


Orthodox justification of collective violence: An epistemological and systematic framework

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Using a religious studies methodology, this paper offers a detailed contextual mapping and a structural configuration of how collective violence is justified in Orthodox Christianity. The research design is explanatory, whereby the functional perspectives of doctrine, ethics and worship are all investigated and probed as phenomena of lived religion and orthopraxy. While predominantly initiatory and pedagogical, the paper also proposes a systematic platform for advanced research on this subject, by flagging contexts, themes and areas of inquiry that a researcher might examine in order to untangle the inner workings of the justification of violence in the mind of the Orthodox. Given the ongoing Russian War on Ukraine, relevant samples are drawn from this case.

Contribution: This paper outlines the Orthodox Christian justification of violence from the perspectives of doctrine, ethics and ritual and identifies pivotal areas of ambiguity between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Keywords: catechism; doctrine; ethics; just war; Patriarch Kirill of Moscow; Orthodox Christianity; Russian War on Ukraine; collective violence; worship.

Introduction

The epistemology of Orthodox Christianity on collective violence is as complex and intricate, as it lacks the Western logic of a just war thinking. Unlike its Western counterpart, the Orthodox thinking about collective violence and its justification is less convoluted and more attuned to a primeval logic of conflict resolution. Its glaring doctrinal vagueness in offering a theory in the Western sense is compensated by phenomena of concealed expressions of primitivism and recidivism that are vulnerable to a most pristine mechanism of conflict resolution – *the sacrificing of the scapegoat on the platform of a dyadic system of justice*. In practical terms, the most that the Orthodox Church could do during violent conflicts was to become an incoherent triangulated third party and attempt to broker a resolution at the individual level and under the penalty of guilty conscience. This is because the church had no law-enforcement authority to define and enforce penalties for violent behaviour, and it relied upon a disorganised dogmatic outlook that bewildered its own sense of social responsibility.

Methodology

Religious studies methodologies are interpretive by nature, and the relevant scholarship generally focuses on the hermeneutics of documents, histories, objects, symbols, symbolic acts and so on. Whether exploring aspects of *phenomenology*, *functionalism* or *lived religion*, the researcher must often appeal to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to understand and explain, for example, *why* and *how* religion and violence intersect each other (Simion 2019b:1–10). Attempting to capture the attrition between Orthodox Christianity and collective violence, this paper uses a mixed-methods approach by combining phenomenology, functionalism and aspects of lived religion. Phenomenological methodologies are adopted whenever various phenomena such as sacrifice are epistemologically recalibrated to fit a particular context or interest, as in the case of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who recently claimed that all those Russian soldiers who died fighting 'evil' in Ukraine will have their sins forgiven (Smith 2022). It involves functionalism, such as how patterns of groupthink and structures of authority specific to the Orthodox Church may impact collective violence (Simion 2016:109–111). And, it involves aspects of lived religion, by juxtaposing standard doctrines of faith with atypical acts of symbolic violence expressed by Orthodox spiritual leaders such as the blessing of weapons in the case of the Russian war against Ukraine (Corcinschi 2022:93; Simion 2023:25–26).

Which are the Orthodox theological factors relevant to collective violence, and how do they intermingle with its justification? In answering these interrelated research questions, this paper follows three steps. In the first step (data gathering), the paper surveys Orthodox Christianity from a Durkheimian perspective that involves *doctrine, ethics* and *worship* (Durkheim 1969:62), for the triple purpose of offering a comprehensive introduction to the Orthodox faith, for identifying the spiritual ingredients behind the justification of violence and for providing a comprehensive context to discuss the significance of the findings. Such a structural–functional approach is also necessary because, as with any organised religion, the doctrine informs the ethical conduct, and the ritual solidifies the relationship between meaning and behaviour. The second step represents the discussion of the findings within their theological context. Focused on why a particular factor was identified and how it relates to collective violence, the discussions provide fundamental assessments of the power of particular teachings that are used as ideologies for conflict escalation, transformation and resolution. As a third step, the paper offers suggestions for how future research might integrate organised faith with relevant cultures as systems of meaning. The discussion of the findings is grounded both in a theological analysis of the Orthodox faith, and in a mode of ‘critical thinking’ aimed at engaging disparities and discontinuities between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, while bypassing conformist theological platitudes. Because this paper is geared towards the benefit of a wider readership (e.g. non-Orthodox theologians, religious scholars, ecumenical leaders and social scientists) and future researchers, the discussion of impervious Orthodox doctrines is often managed with predictive parsimony. Consequently, on numerous occasions, the breadth outweighs its depth.

Lastly, in terms of primary sources, this paper analyses official ecclesiastic publications and seminary textbooks published with the approval of local and national synods and bishops (the authentic church standards), it analyses secondary sources such as authoritative interpretations offered by reputable scholars and specialised dictionaries and tertiary sources that add insight to the information drawn from the primary and the secondary sources.

The just war theory and Orthodox Christianity

It is important to emphasise that this paper is not about the just war theory in Orthodox Christianity per se, but about correlations between various epistemologies of violence and structural assumptions embedded in the teachings of Orthodox Church. The subject of the just war theory had been first analysed by the author in an earlier study (Simion 2008:537–543) Therefore, this paper does not focus on the normative just war theory (*jus ad bellum; jus in bello; jus post bellum*), constructed on theological propositions similar to those developed in Western Europe by St Augustine, by the Medieval Romanists, by *Decretum Gratiani* (c. 1140), by the *Decretists* and *Decretals of Gregory IX* (1234) (Russell 1975:

16–212), simply because such theological propositions did not exist in the Orthodox realm. Rather, it focuses on a descriptive analysis of the thinking behind the justification of violence that pervades the Orthodox mind.

The Orthodox Church does not have a just war theory because of a comprehensive theological opposition to collective violence and canonical ambivalence, because of church-state legislative jurisdiction which left the matter of internal policing and external defence in the hands of the state, and because of externalities, such as ambivalent mimetic rivalry with jihad, Eurasian cultural dualism, nationalism, patriotism, the self-feminisation of the Orthodox Church and so on (Simion 2008, 2015:188–206). In spite of Orthodox Christianity’s demographic profile, the subject of just war theory remains an internal theological aloofness for reasons hard to explain. Insofar as my own insider observation may count as evidence, the subject of just war is avoided because of a conspicuous ecclesiastic control over the theological rhetoric; often supplanted by attitudes of self-differentiation from the West. Whenever compelled to share their opinions, especially during times of conflict that involve Orthodox Christians in general and clergy in particular, the majority of writers yields to platitudes and generalities.

Nevertheless, as the topic of just war in Orthodox Christianity along with its intricacies remains a subject of growing interest outside the Orthodox Church – while also taking into account the ongoing war between two Orthodox Christian countries, Russia and Ukraine – one may follow the work of Mantzaridis (2012:117–127) and Simion (2008, 2015). For work indirectly related to the subject such as the subject of ‘just peacemaking’, at this point in time, one can follow scholars such as Alexei Bodrov, Tamara Grdzeldze, Harutyun Harutyunyan, Philip LeMasters and others, who in the context of two thematic consultations held in Romania and Syria, have engaged subjects such as blessing weapons during war, Orthodox canonical tradition, nationalism, globalisation, victimisation, cultural perceptions of good and evil and so on (Asfaw, Chehadeh & Simion 2012). Additional background work is offered by a more recent thematic volume titled, *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War* (eds. Hamalis & Karras 2017). Nevertheless, given the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, it is expected that scholarly work on this subject will increase dramatically (Solarz & Korniichuk 2023).

Furthermore, even though some empirical evidence related to the just war theory is drawn from the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, this paper does not analyse this particular conflict either. Yet, given the growing interest whether there is a specific ‘Russian Orthodox’ theology favourable of a just war theory in a Western sense, it is important to underscore that although the Russians were in fact ‘good students’ of the Greeks, from whom they inherited the Byzantine theology (Schmemmann 2003:292–299), several perennial phenomena might indeed point to the ‘specifics’ of a Russian theology. The phenomena include the existence of a primitive and existential dualism that appears with a pervasive preponderance across the theological writings authored by Russian theologians, the

practice of dyadic legislative thinking, disregard for personal ownership hidden under the mask of 'Christian sharing' and the mentality of censoring and repudiating law; a subject critiqued by Russian thinkers such as Boris Chicherin, Vladimir Soloviov, Leon Petrażycki, Nikolai Berdyaev, Pavel Novgorodtsev, Bogdan Kistiakovsky and others (Corcinschi 2022:94; Walicki 1992:9–820).

Orthodox Christianity: Intrinsic premises

For historic, organisational and practical reasons, when it comes to collective violence, the Orthodox Church never issued clear canons or guidelines for its clergy and believers, except for liturgical anomalies such as the prayers for blessing soldiers and their weapons. As such, during times of distress, the real sources of meaning for its believers were almost exclusively derived from various forms of surviving primitive religion that were generally labelled as superstitions. Additionally, Orthodox Christianity lacked a centralised source of ecclesiastic authority similar to that of the Pope in the West, where all bishops and potentates had to subscribe to a papal decree. In the East, the sources of ecclesiastic authority were scattered, communication was faulty and the priests often resumed their opinions to local superstitions to give meaning during times of ambiguity or distress.

Nonetheless, in its history, Orthodox Christianity engaged the subject of violence mainly at the individual level, and the subject itself appears lavishly, yet, incoherently dispersed across dogmatic settlements, moral principles, liturgical practices and writings for spiritual formation. Therefore, to locate specific and coherent positions on the subject of collective violence is a very difficult task. It perhaps becomes easier to approach this question in an integrative and comprehensive manner by probing it against the Orthodox Catechism. It is important to do so simply because the Catechism enlists a minimal knowledge that the church wanted to ensure was understood by its priests, so that they can offer informed advice.

Basic teachings

The fundamental teachings of the Orthodox Church centre on humanity's salvation from under the bondage of sin, on the belief in the resurrection of the dead and on the expectation of the everlasting life to come. The paramount doctrinal source is anchored in an act of divine revelation recorded by the writings of the Old and New Testament, in the interpretation of the church fathers, the testimonies of the early martyrs and the dogmatic decisions reached by the church during its seven Ecumenical Councils (BOR 2000:7–42). Therefore, if judged by the standards set by the New Testament and the early martyrologies, the Orthodox Church ought to be eminently pacifist. Yet, in reality, theologians themselves have accepted the criminal behaviour from the history of Christianity as an anthropologic normality, and as a chain of events of a divine plan; while consoling their

crowd with the idea that this is a therapeutic eschatological theodicy; a consequence of the ancestral sin (Corcinschi 2022:92).

Key findings and discussion

In the Orthodox teachings, the message of forgiveness and reconciliation not only has pre-eminence, but it is also prescriptive in the sense that salvation is subject to faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13). The meaning of salvation can only be understood within the narrative of the Scripture, which gives meaning and clarifies what salvation means, why it is necessary and how this can be achieved (BOR 2000:8–29).

Concerning the question of collective violence and war, the early modern era catechisms of the Orthodox Church, such as Petru Movilă's 1642 *Confession of Faith* (Movilă 2001), and the 1672 *Confession of Dositheus* (Mladin et al. 2003a:54) avoided such a contentious subject for political reasons; the bulk of the Orthodox Christians living under Islam. However, the contemporary Orthodox catechisms that were expanded upon the predicament of nationalism and patriotism approached the question of war only from within the selfish and limited context of love for the neighbour; that is, the protection of one's own kin.

In an institutional sense, the church discourages war and claims never to have preached wars (defensive or offensive), contrary to realities such as today's Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the problematic involvement of high-ranking clergy in the war rhetoric (Corcinschi 2022:91–96; Drabinko 2022; Smith 2022). Although unintended, the obvious manifestation of contempt toward the prime message of the Gospel – that of a genuine reconciliation between God and humanity expressed through Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross and practiced by the early Christian martyrs – becomes obvious as the Orthodox Church becomes less confident and trusty of an idealised divine protection and of the logic of martyrdom. As such, it lays its trust in its protection by the sword of the state; recognising that the state is a divinely endorsed instrument for violence and social control (BOR 2000:405).

In a phenomenological sense, during war, orthopraxy is dominated by conjecture, with faith oriented toward the perception of a God being either on the side of one competitor (case in which hope is oriented toward trust in victory through violence and entitlement to a divine love restricted to one's own kin), or toward a God perceived in an Ottonian sense, as a *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*, who is distant and indifferent to human suffering; thus generating sentiments of guilt, rejection and existential suffering.

The Orthodox Church does better at the individual level, particularly on the question of homicide, which, for example, the Romanian Orthodox Catechism considers a violation of the Sixth Commandment (Ex 20:13). In this context, the Catechism recognises the existence of two forms of killing:

physical, understood as causing one's physical death, and *spiritual*, understood as causing one's loss of faith. Killing can also be *direct*, when taking someone's life instantly, or *indirect* by causing someone's death through structural violence, forced labour, physical or mental torture, deprivation of means of survival and so on (BOR 2000:374). Therefore, in reference to Patriarch Kirill's rhetoric and ritualised political support for Russia's war against Ukraine, it may be argued that:

[F]rom the point of view of Orthodox moral theology, Patriarch Kirill, even if he does not use a machine gun to kill a Ukrainian woman or child, he kills them indirectly, by blessing weapons. (Corcinschi 2022:93)

Conclusions

As is evident, the Orthodox Church adopts a favourable position on the use of collective violence to the extent that this is defensive and in the interest of the nation state. The favourable position is determined by patriotism and nationalism, and it is linked with the defence of the homeland; that is a particular sovereign territory that is inherently limited. It is not linked with the defence of the universal Orthodox Church, as national orthodox churches often blessed soldiers and weapons used to kill their Orthodox brethren; such as in the contemporary war between Russia and Ukraine (Corcinschi 2022:91–96; Drabinko 2022).

Dogmatic theology

While the Orthodox Christian Catechism provides the basic tenets of the structured beliefs and it is geared toward the priests and the general faithful, dogmatic theology is a more advanced and a more complex theological pursuit, focused on the intellectual formation of the clergy and lay theologians. Unlike the Catechism, which is anchored into the Pauline mandates of *faith*, *hope* and *love*, dogmatic theology explores some of the fundamental questions about the meaning of life, expressed through complex concepts such as cosmogony, cosmology, divine revelation, the dogma of the Holy Trinity (Meyendorff 1975:171–252), as well as eschatology (Evdokimov 1979:303–346).

Key findings and discussion

Concerning the significance, the theological fortitude, the authority and the authenticity of its philosophical heritage, Orthodox Christianity ranks its doctrines from mere theological *opinions*, to *theologumenas*, culminating with *dogmas* at the summit (Evdokimov 1979:173–179; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:14).

Theological *opinions* have the least authority, as they represent various interpretations offered by individual theologians or by theological schools of thought. They are nothing more than theological attempts to explain, clarify or contextualise a dogma or a theologumena in relation to various cultural factors and contexts. To be acceptable by the church, a theological opinion should neither contradict dogmas nor theologumenas. In orthopraxy, during times

of uncertainty, theological opinions that dominate the contextual worldview often take pre-eminence and are treated with the authority given to dogmas and taboos (Simion 2011:145).

Theologumenas are authoritative doctrines of faith that are widely circulated in the church, but which lack the consensus and the approval of an ecumenical council. The significance of a theologumena lies in the fact that it serves as a basis for church teachings by offering additional ingenuity on a particular dogma, such as, for example, the doctrine of *kenosis* (Evans 2006), which offers insights about the dogma of divine incarnation. Other theologumenas offer explanations about the possible duration of the days of creation, about the nature of the forbidden tree from the paradise and so on (Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:15). In orthopraxy, under conditions of threat, theologumena often become doctrinal bases for local synods either to justify clerical authoritarianism as we will see below, or to justify violence in the name of nationalism and patriotism. Yet, theologumenas are not as simplistic as theological opinions expressed for example by a priest during a sermon, because, through the power of the synod, they gain canonical authority and are treated and possibly implemented with the authority of dogmas.

Dogmas, by their own design (Uthemann 1991a:644), are the most authoritative doctrines of faith, which had been debated and approved during the ecumenical councils (Schmemmann 2003:113–114), and, by virtue of *intercommunion*, are universally enforced within the universal Orthodox Church. Dogmas are non-negotiable precepts that make up the doctrinal structure of the Orthodox Church and had been proclaimed as the official Orthodox teachings by the Ecumenical Councils – that is by the unanimous gathering of all churches organised to approve a particular teaching – being maintained through the perfunctory relationship of intercommunion (Nissiotis 1963:193–222; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:14–15). Once recognised as such, a dogma is a non-negotiable, an unchangeable and a categorical creed. Neither a theologumena, nor a theological opinion can contradict a dogma; unless such theological statements take the risk of being proclaimed heresies. For purpose of illustration, while the creationist dogma rejects the idea that God is the author of evil (as the creation was all good), and evil is treated as the absence of good (Basil 2004:60–61), in orthopraxy, Orthodox leaders often demonise their real or imagined enemies and adopt dualistic perspectives on the meaning of life.

The Orthodox doctrine of God is Trinitarian. God is one in essence, but three in person: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Cutler 1991:2116–2118; Durand 2005; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:118–123). The Father is the Creator, the Son is the Saviour and the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier (Meyendorff 1975:239–250; Stăniloae 2003:44–46). Although apparently superfluous, additional details related to the dogma of the Holy Trinity are highly significant in constructing a pedagogical framework for understanding the Orthodox just war thinking. First of all, this is because various doctrines related to the Trinitarian doctrine often became a *casus belli* (e.g.

Monophysitism, Filioque, Aryanism) and triggered massive conflicts – even wars – which led to the split of Christianity. Second, the Trinitarian doctrine is also a significant source of meaning for defining human dignity and integrity – humanity being created in God’s image (B’tselem Elohim) – as it counters the process of demonising enemies and justifying violence against them.

The Father created the invisible (angelic) world and the visible world in 6 days out of nothing, with the human being set to be ‘the crown of creation’ (George 2013:267–272). Being created *in God’s image*, man was endowed with freedom of will and had the liberty not to sin (Evdokimov 1979:72; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:132–146). Yet, following the devil’s temptation, humanity’s proto-parents, Adam and Eve, committed the sin of disobedience (the *original sin*), which led to the genesis of human suffering, irresponsibility, jealousy and violence, as revealed by the fratricide story of Cain killing his brother Abel (Gn 4:1–15) (Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:161–202).

The Son is the Saviour of humanity from the bondage of the original sin and its consequences applicable to each generation. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Paradise, God assured them that a Redeemer will be sent (Gn 3:14) at the fulfilment of time (Gl 4:4), to discharge them and their posterity from the bondage of sin. The Redeemer was God Himself, in the person of the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

According to Orthodox Christology, to long for salvation and appreciate its value when received, Adam’s posterity had to undergo a process of preparation. Such preparation entailed a combination of suffering and increased awareness of their degenerated condition; an argument which in orthopraxy was often used as a justification of violent punishment. With God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ, new theological dilemmas had to be untangled and reconciled, such as the paradox of the *unmixed, unchanged, undivided and inseparable* union between the divine and the human – or the *theandry* of the *hypostatic union* – a dogma adopted during the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Petrov 2021:804–811). In orthopraxy, theandry is often appealed to whenever narratives of saint-heroes are being rewritten, as in the case of the pictorial narratives of Saint Prince Lazarus, whose memory is celebrated through inter-subjective representations that imbricate the martyrdom of Saint Prince Lazarus with Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Simion 2011:189). At the same time, theandry becomes an obstacle against demonising enemies. Within the development of Christology, one of the main dilemmas was: how was it possible that God would abandon his unthinkable splendour and become a meek human? The dogmatic premise found a resolution into an apparently simple logic known as ‘emptying’ or *kenosis*, which points to a divine decision to temporarily empty oneself from the divine splendour and become a man to empathise with humanity and help the human being become ‘like God’ – a doctrine known as *theosis* (Uthemann

1991b:2069–2070). The incarnation of God the Son into the historical person of Jesus of Galilee also posed questions related to social structure. Such questions found their resolve in Jesus Christ holding the three offices of a *prophet, priest* and *king*, which claimed to embody three main authorities for social order (Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:239–243). Through theological interpretation, these authorities came to justify the necessity for social stability through a hierarchical distribution of power and ecclesiastic authoritarianism. As Uthemann (1991c) explains:

[T]hrough the synthesis of Maximos the Confessor, between the mysticism of Evagrius Pontikos, which sought a direct knowledge of God, and the theology of pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite [...] knowledge of God is mediated through the authority of hierarchies. (p. 2059)

In orthopraxy, the implicit effects of such synthesis emboldened some clergy to see themselves as morally superior and claim special privileges of ecclesiastic power, apostolic succession, infallibility and so on; claims that often generated structural abuse and triggered collective violence, leading up to the splitting of Christianity. In the wrong hands, this fostered the autarchical concentration of power in the senior clergy, to act as a law-maker, law-enforcer and judge. Consequently, autarchy often led to ‘collective’ decisions made as groupthink with negative collective results (Simion 2016:109–111), such as in the case of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who currently goes unchallenged by his own synod about his open support for the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

The third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, the Comforter and the Spirit of Truth promised by Jesus Christ upon his ascent to heavens. The Holy Spirit comforts and guides humanity towards salvation and the attainment of the everlasting life, until Christ’s second coming (Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:258–285). By analogy with Christology, the theology of the Holy Spirit has been rather embryonic and it was solidified in the context of the Trinitarian controversies, where theological disagreements such as the Macedonian (a.k.a. Pneumatomachian) heresy (Haykin 2003:74–79), or the doctrine of Filioque (Siecienski 2010:87–110), yielded episodes of violent physical confrontations. Nevertheless, the believer’s spiritual awareness of the Holy Spirit is paramount in the containment of violence toward the self and its outer projection against the community, particularly by someone in position of power (Scupoli 1952).

Combined with Christology, the theology of salvation led to various forms of ‘theandric’ social structures reflected by ecclesiology, hierarchy and ritual behaviour (Evdokimov 1979:123–166), to forms of devotion, such as the veneration of saints, relics, icons and the cross – including practices of violent asceticism (Talbot 1991:203) – as well as to sacramental theology (Evdokimov 1979:239–298; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:258–364). As salvation is claimed to be granted only within the Orthodox Church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), in orthopraxy such a claim was often abused through unchecked clerical authority used to excommunicate or deny communion

at will to a particular individual or community, and it had also been used as a form of symbolic violence, public shaming and humiliation.

As for eschatology, for the Orthodox, following death, there will be two types of trials: the *individual* trial which takes place immediately after death, when each individual will be judged according to his/her faith and acts (Nedelcu 2015:235–246) and a *universal* trial (Santi 2016:109–125) which takes place at the end of history; a trial that will also consider the historical consequences of one's behaviour: good or bad (BOR 2000:158–180; Conostas 2001:91–124; Todoran & Zăgrean 1991:387–399). In orthopraxy, the awareness of the historical consequences of wrongdoing is often instrumentalised in conflict transformation and peacemaking as a 'memento mori', and as possible redemption.

Why is dogmatic theology relevant to the just war thinking, and how does it reflect in orthopraxy? Just like with any doctrine or ideology, Orthodox dogmatic theology is relevant to just war thinking because it defines, it promotes and it imposes, in a formative way, those beliefs that govern the meaning of existence. Often times, the narratives construed around the fundamental questions of life and death have a sweeping effect over human affairs, particularly in the context of human violence, animal violence and the violence of nature. Each act of violence originating from the nature itself or conducted by one human against another is believed to be the consequence of human sin. When given purpose, violence (offensive or defensive) becomes part of the human pilgrimage from birth, to death and beyond, while corroding human dignity, debilitating social functionality, demoralising one's dreams and wishes, and bringing pain and suffering.

During violent confrontations, one human being demonises another so that violence can be justified and guilt be removed after conducting acts of cruelty. As a countermeasure, the Orthodox dogmatics attempts to provide a leverage that puts all human beings on a foothold of equality. Through a theology of creation, which teaches that the human being was created in God's image, every human being is entitled to benefit from such recognition; weakening therefore the demonising process itself. Furthermore, while a theologumena such as *kenosis* undermines the arrogance of a potentate who conducts dreadful acts of violence, a theologumena such as the *theosis* empowers the meek, by bringing forth a sense of human dignity above and beyond the social status.

At a sociological level, a particular dogma can serve as a group formation mechanism that increases internal cohesion around a shared belief, or it can separate between the true believer and the heretic, between insider and outsider, or between friend and enemy.

Politically, dogmatic unity is not only paramount for pan-Orthodox intercommunion, but it can also lead to building political coalitions by lines of Orthodoxy, or on the contrary, it can generate theological opinions that sustain religious nationalism that divide the wider Orthodox community.

Conclusions

Dogmatic theology provides solid sets of paradigms and insights that yield better understandings of the just war thinking within the context of Orthodox Christianity, while offering the basis for a theology of peace. Dogmatic precepts empower the authority of the clergy when conducting ritual acts of symbolic violence or peace, they transform the individual's conscience through meaning-making and spiritual formation that can either lead to a pacifistic behaviour, or to a victim mentality that fuels anger along with a need for the restoration of one's honour through revenge.

Moral theology and canon law

The second constitutive element of religion revolves around the pursuit of how dogmatic meaning ought to be implemented within the conduct of the individual in society and within the dynamic of the society itself. This is the ethical component of the Orthodox teachings – the applied manifestation of religion itself – organised along the lines of *general* and *special* theological conventions and canon law. It represents habituated patterns of expected behaviour deriving from the golden rule and tailored to the precepts of the Gospel. The logic of moral theology is to connect the theological ideal with social realities for the purpose of building a sanctified moral society. While moral theology declares the vision for a moral society, canon law establishes and maintains guidelines for the functionality of the church as a religious community. Canon law is not hard law in a civil sense, but it is soft law in the sense that it declares legal standards that are mandatory for the institution, and it applies soft forms of castigation within the limits of the religious community.

Key findings and discussion

In a collusive sense, canon law resonated with two prominent Roman jurists; Celsus (AD 129), who defined justice as the art of good of equity – *ars boni et aequi* – and Ulpianus (AD 170–228), who insisted that justice is anchored in the three principles of living honestly, harming none and giving everyone his due. For Ulpianus, *juris praecepta sunt haec: honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, suum cuique tribuere*; that is, 'the teachings of justice are these: to live honestly, not to harm anyone, and give everyone his due' (Floca 1990:23).

In the Roman-Byzantine world, canon law and civil law evolved together, were codified as parallel projects (Schaff 2004:24–35) and mutually influenced and reinforced each other, leading up to the creation of the Byzantine theocracy (Schmemmann 1954:109–123). The Byzantine theocracy was reinforced through canon law which was included into the civil law. Through legislative collections such as *Nomocanons*, *State Codex-es*, *Novelae* (public laws enforcing dogmatic decisions of the church), *Institutiones*, *Ecloga*, *Prohiron*, *Epanagoga*, *Basilicalae* and *Hexabiblos* (Floca 1990:70–150) both the church and the state had each other's backing, with the church ruling over matters of family law (Cummings

1957:977–1007), and with bishops acting as public judges (Floca 1990:299–300)

The canonical literature related to questions of collective violence and just war thinking is intentionally limited due a split legislative jurisdiction between church and state inherited from the Byzantine era. Within this split jurisdiction, the bishops acted as public judges, but their authority was usually limited to family law, whereas the public defence remained under the jurisdiction of the state (Simion 2015:192). As such, the Orthodox does not have a war-specific canonical tradition that would overlap, challenge or otherwise override state legislation on matters of public defence. Consequently, the canonical references to collective violence are fashionably missing, perhaps with two accidental references offered by Saint Athanasius, who stated that ‘it is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy’, and the advisory Canon 13 of Saint Basil the Great, who expressed relative opposition to war and offered penitential guidelines for soldiers who killed in war (Simion 2016:58–59; Viscuso 1995:35–39).

Theological ethics, on the other hand, is organised as general (or theological) ethics and special (or applied) ethics. General theological ethics is more intentional and definitional in content and special ethics bridges dogmatic theology with the lived faith. Together they provide the context in which the universal moral order of creation can be acknowledged – mainly from the structure and the functioning of the universe – order which is to be implemented into one’s spiritual life. In theory, the bloody human violence become nonsensical because reconciliation between God and man was re-established, and the thanksgiving sacrifice is now a ‘bloodless’ sacrifice. However, orthopraxy demonstrates that this theological ideal is regularly abandoned as local churches continue to be fierce supporters of the ‘bloody’ sacrifice by preaching patriotism, by glorifying soldiers who sacrificed their lives defending their country and when prelates such as Patriarch Kirill of Moscow offers instant sainthood to soldiers who died on the battlefield during a war of aggression.

The Orthodox Church recognises that all moral laws are (or ought to be) anchored into the moral conscience – that is, the ever-watchful ‘judge’ from within the human heart – granted by God at creation and meant to persuade the man to do the good and avoid evil. In building a moral conscience, the Orthodox Church often used the power of ‘the imaginal’ as a mechanism for justice and conflict transformation. Whenever fierce disputes arose among the believers, which were to be resolved before a spiritual authority, communication often took place in a spiritual ambience where iconography was present. This is visible particularly on various iconographic representations of the Last Judgment on the outer walls by the entrance into various church buildings, which, apart from depicting the hell and the paradise, the central message is focused on the human conduct (Simion 2019a:115–130). Through such visual narratives, in orthopraxy, the church appealed to the moral conscience of each individual, as it is

obvious from the presence of the *Hetimasia’s Throne*; that is the empty throne of the Judge (Jesus Christ), as a reminder of the impending Last Judgment, when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and sentence their place for eternity.

Special or applied ethics are more directive and prescriptive in content, as it dictates one’s behaviour at the individual level and as part of the community. Individual ethics is deontological in nature, and it focuses upon one’s behaviour and virtues as an expression of faith, with the expectation that one fulfils the duties towards God, the self and the community, through worship (inner and outer), through care for the environment (nature and animals) and through the fulfilment of expected responsibilities toward society (family, state, church). While inner worship involves the development of a moral conscience anchored into the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love (Mladin et al. 2003b:18–49), outer worship revolves around externalities such individual prayer and fasting, participation into the public worship, displays of pietism and religiosity, the honouring of the oath when taken, the avoidance of swearing and so on (Mladin et al. 2003b:49–76). Social ethics is primarily concerned with the duties towards the neighbour as a form of practical demonstration of neighbourly love, justice, socialising, friendship and altruism. Additional duties toward the neighbour include the protection of the neighbour’s spiritual goods such as honour, trust, truth and loyalty, as well as the protection of the neighbour’s material goods and the common good (Mladin et al. 2003b:170–275). Last, but not least, individual ethics includes the duties to protect the environment and the nature, to protect one’s family, church, society and the state (Mladin et al. 2003b:276–347).

Where does a just war thinking fit within the panoply of moral theology and canon law?

From a theological perspective, violence originates in the ancestral sin, which triggered a moral and physical punishment derived from the empirical knowledge of good and evil. It also led to the establishment of the law that prohibited the return to paradise, unless a sacrifice was to be made through atoning blood. Consequently, the understanding of the Orthodox just war thinking within the constraints of theological ethics and canon law is contingent upon the relationship between the concept of sin and the ethics of punishment.

As the Orthodox Church built its own juridical persona, the relationship between sin and punishment was soft by design, and the penalty did not necessarily involve material compensation to the community or to an institution. Sin was not viewed as a crime, rather as a moral disease that needed spiritual cleansing and forgiveness through penitential exercises. As Aristides Papadakis explains, ‘sin was understood as a disease rather than a legally punishable crime’, and ‘the Western juridical notion of sin as a violation of the law [...], is for the most part not a feature of Byzantine penitential literature’ (Papadakis 1991:724). At its core, the

ecclesiastic penitential jurisprudence had been case oriented and contextual – hence *oikonomia* (Alivizatos & Huels 1999:248; Meyendorff 1975:119–122) – and anchored into the principles of *epitimion* and *timoria*. While *epitimion* was soft and oriented toward the individual's spirituality, *timoria* was a more severe form of punishment and was used for severe cases which threatened the stability of the church (Papadakis 1991:723). Therefore, in theory, the Orthodox ethics of punishment is restorative and focused on the spiritual formation of the individual on the assumption that if a society is made up of virtuous and nonviolent individuals, the society itself becomes virtuous and nonviolent.

Conclusions

While, as a theological ideal, Orthodox moral theology is fundamental to the just war thinking because it remains anchored into the fundamental message of the Gospels, orthopraxy is adaptable to the context as led by interests and the survival instinct. Because the ethics of punishment is soft by design, the Orthodox Church ought to take non-aggressive and non-retaliatory stances and restrain particular clergymen who offer their unwarranted support for *casus belli*, particularly when using the power of persuasion and ritual. The core orientation of the Orthodox ethical teachings is restorative, as its focuses on forgiveness, reconciliation and martyrdom. On the other hand, the messianic violence executed against the crucified Christ is viewed exclusively as a unique theological utterance of redemptive sacrifice.

Liturgical theology

In a phenomenological sense, one may note that the most powerful survival instinct of any organised religion is hidden in the ritual. In a functional sense, the Orthodox ritual is elaborately expressed by a rich liturgical ambiance reflected through theological meaning, piety, symbols and symbolic acts. It is the most compelling and dynamic structural feature of Orthodox Christianity. Through overt or covert ritualic socialising, the Church survived oppressive regimes and religious persecution more so than through doctrines or standards of conduct (Simion 2023). As noted on different occasions, a ritual can be viewed as an ambivalent atavistic behaviour endowed with the psychological power to weld together individuals into homogeneous groups, to emotionally manipulate them through motivational symbols and abstractions, to create collective meaning and to concentrate and increase the political power of the ritual performer (Corcinschi 2022:92–93; Simion 2017).

Key findings and discussion

In general, liturgical theology is concerned with the meaning and the manner in which the Orthodox believer worships both in private and publicly.

Tracing its roots in biblical Judaism, the structural and formative expressions of Orthodox worship took shape during early Christianity. As such, it remained anchored into the writings of the New Testament and was dominated by

the spirit of martyrdom. Later, Orthodox worship developed its own spiritual ambience as determined by various historical and socio-political conditions and became dominated by ambivalence. Church–state relations between the Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire generated a mimetic relationship, with the church inheriting much of the secular ceremonial of the Byzantine state.

Beyond historical constants, in its essence, the goal of the Orthodox worship remained focused on the sanctification of the human being, the reconciliation with the divine and the salvation of mankind from under the bondage of sin. To achieve its objectives, Orthodox worship was structured in ways that would mimic dogmatic imperatives so that everything will be 'done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10).

Orthodox worship differentiates between *adoration* and *veneration*. Adoration is a taboo reserved for God alone, and veneration is reserved for saints, relics, sacred objects and the angelic world. While anyone can worship, the sacramental power is structured along hierarchical roles and in correlation with an alleged celestial order (Sheldon–Williams 1964 :293–302). Worship is structural and hierarchical with a mimetic impact upon the imaginal, as embedded in the religious art and sacred objects (Woodfin 2010); the ritual privileges being reserved exclusively to the clergy (Stang 2012:84; Uthemann 1991c:2059–2060). The Orthodox clergy is organised as 'inferior' (reader, cantor and sub-deacon) and as 'superior' (deacon, priest and bishop). Each clerical rank has specific ritual powers and privileges. For instance, while the Eucharist can be celebrated either by the priest or by the bishop, the sacrament of ordination can only be performed by the bishop himself. Liturgical theology is also concerned with forms of worship which define and give structure to the ritual, and it is contingent upon the sacramental power of the clergy performing the ritual.

Apart from meaning derived from the social structure and hierarchical authority, the Orthodox worship demands responsible stewardship over symbols linked to sacred time, space, place, objects and the organisation of public worship itself. Stewardship over sacred time involves the organisation of liturgical time in the forms of church calendar, ecclesiastic year, Sunday worship, event-oriented periods of worship, feast days, fasting days, fasting periods and daily individual prayers in the morning, noon, evening, before and after meals and so forth (Braniște 2002:54–57). Orthodox worship also involves the remembrance of the dead, the veneration of saints, angels, relics, icons and of the holy cross. Stewardship over the sacred space, objects and places, involves the observance of specific canons related to the symbolic architecture of the church buildings, chapels and holy lands. Other canons involve the devotional handling of sacred objects such as icons, liturgical vessels, clergy vestments and service books destined for clergy.

Why is liturgical theology relevant to the just war thinking, and how is it related to collective violence? To answer this, one must look into the ambivalent power of the ritual, as well

as into the taboo of ritual artefacts, which, if desecrated, can trigger violent conflicts.

Rituals are perhaps the most logical elements that can control violence, martyrdom and sacrificial death. They are invariably intrusive and manipulative in spite of their atavism and superfluous realism. They provide a zone where attitudes get contaminated and manoeuvred in either direction of the conflict. Rituals control the transitional moments of life such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death and are inherently therapeutic, while attempting to re-establish moral and spiritual order (Simion 2017). Given the Orthodox liturgical wealth to create a transformative spiritual ambiance, one's sense of empirical reality is temporarily removed, particularly during those rituals designed to heal affliction and help through changes, transition, bereavement and loss or to manipulate one group against another.

Within the spectrum of collective violence and just war thinking, liturgical theology is an intrinsic ingredient simply because rituals are mechanisms designed to control the interaction between human beings, as well as between human beings and the physical and spiritual environment under conditions of fear and uncertainties. As such, Orthodox rituals are designed to appease human violence (invasions, civil war, blessing of national symbols, army, political leaders, soldiers, weapons) and also to appease the violence of nature, with special prayers invoking the divine protection against earthquake, flood, wind, drought, fire, disease, thunder, lightning, wildlife, pandemics and so on (BOR 2006:428–502).

Conclusions

While various implication of worship were sparsely referred to in the context of catechism analysis (and later in the context of dogmatics and ethics), it is imperative to remember that, unlike doctrine and ethics, ritual is the only constitutive element of religion that has the power to end violence. It does so not necessarily through elaborate liturgics, but through the most simplistic and primitive elements of religion, that is sacrifice and scapegoat, performed under its control; and this is what Orthodox Christianity excels in doing, when brokering peaceful solutions (Simion 2017, 2019b). In fact, even the more elaborate forms of liturgical compositions of Orthodox Christianity recognise the power of scapegoating and sacrifice in ending violence – if not death itself – as proclaimed by the paschal hymn, whereby Jesus Christ killed death through his own death; 'trampling down death by death'.

Final conclusions

As this paper is oriented toward a wider readership such as Christian theologians, scholars of religion, ecumenical leaders, strategists and social scientists, the emphasis was placed on the foundational aspects of Orthodox Christianity, and their encounter with the subject of violence. While offering a structural mapping of Orthodox Christianity from

the perspectives of doctrine, ethics and ritual, the paper also flagged the locations of some theological factors that inform the patterns of just war thinking, and how such theological factors fit within the ambiance of rationality, social structure and spiritual meaning.

Because the subject of violence is an open conversation that transcends the Orthodox world, it is important to emphasise the following: First, in research and education it is never demeaning to think in simplistic terms and to treat foundational aspects in an initiatory fashion. This is often a necessary component of well-grounded research. Second, the intersecting trajectories of religion and violence are not to be restricted to complicated theological inter-subjectivities, or to theological conversations marred by impervious layers of hair-splitting verbosity. Third, the mapping of the theological structure of Orthodox Christianity needs to be clear and simple. Fourth, doctrinal terminology must transcend the mentality of guild, by having technical terms defined and used in an intelligible way. Fifth, the relation between orthodoxy and orthopraxy needs to be addressed and anchored not only to probity and common sense, but also to intellectual honesty and courage.

It is the hope of the author that this paper will become helpful to social scientists, religious scholars, strategists and others, as an introductory reading meant to guide the reader in seeing the bigger picture of Orthodox Christianity and violence and in developing an operational use of some of the findings presented herein.

Furthermore, it is important that this mapping be understood as a suggested anchor, as a compass, and as a systematic platform upon which further thematic research can be developed. With such a structural mapping in place, the researcher will gain increased confidence in seeing how multiple theological factors affect spiritual verdicts offered by spiritual leaders in times of ambiguity (Simion 2016:151–172), such as the case of Kirill of Moscow claiming that soldiers who died in the battle field will have their sins forgiven and the blessing weapons as a verdict to a fratricide war (Smith 2022). Such verdicts, as heretical as they might appear theologically (Corcinschi 2022:93), they ought to be understood as political signposts indicating that the Russian aggression against Ukraine will continue.

It is important that the new generation of Orthodox theologians, social scientists and scholars of religion will continue to explore the attrition between the Orthodox faith and collective violence in an integrative manner. Cognitive structural resources such as sacred texts, doctrines, rituals and moral precepts ought to be properly contextualised and analysed, as they help distinguish between dogma and political ideology and between legitimate religious ritual and ritual performed as a political spectacle; while also persuading clerics such as Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to understand the impact of the power that they have, and the power that they lack (Simion 2023).

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Author's contributions

The author declares that he is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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