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# Are American Evangelicals Using Russia To Fight Their Culture War?

By Paul Glader · March 28, 2019

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Patriarch Kirill. Photo from the [website of the President of the Russian Federation](#), used with Creative Commons license.

(ANALYSIS) Forget Jerry Falwell Senior or Junior. Forget Pat Robertson. Forget James Dobson.

The most interesting figure in culture wars these days may in fact be Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Patriarch Kirill. Some are suggesting he is an entrepreneur of moral norms, a grand strategist in traditional morality the way Garry Kasparov was a strategist in the global game of chess.

Austrian sociologist Kristina Stoeckl at the University of Innsbruck has been studying the ROC's role of reframing international human rights conversations. Stoeckl tracks how the ROC developed its social teaching and human rights stance through a set of documents in the last two decades, culminating in the 2008 "Russian Orthodox Church Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights."

### **Contextualized Human Rights**

Russia and the ROC previously questioned the notion of human rights as a western construct. But Stoeckl suggests that, in the aughts, the ROC shifted and realized that engaging in human rights policy offered an opportunity to reframe moral norms. Stoeckl documents how the ROC uses forums for human rights as a new way to oppose progressive values. And Kirill has played a starring role in that process.

"I am convinced that the concern for spiritual needs, based moreover on traditional morality, ought to return to the public realm. The upholding of moral standards must become a social cause," Kirill said when he was head of the External Relations Department of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2006. "It is the mechanism of human rights that can actively enable this return. I am speaking of a return, for the norm of according human rights with traditional morality can be found in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights of 1948.”

Stoeckl spoke at a recent seminar at Fordham University on Orthodoxy & Human Rights. Her research shows how the ROC has teed up battles between “universalists” and “contextualists” at the United Nations and other international forums. Universalists promote inclusion of new categories of individuals -- including women, children, LGBTQ, disabled persons -- under human rights language. Contextualists, meanwhile, argue against the universal application of human rights language but include religious, cultural and historic traditions as “legitimate sources of norms governing a society” and affecting human rights law.

Stoeckl notes that Russia and the ROC has exercised an impressive political ground game in international diplomacy, particularly in advancing traditionalist agendas and Christian rights concepts on family and abortion. Russia had support at the U.N. from many countries in Africa, Asia and Central America. The traditionalist coalition outmaneuvered Western European countries and the U.S. in 2016, passing Resolutions such as 32/23 titled, “Protection of the family: role of the family in supporting the protection and promotion of human rights of persons with disabilities.”

### **World Congress of Families**

Stoeckl points to transnational moral coalitions such as the World Congress of Families, an international non-profit founded in 1995 by a Russian and American. It hosts annual meetings and promotes a pro-Christian worldview, conservative gender roles, anti-abortion policies and a hetero-normative agenda. Its 13th annual meeting happens this weekend, March 29-31 in Verona, Italy.

Religion News Service columnist Mark Silk (who also attended the forum at Fordham University) wrote a column this week highlighting this background on the event and its

parent organization:

*The WCF, in case you haven't heard of it, is an annual event sponsored by the International Organization for the Family (IOF), a Washington-based NGO dedicated to furthering the Christian right's agenda by opposing abortion, same-sex marriage, legal protections on the basis of sexual orientation, and pornography around the globe.*

*It was established in 1997 by Allan Carlson, a history professor at Hillsdale College, who had the clever idea of turning the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights into a charter for traditional family values...*

*Since Kirill became Patriarch of Moscow in 2009, WCF leaders have made their presence felt in Russia. In 2013 WCF Vice President Larry Jacobs (along with anti-gay activist Scott Lively) helped the church engineer passage of a bill that attacked LGBT rights in Russia by imposing fines for the dissemination of "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors."*

At the seminar at Fordham on Orthodoxy & Human Rights, participants discussed how the ROC is defending traditional morality because some believe the Roman Catholic Church is not doing so under Pope Francis as it had under previous popes.

The group discussed how the ROC is collaborating with a new alliance of religious groups that care about traditional morality include American Mormons (or, as they prefer to be called, Latter Day Saints), Muslims, conservative Jews, conservative Catholics and protestant evangelicals.

### **Implications: New, more global culture wars**

To play Kirill's advocate, one can question the consternation on the left. European sociologists, similar to American East Coast elites, sometimes take a jaded view of Baptists, Pentecostals and home-school communities,

painting them as backward, insular and dangerous. The left often approaches religion as an obstacle to a progressive agenda on sex and gender. The problem is that a progressive vision on sex and gender conflicts with some key tenets of most world religions.

One could argue that Russia, a land rich in literature and art and music, was depleted of some history, tradition and religious freedom during the Soviet communist era. The chaotic post-Soviet experience suggests that capitalism and democracy won't easily take root in Russia. President Vladimir Putin, rather, has aimed to restore order with a more Czarist approach. He's used the ROC as a vehicle and an ally to do that. The ROC connects to older ideas of Russian greatness, Russian tradition, and Russian values. It helps fill the void that vodka could not.

Meanwhile, some parts of the world such as Nigeria and Uganda are still dealing with other human rights and public health issues ranging from AIDS, breast ironing, female genital mutilation, rapes and kidnappings by Boko Haram and widespread polygamy. In many contexts, the ROC vision of traditional morality provides an inspiring vision for monogamous relationships and stable family structures in Africa. It offers a language of dignity for individuals and progress for family structures that cannot and should not be punctured by a powerful chief or local businessman who decides he can marry or rape whomever he wishes. Religion and its accompanying morality can help provide a context for education, public health and stable government.

As syndicated religion columnist (and my King's College colleague) Terry Mattingly [noted in a recent column](#), the United Methodists recent drama about whether to uphold a ban on LGBTQ rights played out with traditionalist Methodists in Africa and other parts of the globe outvoting their more progressive brothers and sisters in more developed northern countries.

Terry pointed to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll indicating that 60 percent of United Methodists in America believe “homosexuality should be accepted” and 49 percent already favored same-sex marriage. But the second-largest protestant denomination in America isn’t completely governed by progressive Americans. Terry writes:

*At the heart of this clash is evolving United Methodist math. Unlike other Protestant bodies, the UMC is truly global, with 12.5 million members worldwide – a number that is growing. However, there are only 6.9 million in the United States, where key statistics are declining – especially in the more liberal North and West.*

We see with the Russian Orthodox Church’s moral entrepreneurship, the World Congress of Families, and the African traditionalists in the Anglican and Methodist churches a new chapter in the culture wars.

### **The Perils**

James D. Hunter, the University of Virginia sociologist, wrote a book titled “Culture Wars” in 1992 and helped coin the phrase and explain the concept. He also warned Christians and other religious people not to approach culture with a militant attitude. Culture is not something a group sets out to control or win. That approach often backfires. Aligning religion with politics also brings peril. In his 2010 book, “To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,” he writes:

*“The consequences of the whole-hearted and uncritical embrace of politics by Christians has been, IN EFFECT, to reduce Christian faith to a political ideology and various Christian denominations and para-church organizations as special interest groups. The political engagement of the various Christian groups is certainly legal, but in ways that are undoubtedly unintended, it has also been*

| *counterproductive of the ends to which they aspire.”*

And that brings us to the more serious questions about the new, globalized culture war.

If Patriarch Kirill is the new leader of the moral majority globally, he might well consider the ups and downs of American evangelicals – such as Robertson, Falwell and Dobson -- who led previous attempts at moral majorities. The Hegelian dialectic of American politics led to vicious backlashes, downfalls and political defeats for the religious right. It also changed the face of religion, causing evangelicals to align largely with the Republican Party. It contributed to disarray in mainline denominations. Religion became increasingly political and polarizing, alienating younger generations' from faith traditions.

Stoeckl's research continues to examine the political connections between alt-right parties in Europe who use Christianity as a weapon for their political agenda. Perhaps they are similar to how Islamist parties in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia involve Islam in the talking points and policy platforms?

If Patriarch Kirill is using President Putin to advance Orthodox Christianity, he also knows that President Putin is using Orthodox Christianity to advance the nation state interests of Mother Russia. That might include annexing Crimea one day, banning Jehovah's Witnesses the next. It could mean expanding discrimination against homosexuals and promoting war in the Middle East to protect Orthodox Christians

Maybe that chess game works out for Kirill long term? Or maybe it's a game of Russian Roulette?

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