Opinion
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Firefighters work to extinguish fire amid debris of a residential building destroyed in shelling i

Firefighters work to extinguish fire amid debris of a residential building destroyed in shelling in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine, Dec. 9. (CNS/Reuters/Alexander Ermochenko)



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Last week, I was able to attend the second half of a two-day meeting of Roman Catholic and Orthodox scholars sponsored by the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College. The focus of the conversations was how the different theological traditions approach issues of war, and how that applies to the war in Ukraine today. The conference was on background, so I contacted the participants afterward.

"I wanted to do this because I have been interested in the two approaches," said Greenberg Center director Mark Silk. "The just war tradition, in some sense, develops a checklist of norms, of right and wrong, for both *ad bellum* and *in bello* considerations. And the Orthodox acknowledged that is a useful analytic exercise to go through."

Ad bellum refers to the justifications to go to war in the first place, and *in bello* refers to the moral norms governing military conduct during the prosecution of the war.

The Orthodox tradition, however, strikes a different note. "That line from St. Basil, that killing in war isn't murder, but that a soldier still has to wait three years before taking communion again, that focus on reintegration into society, that is mindful of something the just war tradition doesn't pay much attention to: What happens after?" Silk told me in an interview after the conference.

"The real concern there is how do you deal with the post-bellum reality? With PTSD and those who are morally afflicted? This is a central pastoral concern, and it may not help to just celebrate soldiers who fought in a 'good war.' "

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Fordham University theology professor Aristotle "Telly" Papanikolaou concurred, arguing that war raises more questions than those addressed by the just war tradition.

"The ethics of war usually focus on the question of whether waging war is 'just,'" Papanikolaou said via email after the event. "But if ethics is not simply about rules but about what is possible for humans to become, then the 'ethics of war' must focus on how violence affects one's capacity for loving relationships, including one's capacity to experience a relationship of union with God. War can cause 'moral injury' insofar as our capacity to love can be deeply damaged."

The issue of war, then, is not only about ethics, but about teleology, not just about norms but about what kind of human being we want to be and our baptismal call to be united with God. And teleology can be more complicated than ethics. The Orthodox theological tradition, with its emphasis on the mystical and the pneumatological, goes deeper than issues of ethical justification.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Massaro, also from Fordham, took up the adage that "wars rush history" and focused on six discrete areas in which the war in Ukraine has created a new sense of crisis: environmental, economic, geopolitical, humanitarian, cultural and religious. The first four are relatively straightforward, but the cultural and religious legacy of this terrible war is more complicated.

Focusing on the cultural impact, Massaro mentioned the words of French President Emmanuel Macron, during his recent press conference with President Joe Biden. Macron noted that this war is no mere struggle over real estate but entails a battle over the core values associated with western civilization at its best: freedom, popular sovereignty, principles over brute power. A Putin victory threatens our sense of values because it would represent a regression to a Hobbesian, "might makes right" world order.

U.S. President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron stand together during an of

U.S. President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron stand together during an official State Arrival Ceremony for Macron on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington Dec. 1. (CNS/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

He polled his students about their impressions, and among their various concerns, Massaro found that, "even those who leaned toward pacifism report being persuaded that the Ukrainians are justified in defending their homeland with the use of force and standing up for their way of life. One reported that at first she had doubts about whether the defensive war measures up to the criterion of reasonable expectation of success. But by now they are all convinced of the judgment that all the criteria of the just-war theory are satisfied."

Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa, of Boston College, told me after the event, "The thing that most struck me is how Orthodox Christianity is so tied up with nationalism, which makes the question of 'religion and nationalism' the dominant one when considering Orthodoxy." All agreed that a conference on religion and nationalism, as well as further development of *jus post-bellum* moral criteria, would be useful.

Boston College professor Cathleen Kaveny said her takeaway from the conversations was that "the Roman Catholic and Orthodox approaches to war complement each other." Kaveny understood the value of the Catholic just war tradition in examining the ethical issues involved.

"The Catholic just war tradition provides guidance for decisions about going to war," she told me via email after the conference. "It also provides firm rules about how military forces should conduct themselves in war. In the Ukrainian context, the rule that it is always wrong to target non-combatants is especially important. It also is a foundation for just action after the war is over — and just peacemaking to end the

war as quickly as possible."

"The Orthodox moral tradition of *economia* takes rules seriously, but focuses equally on the brokenness of the particular situation and the harm done to the people in it," Kaveny continued. "Its notion of sin is broader than the Catholic tradition, being understood as 'missing the mark.' So it is has more resources to understand and heal things like post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers who, even if they didn't sin from a Catholic perspective, were involved in something that is not consistent with God's original plan for peace."

A destroyed Orthodox church is seen, during Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Bohorodychne, in

A destroyed Orthodox church is seen, during Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Bohorodychne, in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, Dec. 8. (CNS/Reuters/Yevhen Titov)

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> — *Cathleen Kaveny*

This insight is echoed by the Rev. Perry T. Hamalis, professor of religious studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

"From an Orthodox Christian perspective, every act of killing is an act of fratricide, thus every war is a fratricidal war. The additional fact, in the case of Ukraine, that Russia and Ukraine are nations whose citizens overwhelmingly self-identify as Christians, only amplifies the fratricidal nature of this horrific war," Hamalis explained via email after the conference. "The recent Russian-born Orthodox saint, St. Sophrony (Sakharov) the Athonite, writes, 'wars are sin par excellence' and he reiterates a broader teaching within Orthodox ethics, 'Life in the world is based on force, on violence. The Christian has the opposite aim. Force does not belong to eternal life. No act imposed by force can save us.' "

"Orthodox are much more skeptical of the ways that a 'theory' of just war can easily become either a way for states to propagandistically justify unjust wars or, perhaps more importantly, a way for soldiers to deceive themselves about the effects of war

upon their hearts and minds," Hamalis continued. "Since, for the Orthodox, even a war that meets all the 'just war criteria' and that is fought according to just war principles does moral and spiritual damage to all who are involved."

Silk, the event's host, said he was pleased with the exchange of views. The general consensus, between Roman Catholic and Orthodox, but also between those more attracted to the just war tradition and those who emphasize the pacifist strain in Catholic thought, seemed to be, as Silk put it, "that war is not a good thing, even if it's just, that the Western narrative of 'the good war,' and consequent valorization of right and wrong, doesn't help."

"There is a reason guys who fought in the Pacific and in the Battle of the Bulge tend not to talk about it," Silk said.