

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

worried them, but because Al-Baghadi rightly saw that once people realized that the mullahs were lying to them about something so easily verifiable while using the Quran as justification, they would cease to believe not just in the mullahs, but in the Quran and ultimately in God.

I mention this story because I think it speaks to what is at the heart of the current problem for Christianity writ large within the landscape of the global culture war. For too long now, institutional Christianity has asked people to believe observably untrue things related to so-called "cultural issues," particularly those concerning gender and sexuality, and in doing so has undermined its authority with respect to metaphysical truth. Which is a shame, since the heart of the Christian message is rightly understood to be in eternal metaphysical truths, not in ever-changing cultural norms. By becoming the guardian of very recent worldly traditions, the Church has (one would imagine inadvertently) hindered its ability to proclaim the cosmic reality of the gospel, the good news of Christ incarnated, crucified, and resurrected.

Below, I am going to focus on one favorite culture war issue, homosexuality, within the Orthodox Christian tradition, with the understanding that a similar analysis, making exceptions for historical and cultural nuance, might be applied across a host of issues that have become fodder in the culture wars. I have chosen homosexuality, and particularly same-sex relationships, as the exemplar topic in part because of the sheer hysteria with which it has been approached and in part because of the clear and obvious chasm between official church teaching on the subject and observable data.

I have also decided to focus on the issue of homosexuality in particular because of the incredibly pernicious way in which anti-LGBT sentiment has been deployed by Eastern Christians in defense of some of the most dangerous and egregious geopolitical positions in the world today. From Patriarch Kirill of Moscow's inexplicably citing Pride parades as justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine to Serbian bishops' tying the celebration of EuroPride in Belgrade to religious-nationalist sentiments that seek the further ethnic cleansing of Kosovo to the Holy Synod of Orthodox Church in America's courtship of American Christian Nationalists vis-à-vis their increasingly ardent anti-LGBT agenda, antagonism toward LGBT people is the smokescreen through which a host of other horrific ideas are disseminated. This reality in and of itself (even apart from very real humanitarian and pastoral concerns) should compel us to examine Orthodoxy's increasingly strident position on this issue in the context of global culture wars.

As a final bit of housekeeping and in the interest of transparency, let me be clear up front, because I know that the very nature of the present debate requires this kind of "disclaimer": I do not believe that homosexual orientation nor same-sex relationships are inherently sinful, but instead, like heterosexual orientation and relationships, are morally neutral in themselves and depend on a host of factors, including consent, respect, and love. It is my position for a variety of reasons (some of which, though not all, I will outline below) that historical and contemporary objections to and prohibitions against homosexual identity and relationships are exclusively the products of culturally-bound misogyny, xenophobia, and

prejudice that do not hold up to logical scrutiny nor earnest theological inquiry. Moreover, to quote the late Anglican South African archbishop and anti-apartheid activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “I would not worship a God who is homophobic.”

But how did homophobia become a fundamental characteristic of the Divine within the popular mind, on par with omniscience? The culture wars and their obsessive focus on gender and sexuality have come to dominate religious discourse to such a degree that it is hard to remember a time when this was not true. Historically, though, the debates that animated the Christian world centered around metaphysical topics, like the nature of Christ and the mechanics of salvation. While early Christian communities did experience conflicts around cultural issues surrounding everything from circumcision to the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, as recorded in the Book of Acts and the letters attributed to St. Paul, the general orientation of the early church was to seek solutions that mitigated cultural differences and disagreements in order to assure Christian unity around metaphysical truth. Notably, when the First Ecumenical Council met at Nicaea, moral, cultural, and ethical issues had no place within the debate. The Nicene Creed does not make any ethical claims, but instead requires believers to make professions of theological truths. At what was arguably the moment of Christianity’s greatest triumph—its elevation as the imperial faith—the bishops of the Church focused their attention on metaphysics, not ethics.

In fact, one might argue that the Church has only started seeking to act as moral arbitrator in situations where the Church is on the defensive,

in periods of history in which political and social power are seen as slipping from ecclesiastical hands. In the interest of space, I will not bore you with supporting examples from medieval Christianity, because the most important moment of crisis for Orthodox Christianity came at the dawn of modernity. Modernity, with its focus on materialism, rationalism, and individualism, has been a challenge for all the Abrahamic faiths, a challenge exacerbated in the Orthodox context by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453.

By the early nineteenth century, in the wake of revolutionary fervor, all the monotheistic faiths saw themselves forced to confront a world in which their basic paradigms seemed increasingly irrelevant. Fundamentalism and scriptural literalism in both Christianity and Islam were born in this historical moment, in response to scientific rationalism and modern materialism. All the Abrahamic faiths increasingly emphasized ethics as a litmus test for membership within the faith community. Ancient and medieval faith communities had prioritized belief as the tests of fellowship, with inconsistent concern for individual behavior. But beginning in the nineteenth century behavior increasingly became the standard for belonging. One example from the American Protestant context is Teetotalism, a complete abstinence from alcohol, which became a significant obligation of membership in many churches. The prohibition against alcohol, however dubious from a Biblical or theological perspective, set these believers apart from newly-arriving Catholic immigrants, who were routinely demonized in the press for their alleged heavy drinking. It also became the foundation for a

political movement, Prohibitionism, that ultimately managed to amend the US Constitution to ban alcohol. In the teetotaler movement we can recognize a pattern at the origins of the contemporary culture wars, as an issue of cultural identity was imbued with theological significance and then returned to the secular political arena. In a similar way, the sexual revolution of 1960s and 70s placed issues of gender and sexuality into the cultural zeitgeist (though trouble was long brewing for traditional norms around gender and sexuality, as discussed below) and thus rendered them vulnerable to the “teetotaler effect.”

The Orthodox world came a bit late to these issues, as it so frequently does. It is only since the early 1990s that Western Christian debates surrounding gender and sexuality have been imported into Orthodoxy. This has happened primarily in two ways: the conversion of conservative, culture war-minded people from Western Christian traditions and the post-Soviet engagement of American Evangelicals with the Russian Orthodox Church. I and others have written about this phenomenon extensively elsewhere so I will not belabor the point here. Suffice to say that the cultural-theological-political pattern pioneered by American Protestants in the nineteenth century is now deeply rooted in Orthodox discourse and culture.

According to a much-quoted aphorism, “Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” If this is true, then when power dynamics shift, we should expect sex to change as well. Indeed, the sexual revolution was not sudden, but can be understood as the culmination of events beginning with the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution

decoupled economic production from the biological family and made the individual the locus of his own economic fortunes. As a consequence, it was no longer necessary to control sexual behavior—or really reproduction—as a basic economic necessity. Today everyone, regardless of identity or desires, enjoys more sexual choice than our forebearers could ever dream of. We are far less beholden to the obligation to marry an economic partner and produce workers and heirs. Under these circumstances, it turns out that the spectrum of acceptable romantic and sexual desire can be greatly expanded in both theory and practice. This expanded experience and the observable results that emerge from it further call into question the historical taboos that are now being broken.

Nothing shatters the paradigms of old sexual and gender taboos and norms like the normalization of gay and lesbian people and their relationships, a process which is thus uniquely threatening to so-called traditionalists who seek to prevent or undo the changes to these norms happening all around us. Consequently, just as abstinence from alcohol came to signal the nativist Protestant identity of some nineteenth-century Americans, a refusal to accept gay and lesbian people as such has become a chief identity marker of many traditionalist Christians.

In the Orthodox context, the most visible recent example of this has been Patriarch Kirill’s truly absurd 2022 Forgiveness Sunday sermon, in which he bizarrely claimed that the war in Ukraine was necessary to prevent “gay parades.” Along the same lines, the Serbian bishop Nikanor (Bogunović) has urged the faithful to take up arms against EuroPride, scheduled



Russian law enforcement officers block participants in the St. Petersburg Pride rally in 2019. Photo: Anton Vaganov/Reuters

to be held in Belgrade in September 2022. This statement is particularly dangerous considering that there have been plenty of instances of violence at Serbian Pride events over the past twenty years. And lest one think that this is only a problem of bishops tucked away in formerly communist states in Eastern Europe, Archbishop Michael (Dahulich) of the Orthodox Church in America—a native of Johnson City, New York—is said to have received a standing ovation when he introduced what would ultimately become his jurisdiction’s blanket attempt to silence all discussion about homosexuality at the OCA’s All-American Council in 2022. The scapegoating of LGBT people is now everywhere in traditionalist discourse, both in the Orthodox world and beyond, whether in internet chatter about “groomers” or in public comments around monkeypox that suggest absolutely nothing was learned during the worst days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Patriarch Kirill uses Pride parades as justification for the bombing of maternity hospitals

(hospitals filled with Orthodox Christian mothers and infants, by the way). To believe that this situation is pastorally or theologically sustainable borders on insanity.

Gay people are not mythical creatures; they are in our midst and many of us are well acquainted with same-sex couples. These relationships have the potential to quickly reveal not only the contemporary hysteria but historical prohibitions as groundless, absurd, and frankly cruel.

I know this in no small part because I grew up in a community in which the shift away from traditional marriage had only taken place a couple of generations before. Many people my grandparents’ age, including many beloved great-aunts and uncles, were in actual, pre-Industrial Revolution traditional marriages—that is, marriages arranged by families and aimed at securing progeny and economic stability. In these marriages, women were nearly always stripped of any choice or power over their

lives and bodies. They could not have been more different in its norms and expectations than a “love match” like my maternal grandparents’ marriage, as many of those aunts and uncles sometimes derisively pointed out. And my grandparents’ marriage, I am not afraid to say, was better than those traditional marriages I saw all around them. This was particularly true for my grandmother, who was not expected to play the role of servant, child, or broodmare; who was treated by her husband as a whole person; whom he not only loved, but liked and respected; who, no matter what happened in her life, at least was allowed the knowledge that she chose her life. I saw that. I observed the difference and discerned the moral distinction. No amount of traditionalist protestation could convince me that this was untrue.

In the same way, I have seen plenty of marriages between people of the same sex that are, well, a lot like my grandparents’ marriage—which is to say, extremely good. I have known and loved gay and lesbian people living observably good lives. I have seen it, and I am guessing so have many of you reading this. Which is why it should ring very hollow when Patriarch Kirill tells you that we have to kill babies in Ukraine to stop those people and those marriages from existing. And it should also ring hollow in less extreme cases. When you are told that gay people and gay relationships are innately disordered and depraved, that shouldn’t just

offend your sense of decency; that should offend your sense of reality. And you should not surrender your experience of reality to anyone.

There are perfectly good historical reasons that have led us to this moment, when one’s views on LGBT people and same-sex relationships have become a kind of litmus test for a certain kind of Christian identity. But that doesn’t mean we are absolved of our responsibility to challenge what has become sheer madness at this point. This is particularly true because, for Orthodox Christians, homophobia is our gateway drug, the acceptable prejudice that frequently leads us into horrific and dangerous company. Challenging homophobia in our communities and Church is perhaps the single most significant thing we can do to prevent the increasingly slide of Orthodoxy into a bastion of the far-right. The global culture wars have managed to make many monsters, and it is imperative that we keep those monsters from over taking the Church. Because, when people weigh the untrue things the bishops are saying about homosexuality against the observable data of their own lives, they will not cease to believe what they have seen nor will they just disbelieve the bishops. The lies of our clerics and laity will be understood to be the lies of God. If we do not cease to lie about LGBT people, their lives, and relationships, we will seem to make Christ a liar, and that is a sin—no theological debate required. ✱



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