

# Just War and Orthodoxy: A Response to the Catechism of the Russian Orthodox Church

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In the summer of 2017, the Russian Orthodox Church released a draft of the *Catechism of the Russian Orthodox Church* for church-wide discussion and review.<sup>2</sup> The document is quite controversial, both because it has few predecessors—leading many to wonder whether the Church *should* produce official catechisms—and, in particular, because it endorses ecumenism. Unfortunately for its critics, the second half of the text, which includes the comments on ecumenism, has already been approved and will not be changed. The fixity of this part of the Catechism is also unfortunate for another reason: it includes a section on war plagued by several historical and interpretive errors. This section, which is reproduced from the 2000 document *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, represents the most significant departure from established church teaching within the entire *Catechism*.<sup>2</sup>

The relevant section begins on a strong foundation, proclaiming: “War is evil. Just as the evil in man in general, war is caused by the sinful abuse of the God-given freedom. . . . Killing, without which wars cannot happen, was regarded as a grave crime before God as far back as the dawn of the holy history” (IV.VIII.1). After this, however, the document claims that, “While recognising war as evil . . . war

is considered to be necessary,” so long as it is for the sake of restoring justice and protecting neighbors (IV.VIII.2). This statement is problematic insofar as it claims that Christians sometimes *must* commit evil actions. While it is a testament to the normativity of peace in this document that engaging in warfare is considered to be evil (even when such actions are obligatory), the claim seems nonetheless to be that Christians sometimes have a moral duty to do something immoral. “Necessary evil” is a dangerous category to codify in a catechism, and a more nuanced ethical theory is required.

The *Catechism* continues immediately: “The Holy Church has canonised many soldiers, taking into account their Christian virtues and applying to them Christ’s word: ‘Greater love hath no man but this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’” (IV.VII.2). While it is true that there are many soldier-saints, no saint has ever been canonized for military accomplishments. Unlike in pagan cultures, the Church has never considered military valor a Christian virtue. The closest the Church has come to canonizing someone for military valor was the glorification in 2001 of the Russian war hero Fyodor Ushakov, who never lost a battle. But as Archpriest Maxim Maximov, a member of the Synodal Commission on Canonization, com-

<sup>1</sup> *Proekt Katekhizisa Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi* (Moscow: Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, 2017). The draft *Catechism* may be read in full at [theolcom.ru/images/2017/КатехизисСБК\\_Проект.pdf](http://theolcom.ru/images/2017/КатехизисСБК_Проект.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, Chapter VIII (Moscow: Department of External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2000). Available in English at [mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/viii/](http://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/viii/). Translations in this essay are taken from the official English text.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Maxim Maximov, *Voice of Russia*, June 1, 2007.

mented during a radio interview with the *Voice of Russia*: “Admiral Ushakov was not canonized for his military heroism—this isn’t enough in itself for canonization.”<sup>3</sup>

By speaking of the canonization of soldiers immediately after implicitly endorsing the notion of “necessary evil,” the *Catechism* gives the impression that glorification should follow after soldiery rather than repentance. This contradicts Basil’s thirteenth Canon, which requires returning soldiers to refrain from Communion for three years as a means of repentance. Furthermore, the *Catechism*’s quotation from the Gospel of John is misused as a proof-text in this context. Christ was speaking of himself when commenting on laying down one’s life. The interpretive context of this pericope has always been the crucifixion: it describes martyrdom rather than warfare. To paraphrase General Patton, in war you do not aim to lay down your life, but to make your enemy lay down his.

Next, the *Catechism* quotes at length from the *Life* of St. Cyril the Philosopher:

When St. Cyril Equal-to-the-Apostles was sent by the Patriarch of Constantinople to preach the gospel among the Saracens, in their capital city he had to enter into a dispute about faith with Muhammadan scholars. Among others, they asked him: “Your God is Christ. He commanded you to pray for enemies, to do good to those who hate and persecute you and to offer the other cheek to those who hit you, but what do you actually do? If anyone offends you, you sharpen your sword and go into battle and kill. Why do you not obey your Christ?” Having heard this, St. Cyril asked his fellow-polemists: “If there are two commandments writ-

ten in one law, who will be its best respecter—the one who obeys only one commandment or the one who obeys both?” When the Hagerenes said that the best respecter of law is the one who obeys both commandments, the holy preacher continued: “Christ is our God Who ordered us to pray for our offenders and to do good to them. He also said that no one of us can show greater love in life than he who gives his life for his friends (Jn. 15:3). That is why we generously endure offences caused us as private people. But in company we defend one another and give our lives in battle for our neighbours, so that you, having taken our fellows prisoners, could not imprison their souls together with their bodies by forcing them into renouncing their faith and into godless deeds. Our Christ-loving soldiers protect our Holy Church with arms in their hands. They safeguard the sovereign in whose sacred person they respect the image of the rule of the Heavenly King. They safeguard their land because with its fall the home authority will inevitably fall too and the evangelical faith will be shaken. These are precious pledges for which soldiers should fight to the last. And if they give their lives in battlefield, the Church will include them in the community of the holy martyrs and call them intercessors before God.” (IV.VII.2)

This appeal to the life of St. Cyril lacks nuance and is potentially misleading in a number of ways. First, we must recognize that, while this quotation claims that the saint was sent to “preach the gospel” and therefore implies that he was active as a *Christian missionary* without imperial concerns, other historical sources confirm that Cyril was sent on a *diplomatic mission*, to engage in peace negotiations on behalf of the Roman Empire with the Abbasid Caliphate. According to one scholar, “The discussions [between

Cyril and the Abbasids] took place in the course of lengthy symposia, around a table laden with provender. . . . The Arabs cross-examined Cyril and were stunned by the extent of his knowledge. . . . The Byzantine mission's visit ended with a guided tour of Samarra's magnificent palaces and splendid gardens."<sup>4</sup> Thus, far from a combative dispute with hostile "Saracens," Cyril's work was as a peace-maker and diplomat among intellectuals, who were sharing in a cultural flourishing which included the translation of many works by Aristotle, Galen, Plato, and the Neoplatonists into Arabic by Christian scholars, and the work of Byzantine artists on the decoration of the new capital of Samarra.

Second, the work of interpreting hagiography is complicated by the existence of multiple traditions. The ninth-century *Vita Constantini*—the oldest extant life of Cyril—records a lengthy back-and-forth between Cyril and the

other scholars on a range of issues, but it does not record everything that is quoted in the *Catechism*. Cyril's reply is simply, "God said: 'Pray for them which despitefully use you.' And He also said: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' We do this for the sake of friends, lest their souls be captured together with their bodies."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the *Catechism* quotes from a later and evidently embellished version of Cyril's life, one that appears to support the *Catechism's* arguments, but fails to acknowledge the earlier tradition that gives an altogether different picture of the saint's achievements.

In any case, the context provided by the *Vita* suggests that the best way to interpret Cyril's remarks is *not* as an apodictic statement on the ethics of war, as it is taken in the *Catechism*. Rather, the *Vita Constantini* presents Cyril engaging in rhetorical exhibition. As any reader of Plato knows, symposia traditionally involved participants

<sup>4</sup> Anthony-Emil Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 32.

<sup>5</sup> "The Life of Constantine," trans. Marvin Kantor, in *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1983), 39



Bishop Cornelius of Volgodonsk and Salsk blesses Russian war planes (August 2015)



St. Cyril, Equal-to-the-Apostles, by Mikhail Vasilyevich Nesterov (1890–94), in St. Vladimir's Cathedral, Kiev.

at a great feast standing and giving speeches to demonstrate their rhetorical skill. Thus, when challenged with a difficult conundrum, it was expected that Cyril would reply with rhetorical elegance and answer the objection—which is precisely what he does. He begins with a rhetorical question, asking if it is better to fulfill one or two commandments. He then quotes two commandments, and claims that Christians fulfill both in warfare. The point made by the *Vita* is that Cyril excelled in rhetoric and dialectic. To have done anything less would have sabotaged the diplomatic negotiations and cultural exchange. Moreover, had Cyril denied Christian participation in warfare, he would have sabotaged the peace effort. It is important to acknowledge the difference which potentially exists between the rhetorical demonstration preserved in the hagiography and what might have been the considered theological statement of the historical Cyril.

By failing to contextualize the words attributed to Cyril adequately, the *Catechism* presents a misleading picture of the Christian attitude towards warfare. The most problematic part is the saying attributed to Cyril that, “if [soldiers] give their lives in battlefield, the Church will include them in the community of the holy martyrs.” Without question, this demands further comment. Not only is this part of the speech absent in the earliest sources, but it contradicts established church teaching. In the tenth century, Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas requested that soldiers who die on the battlefield be glorified as martyrs. The Church soundly rejected this appeal, with Patriarch Polyuktos appealing to Basil's thirteenth Canon, which excommunicated soldiers, as demonstrating that warfare is a sin. Similarly, Canon 14 of Hippolytus states: “A Christian is not



to become a soldier. . . . If he has shed blood, he is not to partake of the mysteries, unless he is purified by punishment, tears, and wailing.”

Immediately after the section quoted above on Cyril, the *Catechism* continues: “‘They that take the sword shall perish with the sword.’ These words of the Saviour justify the idea of just war” (IV.VII.3). This is the most blatant misuse of scripture in the entire *Catechism*. The pericope quoted has never in the Orthodox tradition been understood as justifying warfare, but precisely the opposite. In context, Jesus was telling Peter to put away his sword and not to fight. Christ went on to say that if he wanted to, he could have called down an army of angels to fight, but that this was not the right way. In commenting on this passage, Tertullian writes: “How will [a Christian man] war . . . without a

sword, which the Lord has taken away? . . . The Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier.”<sup>6</sup> The *Catechism*, in contrast with scripture and tradition, interprets this verse as justifying war—in the sense that if our enemies take up swords, they will die by our swords, since we will kill them.

Following this dubious line of argument, the *Catechism* next introduces “Just War Theory” (JWT). The *Catechism*’s exposition of JWT should be commended for recognizing that it developed in the West rather than the East, in order to “curb the elements of military violence” (IV.VII.3). The theory was originally intended to promote peace, and not to justify war, which was already occurring and was viewed as a good by many in the West. War needed no justification: rather, it needed to be held accountable to justice.

Still, the *Catechism* would represent the first time that the Eastern Church had endorsed JWT. While certain Western authors such as Augustine did approach something like the modern idea of just war, it took several centuries before these reflections were known outside the Latin-speaking world, and even then they did not become authoritative. Stanley Harakas notes that it is not present in the Greek Fathers and that “no case can be made for the existence of an Orthodox just-war theory.”<sup>7</sup> Or as John McGuckin states in his commentary on Basil’s Canon 13, “What this Basilian canon does most effectively is to set a No Entry sign to any potential theory of Just War within Christian theology.”<sup>8</sup> It is both significant and dubious that the *Catechism* breaks with established Orthodox teaching in this way.

The exposition of JWT in the *Catechism* is weak for a number of reasons. First,

the notion of Just War may be traced back to Cicero and ideas in natural law. Without explaining those origins, JWT makes little sense. One is left wondering how much of the philosophical underpinnings of natural law and Cicero are here endorsed. Secondly, the exposition follows certain elements of contemporary JWT but leaves out others. It excludes *jus post bellum* requirements—that is, conditions concerning the proper ending of a war—as well as a host of other obligations spelled out in the Roman Catholic catechism, including an unequivocal condemnation of nuclear weapons, a mandate to work for peace through internationalism and disarmament, a recommendation of nonviolence, and an elevation of the vocation of conscientious objection.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, though the Russian *Catechism* endorses working for peace, it condemns those who practice “non-resistance to evil by force,” which would possibly include conscientious objectors, instead claiming the “Christian moral law deplores not . . . taking another’s life . . . but rather malice in the human heart” (IV.VII.4). So long as one does not hate one’s enemy, killing can be moral. Not only does this implicit condemnation of conscientious objection break with both canonical and Just War traditions, it also contradicts the earlier statements of the *Catechism* itself.

One of the ironies of the *Catechism*’s endorsement of JWT is that there actually is a historical relation between JWT and Orthodoxy, but not one that endorses war. The Just War tradition was influential in tenth-century France, when the pre-Schism Church held a series of “Peace Councils.” The first such council occurred in 975, when Bishop Guy of Le Puy threatened excommunication unless soldiers took an oath of peace. The ensuing *Pax Dei* or “Peace of God” movement can be

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, in *The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus*, vol. 1, trans. Sydney Thelwall (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1869) 171.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Harakas, “No Just War in the Fathers,” *In Communion* (2003), incommunion.org/2005/08/02/no-just-war-in-the-fathers/.

<sup>8</sup> John McGuckin, “A Conflicted Heritage: The Byzantine Religious Establishment of a War Ethic,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65/66 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012): 39.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), §§2302–2317.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Head and Richard Landes, eds., *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>11</sup> George T. Dennis, Timothy S. Miller, John W. Nesbitt, eds., *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 52.

properly called the first peace movement in history, since the bishops who led it used relics and the cults of saints to draw large crowds that marched for peace. The bishops then issued several canons which anathematized those who acted unethically during war. These canons formed the basis for all subsequent “laws of war” in the West. In 994, at one of the Peace Councils, the bishops released the following statement: “Since we know that without peace no man may see God, we adjure you, in the name of the Lord, to be men of peace.”<sup>10</sup> The *Pax Dei* movement eventually led to international laws outlawing warfare on certain days and restricting the weapons that could be used. The foundations of JWT thus lie in a pre-Schism Christian peace movement. The trajectory that originated with *Pax Dei* culminated in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which saw the passage of the first international laws restricting war in the modern era and were the result of the strong peace movement at the time. The Hague Conventions were originally proposed and spearheaded by St. Tsar Nicholas II—the only Orthodox saint who has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The Orthodox Church, while never endorsing JWT, has thus influenced the development of the Just War tradition, which, throughout its history, has primarily been a peace tradition concerned with placing legal restrictions on warfare. None of this complex history is reflected in the *Catechism*. Furthermore, the introduction of JWT to Orthodoxy at this point in

history, when the Catholic Church has begun to say that “just wars” are now impossible due to technology, comes off as a step endorsing war rather than limit it, which has always been the point of JWT.

The *Catechism* should either endorse all of the Just War tradition, with its emphasis on peacemaking and its privileging of conscientious objection, or it should refrain altogether from doing so. A superior position would be the traditional Byzantine attitude, which viewed war as evil, full stop, and always something of which we must repent. Consider, for example, the recorded statement of Emperor Justin II after returning victoriously from a military campaign: “Do not delight in deeds of blood, have no part in murders, do not repay evil with evil, and do not imitate me in my enmity.”<sup>11</sup> It is striking that an emperor, at his moment of triumph, would still show repentance and chastise people not to glorify war. Even when engaging in warfare, Emperor Justin acknowledged that it was not just.

In endorsing Just War theory, the new *Catechism of the Russian Orthodox Church* abuses scriptural, canonical, and hagiographic tradition, departing substantially from the received Orthodox view. At the very least, it would be preferable for the *Catechism* to get the sources right and show historical and philosophical nuance. But above all, it should be revised to proclaim Christ’s message of peace, rather than distorting his words to serve the ends of worldly power and war. ✱



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