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Sustainability and religion-related aspects of the conflict in Ukraine

Sergei V. Jargin

Abstract

Religions are relevant to the issues of sustainability. Atheistic propaganda in the former Soviet Union was efficient. The recent religious revival in Russia is partly insincere and superficial, being a matter of politics. Apparently, many today's churchgoers, priests and church officials are atheists or agnostics, habitually following official policies. Some church functionaries, endorsing the Ukraine war, engage in moralizing, among others opposing to abortions, sex education and birth control, depicting childbearing as a duty. Ramzan Kadyrov, head and mufti (Islamic jurist) of Chechen Republic, declared the war in Ukraine a jihad and urged Russian Muslims to fight the demons. Should the power in Europe shift to the East, it would come along with losses of some moral values. An autocratic management style would come instead. In the healthcare, attributes of this style include a paternalistic approach to patients, hampering objective discussion and criticism. A preferred perspective would be a leadership based on the principles of mercy, modesty and forgiveness, aimed at preservation of human life and health.

Keywords: Ukraine; Armed conflict; Sustainability; Religion; Ethics

This is an update and continuation of the previously published article [1], where ecological and healthcare-related aspects of the Ukraine conflict were discussed along with some peace initiatives. This mini-review is focused on sustainability and religion-related issues. The sustainability is aimed at a long-term global coexistence of peoples; it includes environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Religions are relevant to the issues of sustainability; some spiritual leaders uttered their attitudes to pertinent problems.

Anti-religious propaganda in the former Soviet Union (SU) was efficient. Atheism has been accepted after 1917 not only due to the propaganda, but also because religiosity was not as deeply ingrained as it is sometimes believed. Faithful people belonged predominantly to the middle class that was largely destroyed by Bolsheviks. Soviet propaganda claimed great successes in tearing people away from religion [2]. In Ukraine, especially in the western regions, which belonged to Poland and escaped the anti-religious activities of the 1920-1930s, the situation was different. Even in the Soviet part of Ukraine, Bolsheviks were alarmed by religious revival in the late 1920s. Closing and demolition of churches, repressions of clergy and parish activists were implemented [3]. Then followed the famine (1932-1933) contributed by the Soviet policies [4]. During the German governance (1941-1944), churches in Ukraine were full,

weddings and baptism being usual practices [5]. The antireligious campaign by Nikita Khrushchev met obstacles in the Ukraine [6].

In Russia, many people understand only a small part of the liturgy, due to it being in Church Slavonic. Probably for that reason people are more affected by traditions than by preaching and Bible study [7,8]. The somewhat archaic language of the broadly used Synodal translation of the Bible (19th century) is not easily understandable in places. The modern translation by the Bible Society is not uniformly accepted because many people are accustomed to the older version. Standing at lengthy services is a health problem; it is contraindicated, especially for aged people. In other countries, churchgoers are seated with a text in front of them, understanding everything that is said and chanted.

The recent religious revival in Russia seems to be partly insincere and superficial, being a matter of fashion, and lately also of policy: religion has been incorporated into the official ideology. Some surveys reported high percentages of self-identification with Orthodox Christianity; but the knowledge of Scriptures remains at a low level [9]. If a child goes to church, he or she may retain faith lifelong despite scientific education. The acquisition of beliefs from within by an adult seems to be improbable. Preparing the end of the communist regime, the Party and military functionaries, so-called Nomenklatura [10], sent their children to theological academies, some students being transferred from Marxism-Leninism faculties. The hypothesis is proposed here that a majority of today's churchgoers, priests and church officials in Russia are atheists or agnostics, habitually supporting the Soviet-time vision of the "West" as perpetual threat [11-13]. The politicization is illustrated by a paradox: the concept of Orthodoxy is broader than that of faith; some atheists designate themselves as Orthodox. Besides, superstitions are sometimes mixed up with religious beliefs, which is named "dvoeverie - dual faith" or orthodox-heathen syncretism [8]. The interest of broad public to the supernatural contributed to the religious revival [14,15]. This tendency seems to be exploited in view of abundant mystical TV shows and films. The communist propaganda named such policies "odurmanivanie – mass mystification". Admittedly, the efficacy of these efforts is limited because the Soviet-nurtured materialism and atheism are deeply ingrained. After an upsurge in the 1990s, the number of young people attending Orthodox services is again declining [16]. Other behaviors propagated by Russian media are promiscuity and de facto reproductive coercion. For example, popular mystical serials "Gadalka" (Fortune teller) and "Slepaia" (Blind) depict unexpected and unintended pregnancies both in and out of wedlock as natural and unavoidable while contraception is mentioned rarely. In the Episode 306 of the latter serial a gynecologist at a husband's request surreptitiously replaced contraceptive pills by vitamins, which was presented as a good deed. Risks associated

with abortions and oral contraceptives are systematically exaggerated. Evidently, the propaganda follows policies aimed at the birth rate elevation. Some church officials, endorsing the Ukraine war, engage in moralizing or “norm entrepreneurship” [17], opposing to birth control and sex education, depicting childbearing as a duty [18,19]. This is understandable from the military-political standpoint but counterproductive in view of the overpopulation in many regions of the world including certain subjects of the Russian Federation (RF). The same activists fail to recognize, or even discuss, the high incidence of rape in RF [19]. The anti-abortion campaigners should learn what it means to grow up as undesired child, and what unwanted pregnancies imply for a female victim of reproductive coercion [20].

The declared reason of the “special military operation”, started February 2022, was the anti-separatist activity of Ukraine in the Donbas since 2014. Apparently, this activity was exaggerated by the media. Counteracting separatism within national borders is justifiable, exemplified by Russian anti-separatist operations in the North Caucasus (1994-2009). The Ukraine voted for independence (~83%) in the 1991 referendum. The pro-independence vote varied from 95% in the west of the country to 76.5 % in the Donetsk area and 54% in Crimea [21]. The 1991 borders of Ukraine were recognized by all nations including RF. The Ukraine war, having undermined the principle of internationally agreed status quo, has triggered conflicts in different parts of the world. Recent referendums in occupied territories were met with skepticism, as the residents voted for unification with RF to avoid trouble because they did not believe that the situation will be reverted. The Soviet-trained collectivism has influenced referendums, elections and opinion polls. Almost everybody voted the ruling party in the former SU. Admittedly, a majority of residents in the southern and eastern parts of the country are Russian-speaking and many people were disappointed that their region had not become a part of RF. Some Russian-speaking areas may become parts of RF if people really want it. A workable solution must be found by means of negotiations. The question is, however, whether there are responsible negotiating partners. The history of the 20th century demonstrated that European leaders sometimes took short-sighted decisions. The main thing is to avoid a large-scale war. Consequences would be unfavorable for both sides, as it was 100 years ago.

Psychological aspects of the war in Ukraine have been discussed previously [22,23]. Vladimir Putin’s saying “If a fight is [perceived as] inevitable, you must strike first” may be a trace of juvenile ways of defending against bullies related to an intergenerational traumatic chain [24]. According to some analyses, the prevalence of family violence in RF during last decades has been 45-70 times higher than, for example, in the United Kingdom and France. As per the recent report, about 40% of all serious violent crimes in RF are committed within families; 14% of

children are subjected to physical abuse, 2 million are regularly beaten by parents while 10% of them lose their lives as a result, reviewed in [25]. According to other sources, 40% of children are beaten in their families [26]; 31% of children experience sexual abuse and 41% suffer cruel punishments [27]. Yet in 2017 Vladimir Putin has signed into law an amendment decriminalizing some forms of domestic violence [28]. Physical abuse was described in Putin's biographies [24,29-31]. Defensive behaviors may include attacking weaker persons and submitting to dominant ones [32]. The latter seems to be reflected by relationships of Vladimir Putin with Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Chechen Republic, who is a dominant personality. There has been a stereotype of "chechenophobia" in Russia [33]. Reportedly, Putin studies Sufism and is sympathetic to this Islamic teaching [34]. The influential ideologist Alexandr Dugin worked on interpretations and conceptualizations of Sufism [35]. The most important topic in this connection is the inter-ethnic difference in birth rate and migrations [36], which is avoided by Russian media and officials today. In November 2022, Putin awarded the Soviet-era medal for mother heroines to Kadyrov's wife, who has fourteen children. According to the Wikipedia, Kadyrov has three wives. Chechnya receives considerable federal funding.

Ramzan Kadyrov declared the war in Ukraine "Big Jihad" and urged Russian Muslims to fight the satanic democracy and demons. He urged to lay waste to Ukraine and backed calls to wipe cities "off the face of the Earth" [37]. The Quran contains numerous injunctions regarding unbelievers: "Smite at their neck at lengths; when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly on them" (47:4). It is not permitted to a Muslim to kill another Muslim (2:84; 4:92), but with regard to unbelievers other recommendations are given: "Fight them on until there prevails faith in Allah altogether and everywhere" (8:39). About responsibility for murder, it is commented: "It is not ye who slew them, it was Allah" (8:17). Contradictions between the Quran and modern legislation can be found: "The law of equality is prescribed: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman" (2:178) [38]. It can be understood that, instead of a criminal, an innocent from his kinship may be killed, woman for the woman, etc. Jihad, the holy war, is considered to be a religious duty. To be objective, positive tendencies in the modern Islamic literature should be pointed out: condemnation of terrorism, promotion of business ethics, of good-neighbor relations, disapproval of arrogant attitude towards supposed sinners and unbelievers. Undoubtedly, Islam promotes many universal moral values.

Calls for punishments can also be found in the Old Testament: "And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19:21). The words eye and tooth, used allegorically, can be understood differently in various cultures, so that the concept might perpetuate conflicts. Admittedly, the "eye for eye" principle

can be seen as a limiting of retribution. Confessional differences should not be exaggerated; but throughout history religious teachings and fanaticism have sometimes contributed to wars. Conflicting laws and injunctions cannot be valid at the same time and place. Considering the unpredictability and compromise-resistance of terrorists with religious motives [39], such motives should be regarded by the justice system as aggravating circumstances. This must pertain also to appeals for war and violence using religious vocabulary, noting that war propaganda is prohibited by the international law [40].

Outside religion, it is hard to see how the notion what is right and wrong should provide a motive for doing right [41]. According to a widespread opinion, morals have no materialistic foundations worth respecting [42,43]. Should the power in Europe shift to Russia, it would come along with losses of some moral values. Disregard for laws and regulations, corruption and collectivism would come instead. The quality of many services and products will decline: spoiled foods on sale, antibiotics in milk, falsified beer and wine, impolite service, wrong price tags in shops, misquoting of legal codes by civil servants in their correspondence, backdating of official letters, embezzlement of registered correspondence, various types of misconduct in the healthcare [44].

An autocratic or military management style discourages criticism. In the healthcare, attributes of this style include a paternalistic attitude to patients and bossy management. Disregard for the principle of informed consent and compulsory treatments are deemed permissible [45]. For example, abortions and gynecological manipulations were sometimes performed in a harsh manner, especially in women deemed socially unprotected or “immoral”. Endocervical ectopies (pseudo-erosions) have been routinely cauterized without cytological tests; at the same time, Pap-smears have been performed infrequently and not up to the international standards, cervical cancer being diagnosed relatively late [46]. Considering the breast cancer incidence, millions of women in the former SU have undergone Halsted or Patey procedures with resection of pectoralis muscles without sufficient indications; details and references are in the book [44]. Psychiatry has been discussed previously [47,48]. The following features of Russian healthcare should be pointed out: comparatively low life expectancy and survival rates in different diseases [49], medical science not repelling falsification, inefficient medications advertised and prescribed, invasive procedures applied without indications [44,50,51]. Experts understood obsolescence of certain instructions but preferred not to voice their opinions.

As mentioned above, environment is one of the most important dimensions of sustainability. Ecological aspects of the Ukraine war have been discussed elsewhere [1]. A brief commentary is added here. The conflict in Ukraine has thwarted environmental policies and triggered armed

conflicts in certain parts of the world. The war itself is damaging for the environment having global repercussions, worsening energy and food supply. As food prices rise, some nations are likely to cope by converting forests to fields [52]. Certain environmentalists and grassroots act in accordance with the interests of companies and governments selling fossil fuels [53]. Most evident is this tendency in regard to low-dose low-rate of ionizing radiation, comparable with the natural radiation background, whereas the overestimation of medical and environmental side effects of nuclear energy contributed to its strangulation, supporting appeals to dismantle nuclear power plants (NPPs). Health risks and environmental damage are maximal for coal and oil, lower for natural gas and much lower for the nuclear energy. The same ranking applies to the greenhouse gas emissions [54,55]. Nuclear power is a large-scale sustainable energy source; it is devoid of unpredictability of wind and solar energy, uses fuels with high energy density, which facilitates transportation. The nuclear fuel cycle holds potential for economic and environmental optimization [55]. Hopefully, the nuclear fission will be in future replaced by fusion, which is intrinsically safer. The fusion should offer a source of safe, clean power generation, with a plentiful supply of raw materials [56,57]. Durable peace and international cooperation are needed for this and others large-scale projects.

In the long run, nonrenewable fossil fuels will become increasingly expensive, contributing to the population growth in the fuel-producing countries and poverty elsewhere. Uranium prices may grow as well; but the cost of nuclear power depends only to a small extent on the fuel cost. Uranium is produced in diverse regions while major reserves of oil and gas are concentrated in a small number of countries [55]. Chernobyl accident has been exploited to strangle nuclear energy [53,58]; but it would be a speculation to claim that there was intention. At least, negligence and disregard for written instructions were among the causes of the accident [59-61]. One can await everything from people devoid of religion and morality. Escalation of conflicts contributes to the boosting of fossil fuel prices. By analogy with the Chernobyl accident, the war damage and shutdown of the Zaporozhie NPP (the largest in Europe) has enhanced demands for fossil fuels. The weightiest consideration against NPPs is that they are potential war targets. Military threats are arguments against the use of nuclear power for electricity production. The boosting of fossil fuel prices seems to be one of the motives to unleash the war in Ukraine and of the threats to use nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The nuclear threats and declarations of jihad [37,62] have appeared against the background of Soviet atheism, while religious vocabulary is misused for political purposes. It can be reasonably assumed that many church officials supporting the war in Ukraine are atheists acting in

accordance with political trends. The above-mentioned ideologist Alexandr Dugin opined: “Every civilization has the right to decide about... death, good and evil” [63]. Indeed, some terrorists made such decisions. A preferred alternative would be a leadership centered in developed parts of the world, based on the principles of mercy, modesty and forgiveness, aimed at preservation of human life and health.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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