



Hovorun, Cyril

*Political Orthodoxies:
The Unorthodoxies of
the Church Coerced*

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018.
210 pp.

ISBN 978-1-5064-3160-4

Reviewed by Olena Chemodanova

After the emergence at the end of 2018 of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which encompassed the whole former Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and a part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC–MP), the present split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy looks particularly strange. In fact, both Orthodox churches in Ukraine, the OCU and OUC–MP now have a legal or “canonical” status, share the same creed, dogmas, and other components of Christian belief, have common tradition and even claim the same identity—being Ukrainian. What, then, prevents them from following Christ’s commandment of being one? One of the answers is the loyalty of the leadership and a part of the clergy of the UOC–MP to the idea of spiritual benefits for salvation resulting from unity with Moscow. But was this ever Christ’s commandment? Moreover, according to the UOC–MP representatives, the OCU is still an illegal “schismatic” institution. However, the Ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew, who granted the autocephaly for the OCU, is the highest administrative authority, first among equals, in the Orthodox world, who has the legal privilege to resolve such issues. So, the claims of Moscow and the dependent UOC–MP have an obvious political backing and follow the traditions of Soviet politics. But how does this correspond to Christ’s teaching?

In his recent book, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (2018), Cyril Hovorun deals with the mixing of Christian, namely Orthodox, belief with secular ideologies. *Political Orthodoxies* is the author’s third book in his ecclesiological series of studies. The idea of differentiation between the divine and human components of the church is developed throughout the series. While the divine nature of the church is always the same and always holy, human contribution is changeable and sometimes sinful. Thus, in his first ecclesiological monograph, *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness* (2015), Hovorun traces the evolution of the self-perception of the church by its members throughout its history. The second

book, *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (2017), is devoted to an analysis of church institutions. The author tries to establish the immanent divine components of the church that belong to its nature, and human institutions brought to the church for better management throughout the ages (“scaffolds”). The latter can be repaired in the cases of malfunction. Finally, in his recent book *Political Orthodoxies*, Hovorun focuses on one particular kind of human sin in the holy church, which is the corruption or even substitution of the Christian faith by secular ideologies.

To conceptualize the diverse phenomena of political influence on the church, Hovorun applies the frames of civil and political religion. They are explored in the first chapter of the book. Civil religion, which can also be called national mythology, creates the national narratives of heroes, events, texts, and dates that are of crucial importance for a given nation. It often contributes to patriotism, but it also tends to nourish nationalism, the feeling of the superiority of one’s own nation over other ones (pp. 147–48). Although Christ preached about the Kingdom of God for people of all nations who would follow God’s commandments, Orthodox churches often identify themselves with their “own” nations and enthusiastically contribute to narratives of national mythologies that are secular in their nature. However, participation in civil religion is not as harmful as the support for a political one. Political religion uses coercion to enforce people to follow its rules and principles (p. 38).

The author implies that both civil and political religions are dangerous for the church. However, there is the quite difficult question of relations between the church and nation. It is obvious that national identity either in its modern or premodern (based on common language, faith or rule) form is immanent to a person as is love for the native land (modern and premodern theories of nationalism are smartly bridged by the author on p. 152). So, the church cannot be completely “clean” from any kind of national engagement. Moreover, history proves that the negation of national engagement, in fact, brings the engagement of some other nationalism that is often imperial. Even figures from the gospel can be described as patriotic (let us think about, for example, Mary’s song (Luke 1:54–55) or the prophecy of Simeon (Luke 2:32)). So, should we, probably, discuss the permissible *extent* of the engagement of the church in its people’s case? It is an open question.

In the second chapter, Hovorun explores the church’s support for civil and political religions. Starting from this point, he analyzes evidence from three countries/nations/national churches: Greek, Romanian, and Russian. In most cases the involvement of the church into civil religion took place during the period of national renaissances in the 19th century and into political religion during the radicalization of political movements in Europe starting from the interwar period. Hovorun evokes the support of Orthodox theologians and clergy for Nazism (even Hitler personally) and the Communist regime in the USSR.

However, the Russian case turns out to be an exception as political religion can be observed there as early as in the epoch of Peter I. The church became there an instrument for empire-building. The anathema for Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa that had no confessional but only political grounds was the clear sign of that shift.

But soon the Russian church itself was violated by Peter I through the replacement of a patriarchal system by a government-controlled synodal one (pp. 67–69). The author explores three stages of the church alliance with the Russian government with more or less harmful consequences for both church and society: tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet ones. During the latter stage the church directly contributed to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

In the third chapter, Hovorun tackles the problem of the corruption of Christian faith with modern ideologies that are often presented as a necessary worldview for the “right” believer. The author highlights that both conservative and liberal ideologies reduce Christianity if the church incorporates them into its own teaching (p. 115). He investigates in more detail the influence of antimodernism, Occidentalism, monarchism, and conservatism on the minds of Orthodox theologians, clergy, and faithful. Indeed, we can observe that some Orthodox still believe that anti-ecumenism, being for the monarchy, or refusing to recognize state documents (that are considered to be “marks of antichrist”)—are components of “unspoiled” Christian faith.

Moreover, these ideologies are rather belligerent and often provide intellectual grounds for right-wing paramilitary groups that pretend to defend true Christianity. In the Russian case, those “defenders,” unfortunately, in turn participate in military aggression against other Orthodox countries (pp. 94–95). Orthodox bishops and clergy officials, basing their worldview on conservative ideologies, suggest a justification for the military aggression. Here I would like to add my own point that the Moscow dependent UOC–MP preaches that Ukrainians have no right even to defend themselves and their native land. What different standpoints within the same Russian Orthodox Church! And both of them, Russian aggressive and “Ukrainian” pacifist, should help the same goal—imposition of Russian neoimperial rule over Ukraine.

The fourth chapter deals with Orthodox anti-Semitism. The author pays attention to the fact that while premodern anti-Semitism was founded on the difference in faiths, Christianity and Judaism, modern anti-Semitism rejected Jews on the grounds of their ethnicity (pp. 117–18). In some ways, Orthodox anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia became an inspiration for later Nazi anti-Semitism. It also had different manifestations in Romania. One example is that Romanian theologians tried to prove that Christ was not a Jew (p. 138). However, the author states that depriving Jesus Christ of his Jewishness corrupts the teaching about his humanity and thus “corresponds to the classical Orthodox criteria of heresy” (p. 146).

In the last chapter, Hovorun touches on the problem of the nationalistic agenda in the church. He differentiates between ethnic and imperial/civilizational nationalism (or imperialism). While the former has often been the predecessor of liberation movements, which in turn, however, may become the instrument of oppression of the ethnic minorities in a newly established state, the latter is intrinsically oppressive. Imperial nationalism is often connected with the idea of restoring a “golden age,” preserving unique civilization. In the Orthodox milieu, the idea of the renaissance or imitation of Byzantium lies in the foundations of many imperial nationalisms. The author focuses on the Greek and Russian variants of civilizational nationalisms.

Unfortunately, the Russian one, supported by bishops and clergy, stands behind Russian military invasions and its information war throughout the world.

This brief review outlines only some ideas presented in the book. The author, being an Orthodox archimandrite and theological scholar, critiques human sins in the church from within. He suggests some solutions for the church: to separate itself from the state, to return to the “apostolic non-coercive ethos,” and to repent. At the same time, this study should be helpful for the further development of the models and mechanisms of harmonious relationships of the Orthodox church with state and society and its contribution to the modern political, social, and ethical reality.