "monstrous" attack on family life and traditional Orthodox values (Economist 2017). In February 2024, the Greek government passed into law same sex marriage as well as extending further parental rights for gay couples. This caused a large backlash from the Church of Greece where leading hierarchs described the decision as "demonic" and "pure evil" and argued that they had not been consulted whatsoever. In reaction, the Prime Minister and leading politicians were not invited by the Church of Greece to a traditional service for the beginning of Lent on the "Sunday of Orthodoxy" (Smith 2024). These are just a few of the many instances of live "post-secular conflicts" in the Orthodox world (Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2020).

In response to this overall picture, Orthodox theologians and church people have met mostly in para-ecclesial and academic contexts to respond academically and pastorally to the challenge of sexual diversity to Orthodoxy. These includes projects and meetings based out of Helsinki (2015), Oslo (2016-2018) and Amsterdam (2017). From 2018-2020, I co-led an University of Exeter-Fordham University project with Aristotle Papanikolaou and Gregory Tucker funded by the British Academy called "Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Identity and the Challenges of Pluralism and Sexual Diversity in a Secular Age" (See Gallaher/Tucker 2020; Arentzen et al. 2022).[4] This project explored the complex responses of Eastern Orthodox Christianity to an increasingly pluralistic and secular world, specifically in respect to an increase in society in the acknowledgment of sexual and gender diversity. This is manifested in rapidly changing legal formulations of same-sex rights and in the relationships and the encounter between openly-LGBTQ+ persons and Orthodox communities both in the West and in traditionally Orthodox lands. Contributors to the project reflected on the Church's theological tradition and customs in conversation with secular policymakers and lobbyists, with the aim of facilitating a mutually-enriching conversation. The project produced: a ground-breaking international conference of 55 scholars held in Oxford; two films; numerous widely read academic articles;[5] a 150 page Report; a Fordham public lecture and panel; and two Zoom workshops. The project attracted considerable attention in diaspora Orthodoxy with the investigation of lay participants by the episcopal hierarchy; much denunciation by conservative Orthodox online; and multiple conservative Orthodox counter-conferences upholding a more traditional understanding of sexuality. The key "result" was the August 2019 meeting in Oxford.

The Oxford meeting (August 16-19, 2019) brought together 55 participants from all over the Orthodox world, including from 17 countries: Greece, Russia, Ukraine, USA, Canada, UK, Spain, Norway, Netherlands, France, Romania, Poland, Sweden, Serbia, Austria, Germany, and Belarus. The diversity of the participants was just as impressive. They included members from many of the 16 local Orthodox churches including male and female theologians, lay, monastic (including multiple nuns and monks)

4 "Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Identity and the Challenges of Pluralism and Sexual Diversity in a Secular Age" (2018-2020): [https://www.fordham.edu/orthodoxy/bridgingvoices/].

5 "Bridging Voices Project" (2019): [https://publicorthodoxy.org/category/fordham-exeter-bridging-voices-project/].

and ordained (of all three major orders including the eminent bishop and theologian, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (1934-2022)), but also political scientists, church musicians, gay and human rights activists, workers in the charity sector, philosophers, psychotherapists, psychiatrists and scientists. The Orthodox participants ranged from those who by any index would be considered extremely conservative and who descried sodomy and a western civilization that had reverted to paganism to those few people who advocated for Orthodox same sex sacramental marriage. Most fell into the category of "everything in between." The majority, both progressive and conservative alike, did not have it "all figured out" and simply were searching for a path of compassion and ecclesial inclusion that yet remained faithful to Orthodox tradition and teaching. Unlike previous pioneering meetings, there was also representation from the Anglican and Catholic Churches who were observers, including a then Anglican bishop (Bishop Jonathan Goodall), a then head of a major Catholic institution (Institut Catholique de Paris: Fr Philippe Bordeyne) and the noted theologians, the Catholic Fr James Alison and the Anglicans, John Milbank and Revd Alison Milbank.

The meeting consisted in its working sessions of multiple sections with short papers by participants then extended discussion on the areas of theology, philosophy, church history, and canon law, fields within the natural and social sciences and an ecumenical panel. The sessions were often extremely heated including members occasionally heckling one another ("rubbish", cried one person at the comment of another at one point). But the working sections were interspersed with long breaks and leisurely dinners in the best Oxford style. What emerged, most remarkably, from this non-official academic event was a universal commitment to the spirituality and "Holy tradition" of Orthodoxy and a commitment to friendship in the path of trying to help the Church discern a way through the challenge of sexual diversity. This could be seen especially well at some of the dinners and drink breaks where those who had been fighting tooth and nail across the different Orthodox divides broke bread and became friends celebrating their communion as Orthodox Christians. This amity spilled over into the liturgies at the local Orthodox churches that Sunday. No unitary Orthodox position was put forth or established on sexual diversity in Oxford. A press release was issued in multiple languages, but it was consciously not an agreed statement as it was stated that the gathering had no ecclesial authority to make a common statement. Nevertheless, all participants advocated compassion for those who are sexual minorities based on the respect for their inherent dignity as being made in the image of Christ, the consequent

abhorrence of all violence towards LGBTQ+ individuals and the need for ongoing dialogue. However, the importance of the meeting, a bit like the Council of Crete in 2016 (which I also attended), was not for any of the positions put forth out of its papers, but that it even took place in a hostile environment in world Orthodoxy towards LGBTQ+ individuals.

The Oxford meeting, therefore, was ground-breaking not because it came to any new position on sexual diversity, but because it put forward an example, even a new mindset (*phronema*) of an alternate Orthodox modernity: Orthodox who agree very much on most other issues of doctrine and spirituality can nevertheless respectfully engage in dialogue and accept the existence of sexual minorities without condemnation and violence as part of the day to day reality of Orthodoxy in the modern West in its pluralism and secularity. The *phronema,* which the meeting embodied, accepts individuals who are sexual minorities out of Christian compassion and attempts to incorporate and care for them pastorally on a case-by-case basis without simultaneously fetishizing their identities and thereby (as is the case with other modernizing Christian churches) changing the teachings and/or fundamental disciplines and liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church. Here the Orthodox would fundamentally differ from the Anglican Episcopal Church in the USA which from 2015 accepts homosexual behaviour as ethically normative and blesses gay marriages and even from the Catholic Church which allows blessings of gay couples not married in the Catholic Church following *Fiducia Supplicans* (2023). The meeting witnessed to a sort of *de facto* Orthodox pluralism, as the first step in the formation of an alternate Orthodox modernity, within which there is a current normative moral position that does not accept sexual and gender diversity as itself normative but nevertheless need not lead to ostracization of those who are LGBTQ+ or that there must be a change of doctrine and teaching on homosexuality along with Orthodox gay marriage. This may seem rather weak as an alternate form of the modern, but, I would argue, that, too often in these debates, one is led to one position triumphing over another, a zero sum game, which is treated as the only possible result: Orthodoxy or modernity. What we saw with this meeting is that Orthodox could engage in an open ended and respectful and even loving way on a highly combustible modern issue with those with whom they disagreed and then break bread and receive the Eucharist side by side.

9. Case Study 2: Nationalism

The second case study deals with the issue of nationalism and ethno-phyletism, for which Orthodoxy has become almost completely identified with in the popular media. We have already seen the complex historical and liturgical background to the growth of nationalism (and often with it, political forms of autocracy) in Orthodoxy earlier in our study. Here we turn to the Orthodox theological response to the Russian church-state ethno-phyletist and nationalist ideology of *Russkii mir* or the Russian world,[6] which is the ideological underpinning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The March 2022 "Declaration on the Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) Teaching" was drafted in reaction to what is argued to be the Russian Orthodox Church's ideological underwriting of both Putin's regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On March 13, 2022, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the beginning of Orthodox Lent, 75 Orthodox theologians and scholars from around the world issued a theological declaration that draws on many sources including the Barmen Declaration (1934), entitled, *'A Declaration on the Russian World (Russkii Mir) Teaching'* (see Gallaher 2025, Gallaher/Kalaitzidis 2022a, 2022b). The Declaration is structured, following Barmen, in terms of six theses headed by citations from Scripture with affirmations of Orthodox teaching and negations or anathemas of heterodox or heretical teaching. Having briefly outlined the Russian world ideology, the Declaration identifies the Russian world ideology's main propositions, which are declared "heretical" from an Orthodox theological perspective. By contrast, the Orthodox scholars systematically outline affirmations drawn primarily from Scripture, as witnessing to Orthodox Christianity. Finally, the declaration calls all to be mindful of the theological principles outlined in their decisions in church politics. It was published simultaneously on the websites of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Volos, Greece. It has garnered over 1500 signatories from every Christian tradition and nation and has been translated into 21 languages. I was one of its core drafters working together with a multi-national and Pan-Orthodox group of scholars including the Canadian theologians Paul Ladouceur and Fr Richard René, the Greek Pantelis Kalaitzidis, and the Ukrainian Fr Cyril Hovorun. The text has obtained unprecedented media attention globally

6 See Gallaher 2016a, 2016b, 2019, 2025, Denysenko 2013, 2023, Kordochkin 2024 and Flogaus 2024; and in contrast: Bremer 2016, 2023, Shishkov 2022.

for a theological text and it inspired multiple international initiatives to respond to the Russian Church's involvement in the war in Ukraine. The text has thrown into the light the ongoing difficulties Orthodoxy has had since the 19th century with ethnic nationalism. Some critics have pointed out that one also encounters sacralized notions of nationality in contemporary Ukraine and it is not limited to Russia.

Russkii mir, which the Declaration condemned, teaches that there is a transnational Russian sphere or Russian world that includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan are added along with the Baltic countries) but also ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples in Western Europe, North and South America, and Japan. It holds that the Russian world has a common political centre (Moscow), a common language (Russian – often Ukrainian will be described as a "Russian dialect"), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv – the "mother of all Rus'"), a common Church with a common Patriarch (the Moscow Patriarchate with its primate Patriarch Kirill of Moscow *and All Rus'*) who works in "symphony" with a common tsar/president/great leader (Putin) and with common moral values, art, one spiritual vision and even one financial system. The different nations and peoples of the unified Russian world – from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus to Kazakhstan, Moldova and even Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania – Patriarch Kirill says "belong to a single, unique civilizational space within which values, knowledge, and experience have accumulated that have always helped our peoples occupy a worthy place in the human family" (Gundiaev 2009: 59). The Russian world, it is alleged, stands against the corrupt "Collective West" with its "radical secularism", characterized by "alternative lifestyles" and pervasive "gay parades", which, it is asserted repeatedly, has lost its spiritual centre and is a plaything of the corrupt and lying Americans and the equally perverse EU (Gallaher 2016a).

With *Russkii mir* a vague Christian teaching on the sacred nature of the nation has collapsed into a far-right political, ethnic and religious ideology with a mythological renarration of history that fits a vision of an eternal holy Russian empire and a sacralized autocracy. This ideology is a form of ethno-national religious fundamentalism, in contemporary Western terms, "Christian nationalism", with an appeal to blood, soil, faith, nation, people, a great czar/leader and especially the Russian language. Unlike some other ethno – and Christian nationalisms, which appeal to a very specific race or ethnos and one tightly defined nation state, the Russian world ideology is a form civilizational nationalism where the "Russian land" and its all-embracing traditional Christian culture, language and vision embraces many

diverse peoples beyond the Russian Federation as "Russian." The Russian world ideology might, as Paul Gavrilyuk has argued, be seen as a new Nazi ideology for the 21st century and much of the behaviour of the Russian state from its mass "Z" cult seen in rallies and schools to the advocating of something like Ukrainian genocide (Sergeitsev 2022), increasingly seems fascist in character and is reminiscent of the Nazis (Gavrilyuk 2022a, 2022b). The *Russkii Mir Foundation*, started in 2007, has been the main soft-power vehicle of the ideology (with centres funded at Edinburgh and Durham universities, since closed down). It encourages worldwide Russian language, culture, and heritage as a "global project" since the Russian diaspora is said to make up the "largest diaspora population the world has ever known" (Russkii Mir Foundation 2024).

Orthodoxy has long struggled with the danger of ethno-phyletism, that is, the theological tendency to confuse the Church with a particular race, tribe and (recently) nation by divinizing a particular nation, culture and political order into a sacred order that swallows up the Christian Gospel. Ethno-phyletism is anti-eschatological in character as it collapses the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, which is to come, with the Kingdom and worldly divisions of this fallen world.

10. Russkii Mir and Vladimir Putin

Let us give two concrete examples – from both Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill Gundiaev – of the Russian world ideology we have just sketched. Putin, it is arguable, is essentially enforcing on Ukraine by the sword its membership in his mythical Holy Rus' or Russian world, as part of his broad and flexible current ideology (on Putin's ideology see Snegovaya and McGlynn 2024). Mythical geography with a mythically unified Russian people has become a weapon for Putin against real nations with real borders, cultures and peoples. In an address to the Federal Assembly in late 2014, explaining the significance of Crimea, which had been seized in early 2014, Putin said that "Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism. And this is how we will always consider it" (Putin 2014).

In Putin's speech on February 21, 2022, just days before Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin argued Ukraine is a "fake" country created by Lenin. This is because Ukraine is really part of the same common Russian world, and

so should legitimately be part of the Russian Federation, as can be seen in the common Russian religious and cultural nexus shared by Ukraine with Russia:

> I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us [...] relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians (Putin 2022).

This appeal to the Russian world teaching is not an isolated statement from Putin. In his July 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which arguably might be seen as his most important ideological rationale for the invasion of February 2022, he argues that a common sacred ethnic-spiritual bond unites all those who are descendants of Rus'. More disturbingly, and here we see that Russkii mir is far from a harmless romantic and ordinary national doctrine where the church is the soul of the nation, Putin argues that the alleged forced assimilation of Russians to Ukrainian culture and the "ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us" (Putin 2021). He sees, in particular, an expression of this use of weapons of mass destruction in Russian assimilation to an ethnically pure Ukrainian state in the founding by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in January 2019 of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (thus undermining the centuries old hold of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate over religious life in Ukraine).[7]

11. Russkii Mir and Patriarch Kirill Gundiaev

You see this ideology also throughout the statements of major leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate, who actively created the ideology acting as a soft-power instrument of the Kremlin. Indeed, Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) of Moscow and all Rus' (to use his full title) even published a separate book of his multiple talks from 2012-15 on the subject – with the general theme of the borderless cultural and spiritual identity and unity of the Russian world roughly mapping on to the former Soviet Union. The work is called *Seven*

7 For commentary see Gallaher 2019: 183-187.

Speeches on the Russian World and includes talks "On Russian Unity", "On the boundaries of Russian Statehood", and "On Russians in the Caucasus" (Gundiaev 2015). In a 2009 speech at the Third Assembly of the Russkii Mir Foundation, Patriarch Kirill gives one of the clearest articulations of the Russian world teaching:

> It is necessary in this context to understand clearly what we mean by the Russian world today. It seems to me that if we regard the Russian Federation within its current borders as the sole center of the Russian world, then we sin against historical truth and artificially cut ourselves off from many millions of people who are aware of their responsibility for the fate of the Russian world and consider its construction the chief cause of their life. The core of the Russian world today is Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. The Holy Reverend Lavrentii Chernigovskii expressed this idea in the well-known sentence: "Rus, Ukraine, and Belarus – that is Holy Rus." (Gundiaev 2009).

We see some of this sacralizing of Rus' and mapping it on to Ukrainian geography in 2019 when Patriarch Kirill explained to multiple international Orthodox hierarchs who had gathered in Moscow that

> Ukraine is not a periphery of our Church. We call Kiev "the mother of all Russian cities", for us Kiev is exactly what Jerusalem is for many people. From there Russian Orthodoxy began, and under no circumstances can we renounce this historical and spiritual bond. The unity of our whole Local Church is founded on this spiritual bond (Gundiaev 2019).

Just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on February 27, 2022, Patriarch Kirill in his initial homiletic response to the war (which term he did not use in this sermon) is even more explicit on the link between the "limited military operation" and his belief in Holy Rus'. What is notable here also is the citation (as we see frequently in Putin as well) of the 12th century legendarium, the "Russian Primary Chronicle" (or "Tale of Bygone Years") which serves as a sort of alternative Holy Scriptures for the Russian World teaching:

> God forbid that the present political situation in fraternal Ukraine so close to us should be aimed at making the evil forces that have always strived against the unity of Rus' and the Russian Church, gain the upper hand… May the Lord protect from fratricidal battle the peoples comprising the one space of the Russian Orthodox Church... May the

> Lord preserve the Russian land. When I say "Russian", I use the ancient expression from "A Tale of Bygone Years" - "Wherefrom has the Russian land come", the land which now includes Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other tribes and peoples (Gundiaev 2022a).

It was entirely natural that the Russian World teaching would eventually be expressed with changes to the liturgy in order to fully sacralize the teaching and incarnate it in the Russian people. On March 4, 2022, Patriarch Kirill ordered all his clergy worldwide to add an extra prayer to the liturgy, whose totality is entitled "Prayer for the Restoration of Peace", which includes this line: "Rebuke the foreign nations who want and take up arms against Holy Rus'! Prohibit and overthrow their plans!" (Gundiaev 2022b). He then updated the prayer in September 2022 focussing on the "victory" of Rus' over its enemies in the "Prayer for Holy Rus'." Multiple clergyman have been suspended or defrocked by the Moscow Patriarchate for refusing to say this prayer or replacing "victory" with "peace":

> O Lord God of might, God of our salvation, look with mercy upon Your humble servants, hear and have mercy upon us: behold, those wishing to fight turned against Holy Rus, wishing to divide and destroy its one nation. Rise, O God, to the aid of Thy people, and grant us Thy mighty victory. Assist your faithful children who are zealous for the unity of the Russian Church, and strengthen them in the spirit of brotherly love, and deliver them from their troubles. […] Strengthen the soldiers and all defenders of our homeland in Your commandments, give them the strength of spirit, and keep them from death, wounds, and captivity. […] Give forgiveness of sins and blessed repose to all who were killed in these days, and of wounds and diseases. Fill us with the faith, hope, and love that we have in Thee; and raise up once more in all the countries of Holy Rus' peace and harmony ("Molitva o Sviatoi Rusi" 2022 and translation at Paert 2023).

In this same vein, and perhaps most infamously, as it attracted wide media attention worldwide, on Forgiveness Sunday (March 6, 2022) Patriarch Kirill preached that the present war had "metaphysical significance," as what the West was attempting to do in Donbass was to force on the locals a "test of loyalty" which was the demand that they hold gay pride parades and so what was happening in Ukraine was a matter of salvation which Russia was defending as a holy nation (Gundiaev 2022d). In the months that followed Patriarch Kirill doubled down on his Russian world rhetoric and

in a homily of September 2022, shortly after the "limited mobilization" of reservists by the Russian government, Patriarch Kirill claimed (reminiscent of Pope Urban II's plenary indulgence in 1095 before the First Crusade) that if a soldier dies fighting for Russia in Ukraine "we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed" (Gundiaev 2022e).[8] Two days later on September 27 he claimed that

> our spiritual mobilization, to which I now call everyone, will also help the mobilization of all the forces of our Fatherland. And it will undoubtedly help in the end the complete reconciliation of Russia and Ukraine, which constitute a single space of the Russian Orthodox Church (Gundiaev 2022c).

On March 27, 2024, at the 25th World Russian People's Council in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, the Russian Church formalized the *Russkii Mir* doctrine in the text "The Present and Future of the Russian World." The Council was attended by 60 priests of the Moscow Patriarchate, 20 of its bishops (6 of whom were permanent members of its Synod, that is, half of that Synod), and it was chaired by Patriarch Kirill. The text, amongst other things, declared that Russia is the creator and supporter of the Russian world and that the

> special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Russia, fulfil the mission of the 'restraining force [*uderzhivaiushchii*]', protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West that has fallen into Satanism (World Russian People's Council 2024 and commentary at Shumylo 2024).

The idea of the "restraining force", which is mentioned, is adapted from the Orthodox far right (e. g. Konstantin Malofeev and Aleksandr Dugin, cf. the website of their think-tank [https://katechon.com/]) to argue that Russia is the defender of Christianity from hostile demonic forces. Patriarch

8 This statement is part of a larger theology of holy war and victory. Patriarch Kirill sees WWII ("the Great Patriotic War") as a sort of national crucifixion or Soviet Golgotha (meant literally) and wholesale Russian state and national redemption. He holds that those Soviets who perished in WWII were part of a providential plan in that they were sacrificed by God on the "altar of victory" so that the sins of the October Revolution and Stalinism could be forgiven. He thus identifies the sacrifice of the cross with the 27 million deaths in WWII from the Soviet nation. The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces is the centre and concretization of this new "cult" of Russian Orthodox Holy War (See Griffin 2023, 2024).

Kirill, in a November 2022 speech, claimed that all of the forces of the Antichrist are directed at Russia, because Russia was the "restraining force [*uderzhivuaiushchii*]", as St Paul (2. Thess. 2:6: *to katechon*) had foretold, which was blocking the revelation and rise of the Antichrist ("the man of lawlessness", 2 Thess. 2:3). This Pauline power, which restrains or hinders the appearance of the Antichrist, is traditionally interpreted by exegetes to refer to the Roman Emperor and the Empire, but, the Patriarch noted in a sermon of April 2022, it had been extended by Russian philosophers to the Second (Byzantium) and Third Rome (Moscow) (Perrie 2023). Here he is referencing the ideology of Russia as "Third Rome" of Filofei of Pskov (c.1465-1542) (Poe 2001), as well as weaving together his theology of holy war with an end of days apocalypticism (Rev. 16:14-16). It is not a surprise that there has been a detailed debate in contemporary Orthodox theology as to whether this teaching is "heresy" (Larin 2024 and Chryssavgis 2024).

12. A Declaration on the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir) Teaching

Having laid out in detail Russkii Mir as an extreme form of Orthodox nationalism, let us turn back to the exact character of the March 2022 response to that ideology in "A Declaration on the 'Russian World' (Russkii Mir) Teaching." The distinct form of alternate modernity we see within the Declaration in its critique of nationalism is the assertion of eschatology as being at the heart of the Orthodox Christian vision, for *Russkii mir* is the anti-eschatological collapse of the already and the not yet (Gallaher/Kalaitzidis 2022a) or, alternatively, a perversion of Christian eschatology which identifies the nation with Christ's Kingdom. The other marker of its alternate modernity is Pan-Orthodoxy or the assertion that Orthodox identity transcends any ethnic essentialism (such as Russianness or Greekness) and that it is founded on a Pentecostal belief that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The Declaration on the Russian world teaching, like the Barmen Declaration on which it is closely modelled (See Gallaher 2025), begins after citing John 18 where Jesus says that His Kingdom is not of this world, with a particular exegesis which is the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the sole foundation of revelation and that one cannot turn to other sources to ground our affirmation of the Gospel. Here it identifies Jesus Christ with the Kingdom as witnessed to in Scripture but, with an Orthodox twist, it asserts that this must be

authoritatively interpreted by the Church Fathers or in "Holy Tradition." Yet, differing from Barmen, but still in its spirit, it says that this Kingdom of Christ is given as a foretaste at the Byzantine Divine Liturgy which announces the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (as every Orthodox liturgy begins).

But like Barmen again, the Declaration follows this affirmation with an anathema: "we condemn as Orthodox and reject" (earlier drafts used the word "anathematize"). Thereby it negates, and here it is also following Karl Barth who drafted Barmen, that one cannot replace the Church as a foretaste of the Kingdom which is to come with any earthly kingdom. Like Barmen, the Declaration holds that the Church reminds men of "Jesus Christ who came and is to come again" but it can never do this if it projects, proposes and attempts to enforce the state into the likeness of the Kingdom of God. It negates its calling if it obscures the fact that Christians, coming from all countries and nations, are migrants and refugees in this world and have no continuing city but a city that is on high. The Declaration asserts that all divisions of the flesh whether "race, religion, language, ethnicity or any other secondary feature of human existence" are secondary and that to assert superiority based on such divisions – negating minorities – is contrary to the Gospel. Some of the drafters used the language "secondary feature of human existence" to reference the attacks of the Russian Orthodox Church on LGBTQ+ individuals.

13. Conclusion

For Orthodoxy, the challenge of sexual diversity and nationalism not only speaks to personal identity and nationhood but above all it speaks to the identity and nature of Eastern Orthodoxy as a pre-modern ecclesial tradition in the modern age. What is Orthodoxy? Is its teaching perennial? Is it unchanging? How can it respond and remain vital in the light of Western challenges? How can it be modern in its own unique and alternative way but still retain its pre-modern sensibility seen in its liturgical corpus and spiritual practices? What is Orthodoxy's alternate modernity? What is modern Orthodox identity?

The challenge of sexual diversity and nationalism, in this sense, are actually God's gift to the Church. Sexual diversity and nationalism are the most iconic of many modern western issues Orthodoxy must face in its current identity crisis. From this spiritual struggle, it then can witness *to*

the West concerning its unique gifts *in the* West, which are *with and for* the West. Orthodoxy is Eastern only in, through and by the West. Moreover, the West needs the East just as the East needs the West. They are two halves of the moon or two lungs. Sexual diversity and nationalism, then, pierces to the heart of Eastern Orthodox identity in the modern West as a pre-modern tradition that must now face creatively the challenges of a modern civilization that it did not give birth but which now defines it. Will it take the leap? Will it choose itself? The fate and task of the West awaits this Eastern Church as it awaits us all.

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