

# Being Christian in a fragile world

## Revisions of Peace Ethics in the Face of the Ukraine War

by Markus Vogt, LMU

The brutal war of aggression on Ukraine, which the Russian president personally pushed forward without any external cause, was not only a violation of the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation, but was at the same time an attack on the order of values of Europe and the United Nations. The people of Ukraine are resisting Russian superiority with great determination, sacrifice, and the irrepressible courage of despair. Under this impression, a wave of worldwide solidarity, unprecedented in history, was formed, underpinned by political, economic and cultural sanctions. Russia massively harms itself by attacking Ukraine and is punished with international isolation. However, the unity of the international response should not obscure the fact that the assistance as a whole has a mixed record: for example, arms deliveries from Germany have come too late to protect the population of Ukraine effectively, if that has ever been possible at all.

We should have been vigilant much earlier. Already for many years and recently bundled in his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (July 12, 2021), the Russian president, who sometimes acts as an amateur historian, has denied Ukraine's right to exist as an autonomous state and declared a Russian hegemony.<sup>1</sup> As we see in retrospect, it was negligent not to take the threat more seriously. Given Putin's offensive contempt for international law and his explicit goal of weakening European unity, it was irresponsible to depend on Russian energy supply and to indulge in the illusions of an appeasement policy that Putin has exploited in order to systematically expand his regime's power on international scale and overtly and covertly destabilize Western democracies.

It is painful to watch idly as the Ukrainian people's very existence is threatened and to realize that they will foreseeably have to endure even more immeasurable suffering and possibly the loss of their sovereignty. However, it remains prudent for NATO and the United States not to intervene directly in the conflict. Not least because of uttered threats of nuclear expansion of the conflict, this would have incalculable risks worldwide that would be irresponsible to take. The special fund of 100 billion euros, planned to be given by the federal government to the Bundeswehr as an additional budget, is a necessary step so that we will not be completely helpless in the future if our own country is threatened. It is also ethically necessary in order to be able to make the necessary contribution to a new security architecture after the war in Ukraine. The cross-party consensus on this, which came about quickly even though it requires the Greens and the SPD to leave behind outdated peace policy convictions, is also to be welcomed from the perspective of Christian peace ethics. However, it will take a long time before the German military is sufficiently equipped to meet the complex new challenges, and beyond money, it needs new impulses

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Luchterhandt, Otto (2022): Russia's Hostage. The Military Encirclement of Ukraine and International Law; <https://zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/blog/russlands-geisel/> (accessed 20.02.2022).

that are forward-looking in terms of strategy and peace policy, as well as a strengthening of European cooperation. A necessary component of the new security architecture is to increase energy resilience and reduce vulnerability to cyberattacks.

As a representative of the subject of Christian social ethics, I ask myself how much my peace-ethical reflections of the past years as well as the guidelines of Catholic social teaching are still worth in view of the new threat scenario. Some ethical theories were characterized by the idea that war in Europe was merely a phenomenon of the dark past. A view that, from today's perspective, must be considered naive and outdated. The experience of the last few weeks has revealed a gap in the ethical debate, which forces us to quickly make up for these theoretical deficits and to give peace and security ethics a much greater weight within theology as well. The peace-ethical consequences of being a Christian in a fragile world need to be explored anew. However, there are also aspects of Christian peace ethics that seem topical, especially in the light of recent events, and are worth recalling. The conviction, for example, that the decisive threat to our peace is being negotiated on the eastern borders of Europe, and that the people there are on the front lines defending our values of freedom, human rights, tolerance, and democracy,<sup>2</sup> motivated me to become involved in Ukraine many years ago. The example of the current war teaches us painfully that democratic values must be defended proactively and existentially, because authoritarian regimes and parties have been gaining strength around the world for roughly a decade. Media manipulations through post-factual forms of communication show their contempt for the truth. Today it is clearer than ever: We need a democracy that is able to defend itself both internally and externally.

Papal teaching letters also contain aspects of current relevance. In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which Pope Francis published in October 2020,<sup>3</sup> and which was unjustly hardly perceived as an encyclical on peace, the pope pointed out forcefully and with foresight that world peace was acutely endangered. He saw the "policy of isolation" in its many manifestations as a portent of the gradual slipping into the danger of a third world war. Even the possession of nuclear weapons, and even more so the threat to use them, he judged to be morally reprehensible. In my opinion, his pacifist rejection of any kind of warfare does not stand up to the necessity of defensively opposing the excesses of armed violence and aggression.<sup>4</sup> At present, however, our hands are largely tied for direct military intervention, which would make NATO a party to the war outside its alliance territory, due to the unpredictability of a worldwide escalation of conflict up to a nuclear confrontation, for which the threshold has become lower due to the variety of "small" nuclear weapons.

The encyclical also contains considerations that can point the way, especially now, in the arduous search for ways out of the spirals of violence. It begins with a sober analysis of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Biser, Eugen (2003): *Wege des Friedens*, Augsburg; Vogt, Markus/Küppers, Arnd (eds.) (2021): *Proactive Tolerance. The Key to Peace*, Baden-Baden.

<sup>3</sup> Franziskus (2020): *Fratelli tutti. Enzyklika über Geschwisterlichkeit und soziale Freundschaft* (Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls 227, hg. vom Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz), Bonn.

<sup>4</sup> On the interpretation of *Fratelli tutti* as an encyclical on peace, with its strengths and weaknesses, cf. Vogt, Markus (2021): *Die Botschaft von Fratelli tutti im Kontext der Katholischen Soziallehre*, in: *MThZ* 72/2021, 108-123.

situation: War is "not a ghost of the past, but has become a constant threat" (FT 256). According to Pope Francis' assessment, the end of the Cold War was not sufficiently used to create lasting peace and to advance the architecture of a new world order through, among other things, UN reforms. The guiding standard for the pope - as it was for John Paul II - is the principle of the human family, which commits to cross-border fraternity, relativizes the category of the nation and must be secured through a defense of universal human rights. Especially against the background of many kinship and friendship relations between Ukrainians and Russians, as well as the common Christian faith, the war is completely absurd.

Christian peace ethics can be summarized under the paradigm of Just Peace, on which the German bishops published a groundbreaking paper in 2000<sup>5</sup>: According to this, weapons alone can win a war, but never peace. What is also needed is the constant vigilance and early recognition of violence and human rights violations wherever they occur in everyday life. Diplomatic and civil society initiatives of resistance at all levels<sup>6</sup> are equally indispensable as well as a demythologization of supposed justifications of war through nationalist identity constructions. Where democracy and the rule of law are weakened and the (semi-)public is manipulated in the digital world, early criticism is needed, as nationalist-aggressive thought patterns can emerge in their shadows. Just peace also includes avoiding generalizing images of the enemy, and always seeking anew the power of reconciliation. "Just peace" is not a pacifist paradigm, but a broadening of the view to the diversity and interconnectedness of military and civil society arenas of the struggle for peace and security.<sup>7</sup>

In the struggle for peace and security, each actor can and must make its own specific contribution. Each has a different radius of action, which indicates the possibilities for action.

From the outside, i.e., through the direct intervention of other states, Putin can only be stopped to a very limited extent. More importantly, it will depend above all on the behavior of the Russian people. The public criticism of the war of aggression by 7,000 Russian scientists, who describe it as unjust and senseless and thus take a high personal risk, is a sign of courage. A weighty voice could also come from the Russian Orthodox Church, whereby a distinction must be made between the official church (i.e. Patriarch Kyrill as well as the majority of his bishops) and the church base (many priests and millions of faithful who do not want war). Patriarch Kyrill wants even more than Putin to force Kiev into the Russian state structure, because Kiev has a high symbolic value for him as the center of Russian Orthodoxy. The concept of a "Russian World" or the first draft of it did not come from Putin's pen, but was written by the patriarch. On March 6, to legitimize the war, he preached that Ukrainians had been oppressing and killing Russians in the Donbass

---

<sup>5</sup> Die deutschen Bischöfe (2000): Gerechter Friede, hg. vom Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Die deutschen Bischöfe 66), Bonn.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schellhammer, Barbara/Goerdeler, Berthold (eds.) (2020): Bildung zum Widerstand, Darmstadt.

<sup>7</sup> On the contours of Christian peace ethics from a social-ethical perspective, cf. Bock, Veronika et al. (eds.) (2015): Christliche Friedensethik vor den Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts, Baden-Baden; Vogt, Markus (2020): Versöhnung als Prinzip christlicher Friedensethik, in: Amosinternational 3/2020, 3-9.

for eight years, and that the liberation of Russians living there and a defense of the Orthodox world against the influence of the supposedly morally decadent West were imperative.<sup>8</sup> Of the Orthodox Church's faithful, on the other hand, many on social media are asking Ukrainians to forgive them for the war that is bringing much suffering upon them.<sup>9</sup> After all, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine did not oppose the demonstrators during the Maidan revolution in 2013.<sup>10</sup> This was an important sign of hope.

However, the intra-Orthodox conflict is deep. By declaring the independence (autocephaly) of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and supporting it through Patriarch Bartholomaios, Cyril sees his claim to power and primacy threatened. In 2000 and 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church published a social doctrine that can be read—at least in Patriarch Cyril's interpretation—as a declaration of war against human rights, democracy, and Western values of freedom, and which differs significantly from the pan-Orthodox social doctrine published in 2018 under the leadership of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.<sup>11</sup> Patriarch Cyril is very close to Putin. He sees his role as supporting him in the war against Ukraine to the best of his ability. According to his understanding of the "symphony" between state and church, he will never criticize Putin. Conversely, the Russian Orthodox Church also has a key importance for Putin. In the end, it is a religious-mythically underpinned identity-political illusion to which the Russian president adheres as a supposed justification for the war and which he and Cyril propagate. Religious enlightenment is necessary. It would be a liberating blow of inestimable effect if as many Orthodox believers as possible would emancipate themselves from this and profess the primacy of peace as a central Christian duty. Many bishops have already removed Cyril from the High Prayer, which, according to Orthodox understanding, is tantamount to a denunciation of communion.<sup>12</sup>

International forces have been barred from direct influence through military intervention, but they have not remained inactive. The economic, financial, sporting, scientific and cultural sanctioning of Russia at all levels could have a far-reaching effect on Russian society through the comprehensive variety of measures. It may not stop the violence immediately or in the short term, but it will weaken what until recently was Putin's strong support in Russia and around the world. Russia's isolation in the UN General Assembly was an important signal of new global unity among the international community in defense of human rights and the right to state sovereignty. But by no means all states currently support the isolation of Russia (see map).

---

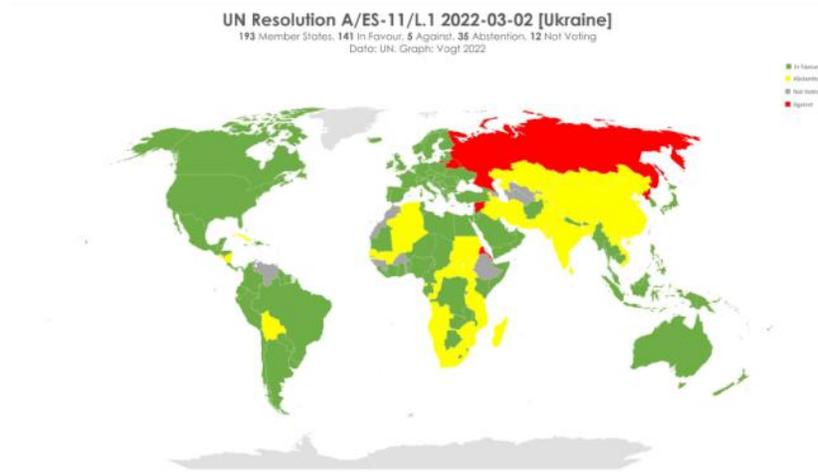
<sup>8</sup> <https://www.kath.ch/newsd/moskauer-patriarch-kyrill-krieg-soll-glaeubige-vor-gay-parade-schuetzen/> (accessed 09.03.2022).

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank my Ukrainian doctoral student Michael Fetko for oral information on this.

<sup>10</sup> On the Maidan Revolution, also called the "Revolution of Dignity," see Andrukhovych, Yuri (ed.) (2014): *EuroMaidan. What is at stake in Ukraine*. Berlin.

<sup>11</sup> Wissenschaftliche Enquete der Stiftung PRO ORIENTE (2003): *Die Sozialkonzeption der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche. Ein Dokument der sozialen Verantwortung*, Vienna, esp. 25-33; the documents, which were also published in German by, among others, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, certainly contain many elements that are to be welcomed from the point of view of Catholic social ethics; however, these are often not taken up in practice and are covered up by other statements. In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church advocates a "cultural reservation" for human rights, which undermines their peace-ethical function of understanding across cultural and national borders.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.die-tagespost.de/politik/die-wut-auf-patriarch-kyrill-waechst-art-226333?fbclid=IwAR2t-IJP1EWjwWtpC0Fkfaw9gweFo1OMZVzBZQp6sphfwXMMdRvabChTAdU> (accessed 09.03.2022.)



World map showing the UN vote on Ukraine: large parts of the world voted with green, but by no means all (Source: Matthias Theodor Vogt)

It remains to be seen how India, which is dependent on Russian arms supplies, will behave, and how China will act, which, in view of its own genocidal human rights violations against the Tibetans, the population of Inner Mongolia and the Uyghurs, shies away from condemning Russia and which could massively weaken the effect of the sanctions through financial and economic cooperation with Russia. Putin has too often experienced that economic interests have made many actors overlook his actions, which are contrary to international law. This was the case with the annexation of Crimea and the covert low-intensity war in the Donbass, as well as with his support for criminal dictators like Assad in Syria or Lukashenko in Belarus. Freezing Russian accounts in Swiss banks was an important step. But Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system has so far been only half-hearted. Germany must accelerate the energy turnaround and reexamine the tensions between energy security, climate protection and social compatibility in order to quickly become independent of Russian gas.

European societies are making their solidarity clear through a high level of neighborly assistance. The willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and to openly welcome the growing influx of migrants - especially in Poland - is overwhelming. However, in the light of the immeasurable suffering and military atrocities in Ukraine, this is cold comfort. It is a bad sign that, after its voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons in the Budapest Memorandum (1994), Ukraine must experience now being so helplessly at the mercy of violence and not receiving sufficient protection from the international community. It would have required, for example, precautionary action on the part of Germany to supply defensive weapons and food depots for the large cities that are now being surrounded, as well as assistance with military training.

The challenge of these days makes clear that it is not just a matter of taming the flagrant war and ending the suffering and death in Ukraine. Rather, it is a beacon of current upheavals that demand intense ethical reflection. We live in a time of multiple crises and accelerated change in a multipolar world that is increasingly characterized by a highly complex "evolution of violence"<sup>13</sup>. In the process, familiar patterns of order in politics, the economy and society are losing their validity, without the future order already being discernible. In response to the resulting uncertainty, the striving for security and resistance to crises on the part of individuals and societies is becoming a central ethical and political goal. At the same time, global society cannot remain indifferent to changes in the international order. Not every change is to be tolerated. Such behavior would be a misunderstanding of tolerance. What is necessary is to observe tolerance in its three basic dimensions<sup>14</sup> in all changes: Passive tolerance as a fundamental renunciation of violence and the effort to resolve conflicts primarily by means of diplomacy. Active tolerance as the defense of human rights and freedoms, which can also mean providing military support, because democracy must be defensible. Proactive tolerance to save spaces of dialogue and trust between peoples and to expand exchanges between civil societies and, last but not least, religious communities and to try everything to make understanding possible.

Since the Ukraine conflict is part of a multi-layered struggle for a new world order, it cannot be resolved in the long run without the creation of an international peace and security order appropriate to today's challenges and lines of conflict. The reform of the Security Council, which no longer adequately reflects the balance of power in the world and is misused or blocked by the powerful as an instrument of unilateral dominance policy by means of their veto power, is of primary importance here. The partial withdrawal of the U.S. as a world power has created a vacuum that must be compensated for by a consolidation of the manifold supranational linkages.<sup>15</sup> This could also include a European Security Council to increase the EU's ability to act. The various institutions involved in security policy (including the UN, NATO, OSCE, and the EU) must be coordinated in a complementary manner.

Lasting peace requires forgiveness and reconciliation, including with one's own history. The historical dimension of today's conflicts is made clear by the fact that narratives that clash with history have been used to construct a rationale for war. It is clear from these narratives that the Russian president and a probably significant part of the Russian population lack reconciliation with the disintegration of the USSR. The sense of grievance from perceived degradation and non-recognition as a world power is the driving force behind the current aggression. Given the disastrous consequences of the Ukraine war for everyone, including Russia, which is harming itself more than anyone else could have done, the grievance is initially intensified. Overcoming it will certainly take a long time. Here the churches and religious communities have an original task, since reconciliation

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Münkler, Herfried (2017): *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, Reinbek.

<sup>14</sup> Vogt, Markus/Husmann, Rolf (2019): *Proaktive Toleranz als ein Weg zum Frieden. Definition and Operationalization of the Concept of Tolerance (Kirche und Gesellschaft 459)*, Mönchengladbach.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schockenhoff, Eberhard (2018): *Kein Ende der Gewalt? Friedensethik für eine globalisierte Welt*, Freiburg, 639-665.

always has a religious dimension.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, it is also highly relevant socially and politically.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is ultimately about reconciliation between the different values, cultural mentalities and political models on the borders of Europe. However, where regimes deny truth, freedom and humanity, they have no moral legitimacy. For Russia, Ukraine, and Europe, the scholarly reappraisal of the highly divergent identity constructions and the role played by religions in them is of central importance.<sup>17</sup> Rationally comprehensible interests are not in the foreground, but conflicts of recognition with their very own grammar of uncompromisingness and power dynamics. The theological critique of a nationalistic claim on the Christian faith is an important peace service that the churches should perform. Being a Christian in the face of a world order that has become fragile requires a considerably higher degree of commitment to the values of peace, freedom and reconciliation than we have been accustomed to in the security-addled German world of the past decades.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Vogt, Markus (2021): Christliche Friedensethik und ihre Relevanz für Toleranz und Versöhnung in der Ukraine, in: Markus Vogt/Arnd Küppers (eds.), Proaktive Toleranz. Der Schlüssel zum Frieden, Baden-Baden, 117-137.

<sup>17</sup> Golczewski, Frank (2018): Different Historical Narratives on Ukraine in the Context of the Current Crisis, in: Justenhoven, Heinz-Gerhard (ed.): Kampf um die Ukraine. Ringen um Selbstbestimmung und geopolitische Interessen (Studien zur Friedensethik 61), Baden-Baden, 35-59, Hnyp, Maryana (2018): Ukrainian National Identity in Transition: Geopolitics and Values, in: *ibid*, 17-33.