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CYRIL AND METHODIUS AS PRECURSORS OF THE ‘RUS’ WORLD’: THE IMAGE OF THE SOLUN BROTHERS AND RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM**

Summary: This article analyses the recent Russian Orthodox discourse on the Solun Brothers. This analysis shows, on the one hand, that the politicised interpretation of the mission of Cyril and Methodius is not a recent ideological innovation, but appeals to the same motives that made their cult popular in 19th-century Russian Orthodoxy. On the other hand, the reinterpretation of the meaning of their mission that is currently taking place is acquiring additional political objectives harmonised with those of Russian state ideology, as well as cultural and foreign policy, especially in relation to the post-Soviet area. At the same time, however, the religious significance of Cyril and Methodius is almost disappearing from church discourse and theological reflection. A common element of Russian discourse on the Solun Brothers, in both the 19th and 21st centuries, is ahistoricity, understood as a complete disconnection from the actual historical context in which Cyril and Methodius lived and worked.

Keywords: Russia, Russian Orthodox Church, Russian nationalism, Russo-Ukrainian war, state-church relations.

Introduction

For those interested in Russia, including the state-church relations in that country, 24 February 2022 was a landmark date. Several phenomena that have long roots in the Russian symbiosis of state and church and that developed intensively after 2000, when Vladimir Putin took office as president, have shown the true face and modus operandi of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy. Under the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the open questioning by the Russian authorities of the values typical of Western democratic societies, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an element of Russia’s ‘soft

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power' in the West and as a window into Russian culture and tradition has come to a definitive end. The use of the ROC by the state authorities to promote pro-war sentiment in Russian society and to justify war crimes in Ukraine is the end point of Putin's ecclesiastical policy. Over the two decades of the 21st century, the ROC has become, as it was during the imperial period since the reign of Peter the Great, an element of the state structure entirely subordinated to the implementation of state policy. This is despite the formal constitutional separation of state and church, which was not changed even by Putin's constitutional reform in 2020 when a reference to God was introduced into the Russian constitution.

The close cooperation of the ROC with the state authorities, which manifests itself under conditions of war, does not concern only strictly political issues. The confrontation of contemporary Russia with Ukraine and the Western world is becoming increasingly total. It also reaches into matters of religion, culture, and tradition. The Moscow Patriarchate has also become involved in this confrontation. Issues that at first sight concern other spheres of church activity, such as piety or liturgy, are also being reinterpreted in an ideological key. An example of such an ideologised, politicised, and thus ahistorical reinterpretation is the contemporary understanding of the mission of the saints Cyril and Methodius.

This article analyses the recent Russian Orthodox discourse on the Solun Brothers. This analysis shows, on the one hand, that the politicised interpretation of the mission of Cyril and Methodius is not a recent ideological innovation, but appeals to the same motives that made their cult popular in 19th-century Russian Orthodoxy. On the other hand, the reinterpretation of the meaning of their mission that is currently taking place is acquiring additional political objectives harmonised with those of Russian state ideology, as well as cultural and foreign policy, especially in relation to the post-Soviet area. At the same time, however, the religious significance of Cyril and Methodius is almost disappearing from church discourse and theological reflection. Moreover, a common element of Russian discourse on the Solun Brothers, in both the 19th and 21st centuries, is ahistoricity, understood as a complete disconnection from the actual historical context in which Cyril and Methodius lived and worked.

The interpretation of contemporary Russian Orthodox discourse on the mission of Cyril and Methodius is based primarily on statements by Patriarch Kirill. To better understand their religious and political context, selected texts from the period preceding the Russo-Ukrainian war are also examined, as well as more recent strategic documents and statements. This article consists of three parts. The first presents the political and religious context in which the significance of Cyril and Methodius's mission is being reinterpreted in Russia.

This context consists primarily of strategic documents and statements by representatives of the state authorities, in which Orthodoxy is identified as an intrinsic part of the Russian national identity and the uniform official version of history becomes a national security issue. The second part reveals the particularities of the cult of the saints Cyril and Methodius in Russia. This cult has had a clear political orientation since its beginning in the 19th century and was similarly shaped in the post-Soviet period. The third part shows how Cyril and Methodius have been used in Patriarch Kirill's war propaganda since 24 February 2022.

1. The political and religious context: Orthodoxy in the service of the state

To understand why Russian state propaganda, together with the ROC, is using Cyril and Methodius politically, it is necessary to consider what role the authorities assign the Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia. A strong relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state has been an enduring feature of Russian history, regardless of political conditions. During the so-called synodal period, that is, from Peter the Great's abolition of the patriarch's office until the February Revolution of 1917, the Orthodox Church was part of the state structure. It was under the control of the Holy Synod, headed by the Chief Procurator (Ponomariov 2017, p. 115–118). The activities of the Orthodox Church served the interests of the state. This fact was of considerable importance in spreading the cult of Cyril and Methodius in 19th-century Russia. During the Soviet period, despite the formally secular nature of the state and the religious freedom declared in the Soviet constitutions, state control over the Orthodox Church did not cease. The compromise, proposed by Stalin in 1943, consolidated the new *modus vivendi* of Orthodoxy in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Petrenko 2011, p. 215–217; Ponomariov 2017, p. 125–126). It was allowed to exist under the condition of full state control, loyalty to the authorities, and the absence of any social or political involvement.

In the modern Russian Federation, religious organisations are formally separated from the state and the state is secular. There can also be no binding state ideology (*Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 1993/2020, art. 13–14). Nevertheless, especially since 2000, the relationship between the ROC and the state has evolved significantly. Several legal solutions have been introduced that not only privilege the religious over the non-religious, but also give special privileges to the ROC. Perhaps even more importantly, the state authorities have used appeals to Orthodoxy in ideological campaigns (e.g., the legal restriction

of information on ‘non-traditional models of family life,’ commonly referred to as the ban on gay propaganda) (*Federal’nyy zakon*, 2013; *Prinyaty zakonoprojekty*, 2022) and in restricting the activities of religious organisations independent of the state (e.g., the ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses) (*Svideteli Iegovy*, 2017). The authorities also invoked the support of the Moscow Patriarchate in the case of the 2014 aggression against Ukraine and the military intervention in Syria (Leonid, 2020).

The preparations for war against Ukraine were expressed in the intensification of the use of Orthodoxy by the state authorities in the ideological confrontation with both Ukraine and the West. Legislative changes have also led to the introduction of a de facto official interpretation of history, accepted by the authorities, the questioning of which can be met with criminal sanctions. In this official version of Russian history, the place of Orthodoxy has also been defined. Two documents announced in July 2021 are worth noting at this point.

The first is Putin’s article ‘On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ (Putin 2021). In his historiosophic reflection, Putin attempts to prove that there is no separate Ukrainian nation and that Ukraine as a state was artificially created. Therefore, neither the ethnic distinctiveness of Ukrainians nor the sovereignty of Ukraine as an independent state is justified. Although these elements of the Putin article elicited the most reactions, especially in the context of the subsequent war, this publication also contains other extremely important statements. According to Putin, Orthodoxy is the basis for the cultural, ethnic, and political unity of the whole Rus’, of which modern Russia is the centre. Therefore, Orthodoxy’s role is to bind the Rus’ lands together and strengthen their sense of unity. In Putin’s interpretation, Orthodoxy is a tool for disavowing the separate national identities of Ukrainians and Belarusians and their right to form separate sovereign states. Orthodoxy also serves to strengthen Russia and build the national identity of Russians. In this way, it becomes one of the many elements of state-building and influences society according to the expectations of the authorities.

The second relevant document is the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. It may seem surprising, but it is in this document that, for the first time, a list of traditional spiritual and moral values is formally mentioned, the preservation of which is necessary for the security of the state (*Strategiya* 2021, sec. 91). Russia considers spirituality, morality, and religion to be one of its national security priorities. Thus, any state intervention in the sphere of religion and morality is justified. This document has far-reaching consequences for the role of the ROC in Russia’s public life. The main areas of its activity have become national security issues. On the one hand, it sets severe restrictions for all religious organisations on the content they preach, including doctrine and

moral principles. On the other, the activities of the Orthodox Church are part of national security priorities and, therefore, can be publicly supported by the state.

Russian Orthodoxy, in its mainstream, does not accept any opposition to state power. What it does know is the practice of adapting its activities to the ruler's expectations. It is interesting and instructive to understand that even one of the few examples of such opposition can be easily reinterpreted. St Philip, Archbishop of Moscow, removed from office and later sentenced to death by Ivan the Terrible, has been venerated for centuries as a martyr. When, in 2021, Putin, while presenting his interpretation of Russian history, stated that it was not certain that Philip had indeed been murdered on the orders of the ruler (Akhtyrko, 2021), a representative of the Moscow Patriarchate promptly agreed with this idea and thus undermined the basis of the veneration of St Philip and questioned the unequivocal historical account and liturgical tradition (*V RPTs dopustili*, 2021). This significant example illustrates well the nature of state-church relations in Russia. In 2021, amid preparations for war against Ukraine and with the state liquidating the last independent mass media, Patriarch Kirill and other representatives of the ROC openly expressed support for the authorities, claiming that Russia, as the country of freedom and justice, was the leader of the free world (Kirill 2021). Following the armed aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the ROC has unequivocally supported the war. Patriarch Kirill has described it as a metaphysical war in which Russia fights against the forces of evil (Kirill 2022a), has called for loyalty to Putin (Kirill 2022c), and has promised eternal life in heaven to soldiers who fall in Ukraine (Kirill 2022b). In this way, the rhetoric of the ROC has been completely subordinated to the needs of the authorities. By adapting its message, the ROC became part of a unified state-controlled ideological system. Without this context, it is impossible to understand how the Orthodox Church interprets the meaning of the mission of Cyril and Methodius today.

2. The ideologisation of the mission of Cyril and Methodius before the Russo-Ukrainian war

The significance of the mission of Cyril and Methodius is heavily ideologised in Putin's Russia. In the 'Rus' World' project, an attempt to culturally influence the Russian-speaking population living outside of the Russian Federation, the Solun Brothers were portrayed as the forerunners of Rus' writing (wrongly identified with Russian writing) and thus of Rus' culture (Naryshkina 2013). This culture would be characterised by a particular sublimity and spirituality, in contrast to the decadent West. Language and culture would also unite all Rus'

peoples, characterised by their loyalty to traditional, spiritual values (Kirill 2010). The mission of Cyril and Methodius would thus not only be a mission of a civilising nature. It would be the beginning of the distinctiveness of the Rus' lands, as well as their civilisational independence and cultural unity. However, in order to interpret the mission of the Solun Brothers in this way, it is necessary to ignore the real causes, course, and consequences of their mission. The first step of such an ahistorical reinterpretation of this mission took place in the Russian Empire in the 19th century. The next step is contemporary Russian imperial ideology, preached in the symbiosis between the state authorities and the Moscow Patriarchate.

According to a typical Russian declaration, the ROC venerates 'the saints, equal to the Apostles, brothers Cyril and Methodius, whom the Orthodox faithful of the lands of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and other countries regard as their enlighteners and teachers. In this is expressed this unity of the Orthodox Christians of these countries' (Marsheva and Belyayev 2022). The genesis of the cult of the Solun Brothers in Russia reveals the right direction for the interpretation of this declaration.

In historical and ecclesiastical terms, the mission of Cyril and Methodius was ineffective insofar as it did not lead to the establishment of a Slav church or the valorisation of Slavdom in the Christianity of the time, either Roman or Byzantine. Nor did it contribute significantly to the Christianisation of the Slavs. After the death of Methodius, the mission declined rather quickly (John Paul II, sec. 7). However, the ineffectiveness of the mission of the Solun Brothers understood in this way has enabled the Russian interpretation to place emphasis on their attempt to develop a Slavic script as if it were the crucial aspect of their mission.

In the 19th century, pan-Slavic movements led, mainly in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to a revival of interest in the mission of Cyril and Methodius (Smolucha 2017, p. 201–202). It was attributed, ahistorically, to the aspiration to unify Slavic lands. However, Pan-Slavism as a political and cultural movement in Central Europe could not prove successful because the Slavic nations were too divided politically, culturally, and confessionally to strive for an idealised unity whose patrons were to be saints who had been active in the ninth century. Meanwhile, in Russia, partly also thanks to Slavophilism, imperial ideology appealed to the concept of Slavic unity. This unity would consist of unification in a single Russian Empire (Berdyayev 2007, p. 148–150; Danilevskiy 2018, p. 674–675; Petrenko 2011, p. 191–192).

It is worth noting that this idea has not entirely disappeared in contemporary Russia. Its persistence is evidenced by the views of Aleksandr Dugin, who represents extreme nationalist and imperialist political circles in Russia. When

writing about Poland, he not coincidentally refers to Józef Hoene-Wronski (1776–1853), a Polish pro-Russian intellectual of German-Czech origin. Dugin argues that ‘the path to Polish greatness is to be found in the coming exaltation of the Slavs, but not against Russia, but with Russia, behind Russia and alongside Russia, but realising this requires a break with a deep identity: with *Pan Tadeusz* and *Dziady*, with the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, with the exuberant individualistic “honour” of the Sarmatian nobility’ (Dugin 2018, p. 635), Dugin views the possibility of saving Poland and restoring its identity only by undoing its entire path of social, cultural, political, and religious development and negating its belonging to the world and culture of the West. This thesis encapsulates the modern idea of the Rus’ world and the unity of Slavdom. Only the Russian culture, identified with the Rus’, is supposed to be authentic Slavic culture, and only in unity with Moscow can the Slavs preserve their cultural distinctiveness and spiritual tradition.

From its very beginning, the cult of Cyril and Methodius in Russia has been associated with an imperial reinterpretation of history. Liturgical texts were published, with the permission of the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, on the occasion of the ‘millennium of Russia’ in 1862 (Strickland 2013, p. 5). The following year, the feast of Cyril and Methodius appeared in the Russian Church (Kaverin 2022). This timing is not a coincidence. In imperial Russian historiography, it was assumed (according to the *Novel of Bygone Years*, a chronicle by Nestor from the 12th century) that the Russian state was founded in 862. According to the chronicle, it was in this year that the reign of Rurik (a Varangian or Scandinavian Viking), who was the founder of the Rurikovich dynasty, began. Thus, imperial Russian historiography took over the history of Kyivan Rus’, identifying it with the history of Russia (Kirill 2010). In turn, by linking the rise of the Rus’ with Cyril and Methodius, who had nothing to do with it, the Russian church expressed the main idea of 19th-century Russian imperialism: the control over the Slavic lands, justified by the ideology of the Slavic community.

Under changed conditions but with similar meaning, Cyril and Methodius were used to rebuild Russian imperial ideology in the last months of the Soviet Union. The feast of Cyril and Methodius was established as the ‘day of Slavic writing and culture’ (Kaverin 2022). Since then, the celebration, which has both an ecclesiastical and a state character, has been accompanied by initiatives to promote the unity of the Slavic Orthodox peoples. This involves not only the idea of religious unity but also cultural and political unity. In each case, the centre of this unity should be Russia (Marsheva and Belyayev 2022; Naryshkina 2013). A constant element of these celebrations involves emphasising the superiority of Russian culture over the Western form. To make this possible, as

in imperial times, the true history of Cyril and Methodius and the purpose of their mission are marginalised. Cyril and Methodius are only useful as symbols of Rus' (Russian) cultural distinctiveness.

3. Cyril and Methodius in the statements of the Patriarch of Moscow during the war

The political use of the figures of Cyril and Methodius, which expresses the ideological symbiosis between the Russian authorities and the Moscow Patriarchate, took on additional aspects after Russia's armed attack on Ukraine in 2022. Patriarch Kirill has unconditionally supported Vladimir Putin from the very beginning. Patriotic and nationalist motives dominate the Patriarch's discourse. Although he calls the aggression against Ukraine a 'metaphysical war' waged against the fallen West, he refers much more often to the need to defend the homeland and unite all Russians around Putin.

In this new political and religious context, the feast of Cyril and Methodius was celebrated three months after the beginning of Russian aggression on 24 May 2022. In order to understand how the Solun Brothers are politically exploited in a new reality, two of the Patriarch's statements are worth noting: first, his address after the service in honour of the saints Cyril and Methodius, celebrated at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour; second, his speech at a concert in Red Square organised by the state and Moscow authorities.

In his address after the concluding service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (Kirill, 2022d), Patriarch Kirill emphasised that the saints Cyril and Methodius gave the Slavs the foundation of the Orthodox faith, which is the source of their unity. In his interpretation, the mission of the Solun Brothers obliges the Orthodox Slavs to unity. This refers both to the unity of the episcopate and to the unity of all believers. The political context of this statement is clear. With regard to episcopal unity, the Patriarch's statement explicitly referred to the need for the episcopate of the Russian church in Ukraine (formally called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate) to maintain unity with the Moscow Patriarch. After the Russian military aggression, there were numerous voices within the Russian church in Ukraine about the need to separate from Moscow, especially since Patriarch Kirill openly supported the war. The tendencies towards independence were also driven by political pressure, including attempts in the Ukrainian Supreme Council (Verkhovna Rada) to ban religious organisations whose leadership is located in Russia, which is recognised as an aggressor state (*Proyekt Zakonu pro zaboronu 2022*; *Proyekt Zakonu pro zabezpechennya 2022*). The bishops of the Russian church in Ukraine also

officially declared their independence from Russia (*Postanova Soboru*, 2022). Against this background, evoking the figures of Cyril and Methodius, the Moscow Patriarch stated that the Church in Ukraine was 'ours', that is, an inseparable part of the Russian Church.

The interpretative context for the Patriarch's pointing to Cyril and Methodius as patrons of unity is also provided by the official Russian ideology, embodied in Putin's repeatedly stated view, both before and after the war, that Russians and Ukrainians are a single people and that the war was intended to free Ukrainians and return them to full unity with Russia, the sole heir of the historical Rus'.

In his speech at the Red Square concert (Kirill, 2022e), Patriarch Kirill drew attention to other issues. According to the official Russian interpretation, Cyril and Methodius gave rise to a distinct Rus' culture. In the Patriarch's interpretation, under the conditions of war against Ukraine and confrontation with the West, the Russians are returning to the sources of their culture and identity. Russia's sovereignty, distinctiveness, and cultural independence, supposedly originating in the mission of the Solun Brothers, determine Russia's spiritual strength and invincibility. The Patriarch claims that Russians are fighting for the independent and sovereign development of their homeland. The basis of this independence is the unique Russian spirituality, language, and culture.

Such formulations indicate the Patriarch's attempt to isolate the mission of Cyril and Methodius from a strictly religious context. They are, in his view, models of cultural distinctiveness and superiority. Any actions aimed at demonstrating this Russian distinctiveness and superiority, including military action, can therefore be interpreted as a continuation of the mission of the Solun Brothers. For these reasons, the celebration of their feast day coincides, according to the Patriarch's rhetoric, with the encouragement of Russians to become even more involved in the war against Ukraine.

Conclusion

An examination of how the cult of the saints Cyril and Methodius arose and developed in Russia provides grounds for pointing out the peculiarities of Russian Orthodoxy. Whatever the political circumstances, it is subordinate to the state and, to the extent of its abilities, supports the domestic and foreign policy objectives indicated by the authorities. This was the genesis of the 19th-century cult of the Solun Brothers, intended to provide an ideological justification for Russian imperialism and the drive to subjugate the Slavic

peoples. The content of the celebrations in post-Soviet Russia, especially after 2000, when Vladimir Putin took power, is similar.

In the official cult of Cyril and Methodius, references to their actual biography and the causes, course, and effects of their mission in Slavic lands have almost disappeared. This ahistorical political and ecclesiastical discourse reduces the mission of the Solun Brothers to the creation of a Slavic alphabet, which would supposedly be the basis of a distinct, spiritual culture superior to that of the West. The unity of the Slavic peoples, based on the unity of the alphabet and the Orthodox faith, is, in the Russian interpretation, a fundamental task resulting from the mission of Cyril and Methodius. However, this unity is always understood, both on a spiritual and political level, as unity with Moscow. Only in unity with Moscow can the Slavs preserve their own identity and develop their cultural heritage.

The cult of Cyril and Methodius in Russia abstracts from the figures of these ‘Saints Apostles of the Slavs.’ Instead, under the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war, it is an effort to sacralise ‘Great Russian nationalism’ and to negate the right of other Slavic peoples to their own culture, language, and traditions.

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Cyryl i Metody jako prekursorzy „ruskiego” świata: obraz Braci Sołuńskich i rosyjskiego imperializmu

Streszczenie: W artykule przedstawiono analizę jednego z nowszych dyskursów, jaki toczy się w optyce rosyjskiego prawosławia na temat Braci Sołuńskich. Z jednej strony dostrzegamy upolitycznioną interpretację misji Cyryla i Metodego, co nie jest ideologiczną innowacją, lecz odwołuje się do tych samych motywów, które spopularyzowały ich kult w dziewiętnastowiecznym prawosławiu rosyjskim. Z drugiej strony reinterpretacja znaczenia ich misji, która obecnie się dokonuje, nabiera dodatkowych cech politycznych odpowiadających celom rosyjskiej ideologii państwowej oraz polityki kulturalnej i zagranicznej, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do obszaru poradzieckiego. Jednocześnie religijne znaczenie Cyryla i Metodego niemal znika z dyskursu kościelnego i refleksji teologicznej. Wspólnym elementem rosyjskiego dyskursu na temat Braci Sołuńskich, zarówno w XIX, jak i XXI w. jest ahistoryczność rozumiana jako całkowite oderwanie od rzeczywistego historycznego kontekstu, w którym Cyryl i Metody żyli i działali.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Rosyjska Cerkiew Prawosławna, nacjonalizm rosyjski, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, relacje państwo–Kościół.