

**COMMUNITY OF VALUES AND THE CHALLENGE OF A MULTI-ETHNIC  
AND MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY:  
THE POSITION OF PATRIARCH KIRILL OF MOSCOW**

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**Abstract:** *The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has gained, after the fall of the Soviet Union, an exceptional position in the social and political life of the Russian Federation, which it had never occupied before. Formally, it is separate from the state. The Constitution of the Russian Federation in article 14 guarantees state ideological neutrality and acknowledges the separation of State and Church. At the same time, the Church representatives themselves, such as Patriarch Kirill (Gundayev), consider this separation beneficial to the Church's activity. Both the Patriarch and the representatives of Church hierarchy emphasize the religious and cultural role of the Church in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The Church's purpose is, on the one hand, to restore religious life that was destroyed in the Soviet period and, on the other hand, to promote traditional values that form the foundation of Russian identity. In the extra-religious dimension, these values are supposed to ensure the stability of Russian society, as well as its ability to oppose foreign (mostly Western) cultural, political, and religious influences. The article deals with the concept of 'traditional values' (traditsionnyye tsennosti) and 'spiritual bonds' (dukhovnyye skrepy) as a unifying factor for the contemporary Russian society. According to Patriarch Kirill, the Russian Orthodox Church can propose an axiological system based on Christian beliefs, especially on the Orthodox concept of the human person and the human community. This system should become a foundation of social unity and peace, as well as a factor which strengthens Russian national identity.*

**Keywords:** *Patriarch Kirill, Russian Orthodox Church, Church and politics, axiology, values.*

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## Introduction

As a response to the internal situation, in which the Russian Federation found itself at the end of the 1990s, President Putin implemented a new ideological policy. The significant social consequences of the 1990s transformation in the Russian Federation have also become a challenge for the Russian Orthodox Church which, in collaboration with the authorities, has undertaken the task to create a new model of political and cultural life in Russia. This new model is based on Christian axiology understood in a very particular Russian way.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the assessment of the previous decade (that is from the fall of the Soviet Union to Vladimir Putin's assuming power) both in public discourse and in the opinion of many Russians, was negative. One can enlist some positive elements, such as the democratization of public life, the increase in the scope of civil rights and freedoms, especially the freedom of speech and economic activity. These, however, have been overshadowed by other negative issues, such as the political chaos and economic crisis leading to the poverty of a significant part of Russian society; identity crisis being the result of the fall of the Soviet Union; security crisis resulting from the weakness of the state, especially its judiciary system and other services responsible for public order. The Chechen wars, which implied terroristic threats, also contributed to the undermining the trust of citizens towards the democratic state, which the Russians attempted to build in the 1990s. Alongside the changes undergoing in Russia since Vladimir Putin assumed power, the 1990s have begun to be called 'the bad nineties' (*likhiye devanostyye*).

This context is crucial because the 1990s were an attempt, in many aspects unsuccessful, to transform Russia into a country following the Western democratic paradigm with similar political structures, economic regulations, and patterns of self-realization of the Russian citizens. The way this plan was carried out, however, when a weak state was incapable of protecting its citizens from the exploitation by oligarchs, poverty, and the dangers of crime and terrorism, gave rise to the opinion, mostly in neoconservative and Orthodox circles, that Western values are incompatible with Russian conditions. An attempt to modernise Russia, which meant its westernization, led to the multi-aspectual crisis manifested both in internal anarchy, political and economic chaos, as well as in the evident deterioration of people's living standard. Under these circumstances, the ideological policy implemented by Vladimir Putin (even if before the conflict with the West, begun with the 'Munich speech' in 2007, he gave the impression of being open, pro-Western and pro-democratic) gained praise in many circles as being the Russian alternative for Western patterns, which failed in the 1990s (Evans & Northmore-Ball, 2012).

The change in Russia's political course at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century also persuaded the Russian Orthodox Church to reflect upon its place in Russian public life. The criticism of earlier tendencies to westernize the country resulted in the propositions issued by the Moscow Patriarchate to base Russian public life, including its political and

economic dimensions, on Russian, Orthodox in principle, values. In such a way, Russia was supposed to return onto its separate historical path of development which agreed with Russian culture and tradition. Such a vision of intensive engagement of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping the axiology of Russian public life has gained significance since the election of Kirill (Gundyayev) to become the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus'.

#### *Sources*

This article presents the main elements of the 'axiological project' of Patriarch Kirill. It can be generally identified with the axiological position of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning Russian public life. Such a project can be described based on various statements by Kirill: his speeches during meetings with Russian authorities, sermons delivered during religious ceremonies, and interviews given to the media. These statements, which obviously have different contexts and importance, are the basis for the specification and discussion of the key elements of his axiological project.

### **1. The axiological involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church**

The involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's public life agrees with the conviction repeatedly expressed by its representatives that the Church forms a sign of Russia's perseverance despite specific historical, political, and structural changes. Simultaneously, under new political conditions, the Church might become an institution promoting such values that will ensure Russia's growth (in the social, cultural, and economic dimensions) as well as protect its identity and cultural uniqueness. The Church might be able to achieve that by drawing on Russian Orthodox tradition and judging all the events of Russian political and social life against it.

#### *1.1. Values and anthropology*

The values proposed by Patriarch Kirill are based on Orthodox anthropology which, in turn, defines the Orthodox teaching on the social role and obligations of an individual, including the duties of a citizen towards the state and the regulations of economic life.

This is not, however, classic Orthodox anthropology based on the Bible interpreted by the Church Fathers and the Byzantine theological tradition, as well as reflected in the Byzantine models of State-Church relations. Anthropology proposed by Kirill—alongside the related fields of ethics and axiology—has a specifically 'Russian' character. It is a result of the Rus' and Russia's development and the development within Rus' Orthodoxy itself, whose doctrine (precisely in the anthropological, ethical, and axiological domains) underwent a significant transformation under the influence of Asian concepts of the human person and society.

This is the reason why the propositions of the Patriarch, which contain typically Christian teaching on personal dignity, strongly emphasise the well-being of a community (the well-being of state) and subjugate the well-being of an individual to

the former (Zizioulas 2004; Zinkovskiy, 2014). This subordination should not, however, be understood as the negation of personal dignity; it is expressed in a view that every individual can discover their dignity and fulfil it only in a community and by subjugating their aspiration to the well-being of a community (Dugin, 2015 p. 338).

The consequence of such an approach to individual dignity is the impossibility for the values characteristic of Western states to be the ones proposed by the Russian Orthodox Church as typical for Russia, which also means that they cannot serve its political and economic development (Kozlov, 2009 p. 398). This, in turn, makes the Patriarch oppose the patterns of political and economic life that are proposed by the West (Kirill of Moscow, 2018a). This opposition is strengthened by the above-mentioned criticism of the 1990s, the period which is considered an unsuccessful attempt to westernize Russia. This period of Russia's recent history is thought to have caused severe political, social, economic, and cultural damages both to the state as well as to its citizens.

In Rus' tradition, Orthodox anthropology possesses one more feature that can influence the way the Russian Orthodox Church perceives Russia's political and economic life. This feature is the 'eschatological' nature, which emphasizes that the fate of an individual lies in the afterlife, eternal life, while earthly life is of limited importance (Osipov, 2015). Orthodox Christians should not concentrate on earthly life because that could distract them from the final perspective of their lives (Dinello, 1998). In this eschatological context, Orthodox theology was occasionally used in the past to legitimize unjust social relations, laws, and the abuse on the part of either the authorities or people of wealth. People's suffering from all these signs of 'earthly' injustice was in traditional Russian Orthodox teaching considered a sacrifice made on a path to eschatological happiness. In contemporary conditions, the Russian Orthodox Church does not express the views that could potentially justify social, political, or economic injustice. Nonetheless, a trace of these views (eschatologism, Manichean contempt for earthly happiness and the fulfilment of earthly personal aims, and Gnostic suspicion towards political and economic structures) is still present in Church teaching. Patriarch Kirill's speeches can serve as proof for the existence of these traces.

### *1.2. Values and the State*

According to the long-standing Orthodox tradition, which dates back to the Byzantine Empire and has been strengthened through the centuries of the Rus' and Russia's history, Orthodox teaching which refers to political and economic issues tries to avoid the confrontation with the Russian Federation authorities. In Orthodox tradition, such a confrontation, if the leaders do not abandon faith officially and do not fight the Church, is impossible. However, the Russian Orthodox tradition is manifested in the rejection of any possibility to oppose the authorities by the Church even if, as in the case of Soviet authorities, they openly demonstrate their hostility towards religion (Kirill of Moscow, 2017a; Knox 2005, p. 111–113; Papkova, 2011 p. 6–7).

However, the stereotypical perception in the West, according to which the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church would be just a passive instrument for the implementation of leaders' orders, is far from the truth. The legislation of the Russian Federation separates Church and State even if the Russian Orthodox Church remains in the privileged position. The Moscow Patriarchate itself emphasizes the autonomy of the Church and the impossibility to reduce it to being one of the state structures (which did occur in the 'synodal period' from the abolishment of the Patriarchate by Peter the Great to the February Revolution in 1917). (Kirill of Moscow, 2018a; Kirill of Moscow, 2019).

In its assessment of the quality of Russian political and economic life and its promotion of traditional Orthodox values, the Moscow Patriarchate collaborates with Vladimir Putin's administration. This collaboration has been particularly visible in the ideological domain under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill. At the same time, the Moscow Patriarchate gains credibility as a participant of Russian public debate by demonstrating its autonomy, which is also manifested in limited criticism towards the current condition of Russian political and economic life.

## **2. Christian Values in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society**

The contemporary Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state. Most Russian citizens, however, in one way or another, identify with the Russian Orthodox Church (Matsaberidze, 2015). Additionally, Orthodoxy itself, which shaped numerous Russian institutions and public structures, is the foundation of the historical continuity of the Rus' and Russia and forms the source of its cultural distinction from the West.

The axiological project of Patriarch Kirill does not exist in axiological emptiness. Attempts to build a social life in opposition to Christianity are still alive in contemporary Russia despite the time that has passed since the fall of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, these attempts are not inspired by communists, but by the supporters of the specifically Russian version of 'new atheism.' The proposals are also advanced to partially integrate Christian values into the axiological foundations of multi-religious Russian society.

### *2.1. Nevzorov's proposal*

The first axiological proposal, in contrast to Patriarch Kirill's concept, is promoted by social activists who openly proclaim radical atheistic and anticlerical views. Some of them are political participants, moderately criticizing the political system created by Vladimir Putin, nevertheless remaining in the network of connections with the political elite. Their activities enjoy tolerance of the authorities. It can be assumed that these groups are used by the Russian authorities to tighten control over the Russian Orthodox Church and to limit its independent political role. The best-known representative of this trend in contemporary Russian public life is Aleksandr Nevzorov. In his social program, he

combines the elements of aggressive Soviet atheism with the premises of contemporary Western ‘new atheism.’

In the axiological dimension, he proposes to remove the Russian Orthodox Church from public life entirely. In his opinion, the rules of individual and social life proclaimed by the Church are an obstacle on a path to develop Russian society. Ethical norms, forming the foundation of the Church’s teaching—such as opposing abortion, the primacy of spiritual over earthly values, restricting human-made laws by the law of God—Nevzorov perceives as false and harmful. In this context, Nevzorov and his supporters refer to numerous authentic examples of how unreliable the Christian testimony given by the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church is (Nevzorov, 2015; Nevzorov, 2018).

### *2.2. Zyuganov’s proposal*

It may seem strange that anti-Church proposals on social life issues do not come from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. In fact, in recent years, its leader Gennadiy Zyuganov has repeatedly expressed his appreciation for the role the Russian Orthodox Church plays in Russian public life. He acknowledges the value of ethical guidelines that Christianity preaches. At the same time, he concentrates on these elements of Christian teaching that emphasize the necessity to care about a human, social justice and the role of community for the proper development of every human being. The leader of the Communist Party also believes that Jesus Christ’s teachings are very close to communism when it comes to ethical and social issues (Zyuganov, 2016).

While attempting to determine common elements between communism and Christianity, Zyuganov undoubtedly ignores a vast part of Christian ethical doctrine. What is important, however, from the axiological perspective that could integrate such a diversified community as the Russian one, is the general direction of Zyuganov’s thoughts. In his opinion, by preaching its values, the Russian Orthodox Church may play a positive and creative role in social life. It may contribute to the greater integration of society and the strengthening of the state. The values preached by Russian Orthodoxy are not purely religious, which is why fundamental Christian principles could be accepted by people not sharing that philosophy. What emerges from Zyuganov’s perspective is a possibility for the Russian Orthodox Church and the Communist Party to cooperate on the most important social issues affecting the life situation of contemporary Russians (Zyuganov, 2012; Zyuganov, 2018).

### *2.3. Putin’s proposal*

When talking about the spiritual state of contemporary Russian society, a public statement by Vladimir Putin is often quoted. In his opinion, the Russian society today suffers from a severe lack of ‘spiritual bonds,’ which manifests itself in social problems, in the way the state administration functions as well as in the hardships of political and economic life (Putin, 2012). The lack of strong spiritual bonds means that Russian

society is susceptible to ideologically harmful Western influences. In this context, Putin's statements contain a negative image of the Western culture, which is supposed to be devoid of authentic values, fighting against Christianity and promoting moral standards opposing traditional norms accepted by most of the Russian society (Putin, 2017b). This negative image of the West is also actively advanced by Russian state propaganda.

While pointing to the lack of 'spiritual bonds' uniting Russian society (Putin, 2017a), President Putin does not propose simple solutions. On the one hand, during meetings with the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, he repeatedly emphasizes the positive aspect of the social activities of the Church. He recognizes the Church's significant and undeniable contribution to the formation of the Russian state, society, and culture over the centuries. He also clearly defines himself as an Orthodox Christian. On the other hand, however, President Putin expresses his appreciation towards other traditional religions, which are a part of the Russian religious and cultural landscape. This is the reason why he considers patriotism as the fundamental value that should serve to unite Russian society.

Putin's interpretation of patriotism comes close to the Orthodox anthropological concept, according to which a person gains their full value only when they act for the sake of the community, which is identified with society and state (Putin, 2014).

#### *2.4. The proposals of ultra-Orthodox circles*

The views of extreme conservative Orthodox circles are also present in the contemporary Russian axiological debate (Stöckl, 2006). In the axiological aspect, they are revealed, for example, in the religious sanctioning of Russian military actions in Syria or Ukraine and in the radical subordination of the well-being of individuals to the interests of the state (Dugin, 2014 p. 620). Such views are usually accompanied by the rejection of the concept of human rights and radical anti-Occidentalism, which refuses to admit that Western culture possesses any value, accuses it of moral decay, and appeals to the Russian authorities to oppose its influences (Papanikolaou, 2003). The most recognizable supporter of such ideas in public life was protopriest Vsevolod Chaplin, deceased unexpectedly in January 2020. It needs to be mentioned, however, that such views are extreme and marginal. Due to the moderate position of Patriarch Kirill (2014), they do not have much social influence.

### **3. Patriarch Kirill's axiological project**

Against this background, we can outline the main values that make up the axiological project of Patriarch Kirill. First, however, it is necessary to point out the fundamental difficulty. The Patriarch has repeatedly pointed to the existence of values traditional for Russian society; the view that was also expressed by President Putin in his statements. The problem, however, lies in defining such values; the definition that the Patriarch does

not provide. What does it mean that a given value is 'Russian' or 'traditional?' It is also impossible to determine the comprehensive list of Russian values. All of this means that the very concept of 'traditional Russian values' as well as their enumeration can be subject to manipulation. There is the danger that they will be modified depending on the current political demand, the pressure exerted on the Church by the authorities, or, finally, temporary Church interests.

The indicated difficulty makes it harder, although not impossible, to speak about values in Kirill's project. Based on his statements, it is worth pointing out five main values, which play a crucial role in setting the directions of Russian social and political life.

Firstly, it is the primacy of the community, which results from the premises of Orthodox anthropology. According to Kirill, it is specifically Russian to assign value to a community and subordinate individual egoistic interests to the well-being of a community. This means that there is no room in Russia for egoism and individualism, but there is for sacrifice for the benefit of others.

Secondly, the Russians are aware of their historic mission. In different historical periods, in various political and social conditions, Russia fulfilled this mission towards the world. Even today, in the face of the threat, above all from the West, the awareness of the mission is an element which integrates Russian society and makes it immune to external cultural and ideological pressure.

The third Russian value is the primacy of the spiritual sphere (or more generally, spiritual values) in individual and social life. Although human life always takes place in a material dimension and abounds in material concerns, the Russian people's distinguishing feature is that what is spiritual and enduring is more important to them than what is material and can be given a money value.

The fourth value is related to the preceding one. The Russian tradition rejects attachment to material values. Russian society, if it is supposed to develop in a proper direction and resist the temptation of Western egoism and individualism, should also renounce the pursuit of material goods.

Such a view leads us to the fifth value, which, in the eyes of Patriarch Kirill, plays a vital role in the shaping of social life. It is humility—understood, however, in a much deeper way than the mere rejection of conceit and egoism. In the Russian social and religious tradition, which Kirill refers to, humility (*smireniye*) means the acceptance of one's fate, of adversity without opposing it or fighting it. It also indicates, therefore, an acceptance of the shortcomings of social, political, and economic life. According to the Patriarch, strengthening this virtue forms the foundation for the proper development of Russian society; it guarantees social order and political stability (Kirill of Moscow, 2018a; Kirill of Moscow, 2018c).

To sum up, it is worth mentioning that Patriarch Kirill fully accepts Russian social and religious reality. He emphasizes that the Church does not aim to impose the preached values onto the entire Russian society, including the non-Christians. He believes, however, that the key principles proclaimed by Russian Orthodoxy are 'traditionally Russian.' (Annushkin, 2017 p. 226–227). It means that they are also shared by the representatives



of other denominations and faiths, provided these denominations and faiths are conservative on ethical issues and emphasize the necessity to preserve traditional forms and moral norms governing individual and social life (Kirill of Moscow, 2017b).

## Conclusions

Since Patriarch Kirill assumed leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Moscow Patriarchate has become more publicly active. This activity is manifested in numerous statements referring to politics, economy, and social issues, as well as the initiatives which require the collaboration of the Orthodox Church with the authorities or business representatives; this collaboration allows the Church to conduct its usual activities (missionary, charity, and educational). At the same time, however, the political connections of the Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill himself still pose the problem. One can ask, therefore, whether these connections of the Orthodox Church influence in any way how it proclaims Christian values referring to politics and economy.

When we analyze the concept of 'traditional values' as a unifying factor for contemporary Russian society in the thought of Patriarch Kirill, we find that he proposes an axiological system based on Christian beliefs, especially on the Orthodox concept of the human person and human community. However, it can be accepted as a unifying factor of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

First, Patriarch Kirill indicates the existence of 'traditional Russian values,' which encompass all the aspects of human life, especially in its social dimension. He claims that these traditional values express Russian cultural uniqueness (which is manifested in Russia's unique 'spirituality' — *dukhovnost'*) and they distinguish Russia from the Western world, which is accused of 'lack of spirituality' (*bezdukhovnost'*). (Kirill of Moscow, 2016).

Second, the existence of traditional Russian values is usually mentioned by Patriarch Kirill in the context of the confrontation with the West, under the circumstances of the conflict with the West. These values are supposed to indicate the spiritual (moral) superiority of Russia over the West, even if at the current stage of development, the West is economically superior to Russia (Kirill of Moscow, 2018b).

Third, it is extremely intriguing that the 'traditional values' are not directly defined and classified. It is possible, however, to classify and enlist them by analyzing Kirill's different statements. It so happens because the speeches devoted to values nearly always refer to a political and economic context. Proposed values are a response to negative phenomena in the social domain, in international politics, and economic life.

Fourth, in many cases the axiological issues in Patriarch Kirill's statements explicitly refer to Orthodox anthropology which, in his opinion, significantly differs from the Western concept of the human person. This difference is manifested in such a way that Western concepts of the human person are supposed to be reductionist, incomplete, and even distorted. In contrast, Russian Orthodox anthropology is supposed to be true, appropriate and complete and can also express the 'spirituality' of every individual

better. Such an attitude leads us to the conclusion that Patriarch Kirill's axiological project cannot be separated from the Russian version of Orthodox anthropology.

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