

A common statement of Archbishop Tapio Luoma (the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland) and Archbishop Leo (the Orthodox Church of Finland) concerning the war in Ukraine. The statement was published 27th of July (in Finnish) in the largest daily newspaper of Finland, Helsingin Sanomat, (<https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000008961988.html>), and 10th of August (in English) in the Orthodox Times ([No religion can justify the war in Ukraine | Orthodox Times \(en\)](#)).

No religion can justify the war in Ukraine

Ingress: Defending a war of aggression on religious grounds is unethical and breaks the link between East and West.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has used religion in justifying the illegal war of aggression against Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has also supported the military operations on religious grounds. As church leaders representing both Eastern and Western traditions, we find this deeply shocking.

There was a recent example of the abuse of religion on 21 June, when Patriarch Kirill visited a military hospital in Krasnogorsk, on the western outskirts of Moscow. “You are all ascetics in a sense,” Kirill declared to some Russian soldiers who had been injured in the war. It was important that the soldiers and the entire Russian army remained on the side of good, because, according to the patriarch, “the soldiers will then receive divine support in achieving their objectives”.

In the Christian tradition of the East asceticism is understood as the exercise of piety, the core of which is a person’s spiritual growth. It always entails a personal effort to achieve higher values, such as the renouncing of the self and the sacrificial service of one’s neighbour. Soldiers must undoubtedly strive and make sacrifices, but the patriarch abuses not only his tradition but the essence of Christianity in equating violence with religious piety.

Another example of Kirill’s problematic rhetoric involves a false and damaging confrontational approach. At Penza cathedral on 19 June the patriarch declared that for Russians self-sacrifice – asceticism – was something that arose from “an inner moral sensibility cultivated by Orthodox faith”. There are many serious problems with what he said.

In referring to violent war as asceticism, the patriarch is embellishing the truth. He is seeking to use religion to wash the bloodstains away. Moreover, the suggestion that Russian soldiers have an ingrained morality and that they represent good implies that the opposing side is immoral and represents evil. At its heart is the deliberate dehumanisation of another group, which is the prerequisite for a person to be prepared to kill others.

Dehumanisation is often heard in Kremlin speeches especially, in which Ukrainians are called fascists and nationalists who must be denazified. Although it is subtler and has a different emphasis, the same phenomenon can be seen in the patriarch’s speeches. Kirill’s speeches feature repeated accusations that the West, which is apostate and liberal, is the war’s real enemy and has

enslaved some Ukrainians. The patriarch thus falsely portrays the West and its churches, while ignoring the fact that the Ukrainians are mainly Eastern Christians.

Because the war lacks a rational justification, the attempt is made to find it where it speaks to and touches many Russians: in the painful memories of the Second World War and in the Orthodox faith. The real victims of such rhetoric are the Ukrainians suffering and dying in the war, but the patriarch's speeches simultaneously cloud Russians' sensibilities, damage the Russian Orthodox Church, and distort the image of the churches of both East and West.

In the Western Christian tradition we speak of the principle of a just war. This means that although killing a person is always fundamentally wrong, warfare is ethically justified in certain situations. According to the principle a defensive war can only be justified if no other options remain, and if fighting makes it possible to prevent even greater suffering.

Although the Eastern tradition does not itself speak of the principle of a just war, the Orthodox Church does not require a strictly pacifist approach to war. However, it always prioritises the Christian conscience and emphasises that the killing of the innocent is never ethically acceptable, regardless of the state's objectives.

Defending Russia's illegal war of aggression on religious grounds is an abuse of religion: it is unethical and breaks the link between East and West, and above all it harms people.

Tapio Luoma and Archbishop Leo

Luoma is the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and

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