

IDEA OF RUSSIAN “SUPERETHNOS” IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AS A BASIS FOR THE “RUSSIAN WORLD” IDEOLOGY

ІДЕЯ РОСІЙСЬКОГО «СУПЕРЕТНОСУ» В БОГОСЛІВ'І РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ПРАВОСЛАВНОЇ ЦЕРКВИ ЯК ОСНОВА ІДЕОЛОГІЇ «РУССКОГО МІРА»

The concept of the “Russian world” as such comes from the late 1990s. It was promoted by the state officials and very soon supported by the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. Since 2009, the ideology of “Russian world” got its quasi-theological basis: an attempt was made to mingle this aggressive ideology of Russian expansion with Orthodox theology.

In 2022, few days after full-scale military invasion of Russia into Ukraine, a Declaration on the “Russian World” teaching, signed by a number of contemporary Orthodox theologians, were published on the web site of Orthodox Christian Study Center of Fordham University [A Declaration on the “Russian World”]. The aggressive Russian ideology was treated here as “a false teaching”. The authors of the Declaration mentioned that the Russian president and the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church have used

The early stages of support by the Russian Orthodox Church for the ideology of the “Russian world” are marked with the specific idea of Russian “superethnos”. This idea contradicts the basic church concepts, its unity and catholicity. The speeches and publications from 2009, when this ideology was openly and actively supported by the Moscow Patriarchate for the first time, are analyzed in the article.

Key words: “Russian world”, ethnophyletism, superethnos, Eucharist, unity, catholicity, political theology, ecclesiology, Church and state.

Концепція «русского мира» зародилася в кінці 1990-х років. Від початку 2000-х її почала активно просувати російська влада. У РПЦ цю ідеологію стали підтримувати з того часу, як московським патріархом став Кирил Гундяєв. У статті проаналізовано виступи й публікації

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“Russian world” ideology as a principal justification for the invasion since 2014. They also emphasize that since the enthronement of patriarch Kirill in 2009, the leading figures of the Moscow Patriarchate “have continually drawn on these principles to thwart the theological basis of Orthodox unity” [A Declaration on the “Russian World”]. But no attention was paid to the one of the basic arguments of the promoters of this homicide ideology, i.e., to the idea of Russian “superethnos”, which strongly contradicts one of the very basic concepts of the Christian ecclesiology, the catholicity of the Church.

The aim of this article is to research the early theological arguments for support of the “Russian world” ideology and to analyze them in compare with the Orthodox Christian ecclesiology.

“Behind any conflict, we can easily discern an idolization of religion, tribe, and nation, an odd paganism of earth, soil, and homeland, or of the ‘God-bearing’ people and its claim to exclusivity, which is a real temptation,” – Pantelis Kalaitzidis warns [Kalaitzidis, 2015, p. 116]. And this is especially true for the ideology that justifies Russian aggression.

In the early 2000s, the concept of “Russian world” was actively promoted by Vladislav Surkov, an Assistant to the Russian President, who even then noted that this ideology was associated with an understanding of Russia as an empire, and its desire to expand into new territories. Surkov stated that the task of the “Russian world” ideology is “to talk about the empire, about our desire to

офіційних представників Московського патріархату з 2009 р. Заради виправдання ідеї «русского міра» в РПЦ було сформульовано специфічну ідею російського «суперетносу», проголошеного єдиним у світі «православним суперетносом». Автором ідеї став ієромонах (нині єпископ РПЦ) Євфимій Моїсєєв. Замість помісного (територіального) принципу церковного устрою ідеолог «російського суперетносу» ототожнив помісну Церкву з церквою певного народу, а не території. На вказаних засадах Московський патріархат здійснює експансію у світі, відкриваючи паралельні структури на територіях, де вже присутні парафії та єпархії інших помісних Церков. Зазначена ідея суперечить двом із чотирьох засадничих концептів православного вчення про Церкву – концептам єдності Церкви та її кафоличності, або соборності. Православне християнство засудило етнофілетизм як ересь. Доктрина «русского міра», розроблена вищими ієрархами та деякими богословами Московського патріархату, намагається створити теоретичне підґрунтя для існування окремої Церкви – Церкви для «русских». Захоплена ідеологією національної (або «суперетнічної») окремішності, ця Церква втрачає біблійні, святоотцівські та евхаристійні основи богослів'я і просуває нову, але застарілу версію релігійного трайбалізму. Однак для

expand, without offending the global community” [PMC Pegov, 38m23s].”

In 2007, by decree of the President of Russia, the Russkiy Mir Foundation (literally, “Russian World Foundation”) was established [About Russkiy Mir Foundation]. They initiated the Russian World Assembly forum on November 3, the eve of the Russian holiday National Unity Day, and have

held it annually ever since. For the first two years, the Russian Orthodox Church hardly reacted to this phenomenon in Russian political life. Everything changed in 2009, when Kirill Gundyayev became patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The day after his enthronement, on February 2, 2009, during a presidential reception at the Grand Kremlin Palace, the newly enthroned Patriarch Kirill spoke of the Byzantine idea of “symphony” as his vision of the ideal relationship between Church and state. Shortly thereafter, during a meeting in Moscow with the Prime Minister of Ukraine Yulia Tymoshenko, Patriarch Kirill said that for the Russian Orthodox Church, Kyiv is “our Constantinople; with its Hagia Sophia, it is the spiritual center and the southern capital of Russian Orthodoxy [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill met...].”

In the same year, Patriarch Kirill spoke at the opening of the Third Russian World Assembly. In his keynote speech, he presented for the first time the church’s vision of the concept of the “Russian world.” Patriarch Kirill noted: “The core of the Russian world today is Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. Saint Lavrenty of Chernihiv expressed this idea with the well-known phrase: ‘Russia, Ukraine, Belarus – this is Holy Russia.’ It is this understanding of the Russian world that is embedded in the modern self-name of our Church” [Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill]. Even at that early date, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church called the state borders between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus “unnecessary obstacles between the peoples of the Russian world” and called for the development of “integration processes” between the countries of what he called “historical Russia.” At the same time, an agreement on cooperation was signed between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy Mir Foundation [Cooperation agreement signed]. A couple of days after the third Russian World Assembly, which had been held in Moscow, Hieromonk Euthymius Moiseev, lecturer at the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary, presented a pa-

Церкви як Тіла Христового в богослів’ї важливе повернення до автентичного принципу кафолічності.

Ключові слова: «русській мір», етнофілетизм, суперетнос, Євхаристія, єдність, кафолічність, політичне богослів’я, еклезіологія, Церква і держава.

per at a conference in the Kazan Theological Seminary in which, for the first time, an attempt was made to identify the boundaries of the “Russian world” with “the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church.” His paper, entitled “The Russian Church as the Foundation of the Russian World, the Russian World as the Foundation of the Universal Church,” became known thanks to its publication on the Bogoslov.ru website [Euthimius Moiseev, hierom., 2009].

It should be added that within the first month of the Russian full-scale military invasion to Ukraine, Fr Euthimius Moiseev was consecrated bishop by Patriarch Kirill in Moscow [In the 2nd Week of Great Lent].

In addition to identifying the boundaries of the so-called “Russian world” with the boundaries of the Moscow Patriarchate, Father Euthymius defended the idea of the Russian people as a “superethnos.” This concept is based on the writings of Soviet ethnographer Lev Gumilyov [Gumilyov, 1989]. Fr Euthymius said that the Russian people as “superethnos” constitutes the basis of the “Russian world,” “on the basis of the Eastern Slavic ethnos according to the confessional principle.” However, Fr Euthymius went further than Gumilyov. Gumilyov had written about the superethnos as follows: “Like an ethnos, a superethnos in the persons of its representatives opposes itself to all other superethnoi” [Gumilyov, 2016, p. 31]. Father Euthymius, on the other hand, proclaimed that there is only one superethnos, the Russian one, which at the present stage of the development of world history is “the only Orthodox superethnos all over the world” [Euthimius Moiseev, hierom., 2009].

“The multi-confessional nature of the Russian world is a myth as much as its multi-ethnicity,” continued Fr Euthymius. The Russian world is monoethnic and monoconfessional. This world includes only one superethnos, the Russian, and only one confession, Russian Orthodoxy. It worth to note, the confession he named was not Orthodoxy, but *Russian* Orthodoxy. This thesis was fundamental for the author.

Father Euthymius stated: “To identify a particular Church as a local one, what was important was not so much the territory to which it extended its jurisdiction, but the people who were the bearers of the national spiritual tradition. The territory in this case was understood as the area of residence of one or another people” [Euthimius Moiseev, hierom., 2009]. He continued: “It is important to understand that it is the Orthodox people that are the subject of the church-historical process, therefore, traditionally, each of the Local Churches is identified as the Church of this or that people,

and not as the Church located on this or that territory. Territory, as we have already said, has never been considered as a self-sufficient unit of church law, it has always been understood as a place where this or that Orthodox people carries out its life activity" [Euthymius Moiseev, hierom., 2009].

I would ask: is this a conscious lie or a sincere heresy? Following one of the best modern Orthodox political theologians, Pantelis Kalaitzidis, we might agree that this teaching is presumably nothing other than a "secularized form of eschatology" [Kalaitzidis, 2015, p. 121]. The "Russian world" ideology clearly violated the fundamental principle of church organization, which follows from the dogma of the catholicity of the Church. The existence of a separate church "for Russians" fundamentally undermines the very idea of the Church of Christ. On this basis, the Moscow Patriarchate is expanding in the world, opening parallel structures in territories where parishes and dioceses of other local churches are already present.

A few days later, my critical review of Fr. Euthymius Moiseev's paper was published [Dudchenko A., priest, 2009]. On the Bogoslov.ru website, I called the doctrine proclaimed by Fr Euthymius "a manifesto of phyletism," and showed how the speaker actually derived from the idea of a superethnos the denial of the catholicity of the Church.

Ekklesia, the term used in the New Testament for the Church of God, means "the community of the called." Apostle Peter refers to Christians as "the holy people," "the royal priesthood," "once not a people, but now the people of God" (1Pet. 2:9–10). This New Israel, gathered from all corners of the earth, is united not by shared descent from one ancestor according to the flesh, not by ethnic ties, not by some abstract values, but by faithfulness to the call of Christ. The church on earth is the image of the Kingdom of God. Revealing and fulfilling itself in the Eucharist, the Church is the experience of a foretaste of the Kingdom, which is still to come, but which already may be accepted and experienced by us. In the New Testament, or in the writings of early Christian Fathers, we cannot find identification of the Church of God with any people or ethnic group. On the contrary, it was proclaimed that in the Kingdom of God, of which the Church is an image, there is "neither Greek nor Jew" (Col. 3:11).

In the Creed, we confess the Church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." The concept articulated by Father Euthymius leaves no room for two of these four basic properties of the Church. By postulating an ethnic principle of church structure, instead of a territorial one, the author essentially denies both the unity and the catholicity of the Church.

The term “catholic” can probably most adequately be translated into modern language as “universal,” that is, one that fits everyone without exception. The classic definition of catholicity from St. Cyril of Jerusalem affirms the external and internal universality of Christ’s Church:

“The Church is called *catholic* because it is in the whole *oikoumena* (the inhabited earth), from the one end of the earth to the other, [The catholic church] in generality and without any omission teaches all the dogmas that should be part of human knowledge... [it] subordinates the whole human race to piety... [and because,] as it heals everywhere all kinds of sins committed by souls and bodies, everything that is called virtue, of any kind, is also acquired in it: both in deeds and in words, and in every spiritual gift” [Cyril of Jerusalem, St., 1987, p. 36].

If the Church is catholic, then there can be neither national, nor social, nor cultural boundaries for it. It should welcome and include everyone without exception, not a separate people, even a “superethnos.” Sadly, the temptation for the Church to turn to nationalism is not new. The desire to make the Church “national” arose on the wave of liberation movements in the Balkans, multiplied by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Until then, “nation” was defined in terms of religion and culture, and not in terms of ethnicity. This is how the ancient Greeks, pagan Romans, Christian Romans, Jews, and Muslims identified (and still identify) themselves. However, when new European states began to emerge in the 19th century, especially in the Balkans, this led to the emergence of a new phenomenon, unknown to the ancient church structure, of creating new autocephalous churches based on ethnicity.

At the turn of the 18th-19th centuries, the Church encountered this concept and condemned it as phyletism, a heresy, at the Great Council of 1872 in Constantinople. However, phyletism continued its victorious march in the so-called diaspora territories. So today, for example, in the United States there are 14 Orthodox jurisdictions. The situation is slightly better in Western Europe. We are faced with the development of a similar scenario in Ukraine. The creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018 led to parallel church structures in Ukraine: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the autocephalous one, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church part of Moscow Patriarchate.

The theology of the “Russian world,” as expounded by Hieromonk Euthymius, witnesses to a “Babylonian captivity” of Orthodox theology by national and state ideologies (expression of Fr Georges Florovsky, cf. his book “Ways of Russian Theology”, IV, 2).

The idea that we need a special Church for the Russian “superethnos” denies both the New Testament and early Christian tradition. From the New Testament and church tradition we take the definition of the Church not as ethnic but for a given locality: the Church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1), the Church in Galatia (Gal. 1:2), the Church of Jerusalem, the Patriarchate of Rome, Orthodox Church of Ukraine, etc. Never until recent history has the term “church” been used with a preceding qualitative adjective (for example: the Corinthian Church, the Galatian Church, the Roman Church, the Russian Church, the Ukrainian Church etc.), as notes Archimandrite Gregory Papatomas [Grigorios Papatomas, archim, 2008, p. 39]. Today, we must refer to: “Ukrainian Church in the USA,” “Serbian Church in France.” and “Russian Church Abroad.” The latter jurisdiction takes this phenomenon to a new level: an autonomous Church without its own territory.

“In Paris there are six co-existing Orthodox bishops, with equivalent or synonymous – sometimes even homonymous – overlapping ecclesiastical jurisdictions (despite this being explicitly forbidden by the ecclesiology of the First Ecumenical Council (325) and the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451)),” notes Archimandrite Gregory [Grigorios Papatomas, archim, 2008, p. 42]. In the ancient Church, it was obvious to all Christians that we can have only one Church in Corinth, only one Church in Jerusalem, and only one Church in Constantinople – and these are not three different churches, but the one Body of Christ, scattered throughout the world as “salt of the earth.”

Conclusion. Orthodox Christianity has condemned phyletism as a heresy. The doctrine of the “Russian world,” developed by top hierarchs and some theologians of the Moscow Patriarchate, is trying to provide a theoretical basis for the existence of a separate Church for Russians. Captured by ideology of national (or of ‘superethnos’) particularity, this church loses the biblical, patristic and Eucharistic foundations of theology, and promotes a new but outdated version of religious tribalism. However, for the church re-discovering the authentic principle of catholicity in her theology is essential to her future as the Body of Christ.

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