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## Ecclesiological rifts and methodological possibilities: thoughts on Ukraine from Serbia

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We are scholars with experience of studying Orthodox Christianity in Serbia. Whilst Serbia is not directly affected by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Serbian Orthodox Church (with its historic connections to the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate) as well as its laity find themselves indirectly implicated in the war and forced to take positions on issues of sovereignty, communion, territory, and canonical jurisdictions. Drawing on our research on Serbian Orthodoxy we wish to contribute two broad reflections to the discussion.

The first is a point about ecclesiology. Whilst the invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war can be seen as bearing all hallmarks of a confrontation between Russia and NATO, we should not lose sight of an identity dispute concerning both the invaded areas and the rest of Ukraine. Underlying and preceding this war is – as well as other issues – a conflict among Eastern Orthodox churches. In terms of ecclesiology, it is a conflict over jurisdiction or Church governance on the territory of Ukraine between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which until May 2022 was part of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, formed by the merger of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church and subsequently recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate).

This is a part of a much bigger conflict which has been undermining the Eastern Orthodox world for centuries, but which has exploded in the last hundred years, following the demise of the Russian and subsequently Ottoman empires. More specifically, following the October 1917 Revolution, and then the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the Greek-Turkish population exchange, both the Moscow and Ecumenical patriarchates, the two biggest Orthodox churches, were almost annihilated. At the same time, a demographic shift saw millions of Orthodox faithful disperse – first to north America and western Europe, and eventually to the rest of the world. This shift raises various questions. To what ecclesiastical jurisdiction do these believers belong? To which dioceses should their parishes contribute? In which language should they pray? These are key issues embattling the Orthodox churches today as tensions between the jurisdictions multiply.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whose side one takes in these various ecclesiological disputes, or whether one engages in ecclesiology at all, the territorial changes and demographic shifts

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that polarise the debate must be studied. In sum, we wish to re-inscribe the ongoing conflict within a broader ecclesiological context.

Our second point has to do with the way in which we approach Eastern Orthodoxy methodologically. Whilst we recognise the importance of exploring church-state dynamics and the political machinations of ecclesiastical institutions, we want to stress the importance of studying Orthodoxy ethnographically, at a grassroots level. It is worth recalling Quentin Skinner's methodological and theoretical imperative 'to see things their way'. How are Orthodox parishioners in jurisdictions beyond Russia and Ukraine affected by the war? How do they make sense of the conflict in Christian terms? Where do their loyalties lie? For instance, recent ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Serbian congregations reveals that the war in Ukraine has provoked memories of the 1999 NATO intervention, with some parishioners drawing parallels between Russia's claims to Ukraine and Serbia's claims to Kosovo. In Serbia, then, whilst there is condemnation of the terrible suffering inflicted on the Ukrainian population there is also sympathy for Russian claims about territory, heritage, and what is seen as the intrusion of the West in the guise of NATO.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the specific issue of the war, talking with and observing believers should also help us understand the renewed interest in monasticism in the Orthodox world and the monastic communities that are flourishing not just on Mount Athos but in the West. Given the role monasticism traditionally enjoys among Orthodox, it is important to explore how charismatic monks or monasteries relate to ecclesiological rifts. Similarly, there are new cults and places of pilgrimage that seem to traverse or transcend the ecclesiological disputes and borders described above. A striking example is Nectarios of Aegina, himself the subject of ecclesiological disputes, who is rapidly becoming one of the most venerated Orthodox saints. In 2021, *Man of God*, an English-language biographical film about him, was produced by Orthodox of all jurisdictions and was received with enthusiasm throughout the Orthodox world. Believers and clergy are also increasingly moving into different jurisdictions due to migration, but also disagreements.<sup>3</sup> Their movements, practices and beliefs are as important as those of the hierarchs. Are ethnic bonds among Orthodox Christians as strong as they used to be? We call for research that will help us to appreciate the complexity of church life and move beyond perceiving each autocephalous or autonomous church as a monolith.

Of course, whilst it is possible to undertake fieldwork in places like Serbia, that is not currently the case in Russia and Ukraine. A rich alternative avenue could be to turn our attention to the digital, to the world of Orthodoxy online. One of the most remarkable consequences of the shift in global Orthodoxy is the emergence of an expansive virtual Orthodox realm populated with hundreds of platforms and countless websites and social media accounts.<sup>4</sup> In this online space, we find refugees and recent emigrants from Ukraine and Russia, but also from earlier waves of immigration. We have a chance to explore the interactions and arguments between Orthodox Christians of different generations, backgrounds, affiliations, religiosities, pieties. Questions abound: How are terrestrial conflicts and ecclesiastical fissures transferred to – and replicated in – the virtual realm? To what extent do western converts to Orthodoxy weigh into and stoke these discussions? More broadly we could ask, what – if anything – is unique about Orthodoxy online? Are there any commonalities with the New Age religious movements and trends from the wider world? In other words, the ongoing conflict serves as

a prompt to develop additional methodologies to explore virtual or global Orthodox Christianity. To conclude, the war in Ukraine invites critical, historically-grounded reflection on the wide-ranging consequences of ecclesiastical tensions – as well as how believers navigate and make sense of these tensions in everyday contexts.

## Notes

1. The conflicts engulfed parishes and dioceses worldwide. For more see <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/8-march/news/world/concern-mounts-over-russian-orthodox-church-s-expansion-abroad> (accessed 24 May 2024).
2. We discuss the Serbian Church's attitude to the war in Ukraine in more detail in Aleksov, B. and Lackenby, N. 2023. "'Symphonia'? A New Patriarch Attempts to Redefine Church–State Relations in Serbia" *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 71 (3), 412–433. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2023-0039>.
3. Recently five Serbian Orthodox priests in its Eparchy of Austria clashed with their bishop and moved to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its bishop Arsenios Karmadakis accepted them without necessary release from the Serbian Church given that the Ecumenical Patriarchate does not recognise canonical jurisdiction of Serbian (or other churches) in diaspora. See <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/301590-svadja-oko-904-000-pet-klirika-napustilo-crkvu-srbije-i-stavilo-se-pod-omofor-vaseljenskog-patrijarha> (accessed 24 May 2024).
4. Some of the sites are not controlled by hierarchies of particular churches and allow for discussion and contribution from believers online, i.e. Orthochristian, Orthodox Christian Laity, or forums such as Reddit.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).