

Church of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin, Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine, destroyed by the Russian army in March 2022.



STATE OF AFFAIRS

Propaganda, Truth, and the War in Ukraine

Sister Vassa Larin

Let me begin by quoting the kontakion of Pentecost: “When the Most High came down and confused the tongues, he divided the nations; but when he distributed the tongues of fire, he called all to unity. Therefore, with one voice, we glorify the all-holy Spirit!”

This hymn describes the “confusion of the tongues” that God brought about when mankind undertook the building of a city and the Tower of Babel. When God confused their languages, they could no longer build their city and their tower together, as it says in Genesis: “So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all

the earth, and they left off building the city” (Genesis 11:8).

This story reminds me of our state of affairs today, in what has been called a “post-truth” world; when on any given issue we seem incapable of discerning the truth, or even of any discussion thereof, because we find ourselves in different information bubbles and hence seem to be speaking different languages. Our technological progress, including our constant connectivity via the internet and social media—which one might expect to lead us to unity—is ironically dividing us more than ever.

But we need not be discouraged, because in our day, in the era of the Church—unlike the pre-Christian times described in Genesis 11—God has “distributed [upon all of us, upon the Church] the tongues of fire,” or the divine energies of the Holy Spirit, by whom we are all “called to unity.” We are continuously called to unity, which cannot be realized by human effort alone—not by our own tower-building or even our own church-building—but by a humble openness to God’s grace.

What do I mean, a humble openness to God’s grace? Do I mean resigning ourselves to silence on any issue, or saying, “We can’t possibly discern the truth of any matter, because you have your truth and I have my truth”? As we say in Russian, “всё не так однозначно” (everything is not that clear). No, I do not mean that. I do not believe we are to become agnostics, who justify their complacency regarding the truth, because truth is, according to them, unknowable. A faithful Christian believes that God reveals himself to human beings in this world, and it is our vocation to recognize or read the signs of his revelation to us and act accordingly. We do not say, with Pontius Pilate, “What is truth?” (John 18:38), while the Truth is staring him in the face, and then go wash our hands of any responsibility for letting that Truth be crucified on our watch.

In the case of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it has not been the Kremlin propaganda machine’s goal to instill trust in any particular narrative. Rather, the objective has been to encourage and justify our inactivity by floating several narratives about the war—not just one—so that we throw up our hands and do nothing, because “everything is not that clear.” First, in the weeks prior to February 24, it said

repeatedly that it had no intention of invading Ukraine. Then it claimed it had invaded Ukraine for the goals of “demilitarization” and “denazification” (as Putin put it in his speech on February 24). Then the reasons changed, and we were told that the invasion was meant to stop the expansion or even attack on Russia of NATO (even though NATO had no intention of admitting Ukraine as a member in the near future, nor of attacking Russia, which it has not done even to this day). Then we were told by the Russian diplomat at the United Nations that the United States and Ukraine were plotting to use migratory birds and bats to spread pathogens, supposedly from a laboratory in Ukraine, and that this is what Russia was trying to stop through its “special operation.”

But how can we learn the Truth, we might ask, when we don’t trust any source of information on the matter?—when we have essentially no trustworthy authority, because we live at a time when human authority, both in the Church and elsewhere, is undermined? As G. K. Chesterton wrote: “The modern mind will accept no dogmas upon any authority, but it will accept any dogmas upon no authority. Say that a thing is so, according to the Pope or the Bible, and it will be dismissed as a superstition without examination. But preface your remark merely with ‘they say’ or ‘don’t you know that?’ or try (and fail) to remember the name of some professor mentioned in some newspaper; and the keen rationalism of the modern mind will accept every word you say.”¹

I would suggest several basic strategies—not new strategies but traditional, Christian ones.

First, we might re-embrace faith in humanity and in the human capacity

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Superstition of Divorce* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), 70.

to discern and receive the truth, by divine revelation and through one another. It is, after all, through human beings and eyewitnesses to God's revelation that truth has been passed down to us in what is called tradition. Human authority, as a God-given gift, does exist, even if it is abused and misused by us, time and again, when we fail to exercise it as we are called to do, each in the areas in which we are given that gift (as Pilate failed to exercise it as he was called to do). We have authority and should exercise it—as parents, as state or church leaders, as experts in this or that field, as workers responsible for this or that small or large part of a business, and so on.

Second, we might learn to respect one another's authority, each in our own fields of expertise. At this conference, we will hear from speakers knowledgeable in the areas of theology, church history, politics, geopolitics, and law, and we will try to discuss honestly and respectfully—that is to say, with the gentle realism that is humility—the issues these speakers raise, whether or not we agree with their conclusions, on the basis of their knowledge. Of course, I do not think that everything to be said or to be known about the war in Ukraine will be said or learned at this conference. But it is our purpose, at the very least, to provide a springboard for further, informed discussion on the issues at hand.

Finally, as Church, and each of us as individual members thereof, we might become open to *repentance*, which in Greek is *metanoia*, "a change of mind." As Church, we might do better to rediscover our God-given capacity to change course, to admit we have wandered onto the wrong path, if that is indeed the case. I think that this basic Christian capacity to

take a self-critical look at ourselves when needed has been lacking of late, particularly in my own Russian Orthodox Church, despite the evident signs that we have been taking some wrong turns on our cross-carrying journey. These signs are not only the division we have allowed to develop, or have even caused, within the Orthodox Church (such as our last-minute refusal to take part in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in Crete in May 2016, and our more recent break in communion with the Greek churches). It is also our incursion into the territory of the most ancient of Orthodox patriarchates, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, which violates the most ancient stratum of canon law and shakes the Church's administrative foundations. We might take a self-critical look further and more deeply into the past of Russian Orthodoxy, into pre-revolutionary Russia and the Church's less-than-ideal relationship with the Tsarist state; into the Revolution and events leading up to it, for which the Church might share responsibility; into the Church's collaboration during the Soviet period with the atheist authorities, and more recently with the Putin regime. And, in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad or Outside Russia, we might take a self-critical look at our collaboration with the Nazis during World War II, and our more recent failure to speak out against the persecution of innocent dissidents in Putin's Russia such as Father Gleb Yakunin and Alexei Navalny. And we might repent, so as to heal our collective memory of self-delusions and move forward in a healthier manner. There is no shame in repentance, in admitting we have been wrong, and in moving forward in honesty, focused not on our human fears and politics,

but on our merciful triune God, who awaits and consoles the repentant sinner in his healing embrace.

I will conclude by quoting the ikos of Pentecost, the hymn that immediately follows the above-quoted kontakion, and offers solace at this difficult time: “Grant speedy and steadfast consolation to your servants, O Jesus, when our spirits have become despondent.

Do not depart from our souls when they are in afflictions, nor be distant from our minds when they be in tribulations, but do ever go before us. Draw near to us, draw near, you who are everywhere present; and even as you were ever with your apostles, so also unite yourself to them that long for you, O compassionate one, that, being one with you, we may praise and glorify your all-holy Spirit.” ✽



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STATE OF AFFAIRS

Putinism and the Culture Wars of the West

Katherine Kelaidis

I remember an anecdote from my Middle Eastern history class in college. In 11th-century Baghdad, a group of local mullahs began to teach, based on their interpretation of a few verses from the Quran and the Hadith, that eclipses were unpredictable events. This is, of course, patently untrue. Human beings have been able to predict eclipses for a very long time. In fact, if the markings in some caves in modern day Iraq are to be believed, Neanderthals were perfectly capable of predicting such astronomical phenomena. Muslims have always known the ability to predict astronomical phenomena, including eclipses. Islamic law notably even requires astronomers to release the dates and

times of known major astronomical events in advance, precisely to avoid superstitious panic. Of course, none of this—including the fact that people, among them those very mullahs, had seen eclipses predicted and come to pass—stopped them. Instead, they just kept right on sharing their clearly false interpretation.

We know about all this because Al-Kitrabi Al-Baghadi, the greatest philosopher of the era, took offense. He penned an open letter to the mullahs to demand that they stop promulgating their clearly false teaching. They needed to stop, according to Al-Baghadi, not because it made them out to be liars, though that clearly should have

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