The Human Rights Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarch Kirill I: A Critical Appraisal

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Introduction

The debate on the universality of human rights recently has acquired an inner-European dimension. When previously, criticisms on the universalization of the European (Western) particularity were conducted mostly either in the name of the Asian values or from the perspective of third-world approaches to international law (TWAIL), one of the most recent systemic criticisms comes from the heartland of Orthodox Eastern Europe, Russia.

On 6 April 2006, the Tenth World Russian People’s Council adopted the “Orthodox Declaration of Human Rights. Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity”. Formally, the World Russian People’s Council is an international non-governmental organization which has consultative status at the UN (ECOSOC). Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow explains that “the annual meetings bring together representatives of Russia’s traditional religions, government and society but also representatives of the Russian diaspora from all over the world”. One might ask, however, what exactly the interest of representatives of Russia’s other traditional religions—beyond Orthodox Christianity—would be to co-adopt the Orthodox Declaration of Human Rights? It seems that, substantively, the World Russian People's Council has been under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

At the time of the adoption of the Orthodox Declaration in 2006, the World Russian People’s Council was chaired by Patriarch Alexius II (1929-2008). Nevertheless, the current Patriarch Kirill I gave the programmatic speech “Human Rights and Moral Responsibility” there, and Kirill’s own subsequent involvement with the Orthodox Declaration reveals that he has been the ideological

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3 Moskva ja Kogu Venemaa Pühim Patriarh Kirill, Vabadus ja vastutus. Harmoonia otsingul. Inimõigused ja isiksuse väärikus (Tallinna Raamatutüriköda, Tallinn, 2012), 104 (hereinafter referred to as “Kirill (2012)”)). For the purposes of writing this chapter, I have used the Estonian version and translated the respective passages into English.
driving force leading to the Declaration’s adoption. Furthermore, in mid-2008, the ROC adopted its “Foundations on the Teaching on Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights” which elaborates, in further detail, ideas expressed in the 2006 Orthodox Declaration.5

More recently, the ROC published a collection of Patriarch Kirill’s essays and speeches on human rights which reads like an extended commentary to the Orthodox Declaration of 2006. Patriarch Kirill’s work has been translated in a number of languages, including English,6 Japanese,7 and Estonian.8

This chapter has a simple structure. In the following section, the 2006 Orthodox Declaration and Patriarch Kirill’s views on human rights are introduced. Then, I will critically reflect on some of the points raised by the Orthodox Declaration and Patriarch Kirill I. Finally, I will offer the reader some conclusions.

**Human Rights in the 2006 Orthodox Declaration and in Patriarch Kirill’s Writings**

The 2006 “Orthodox Declaration of Human Rights. Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity” starts with the statement that there exists a “unique Russian civilization” in the name of which the Declaration has been adopted.9 It then turns to the concept of human dignity which it sees as foundational for human rights and makes the following claim:

“It is by doing good [things] that the human being gains dignity. Thus we distinguish between human worth and dignity. Worth is given, while dignity is acquired.”10

Human rights cannot be separated from morality; there cannot be such a thing as immoral dignity. The Declaration goes on to emphasize:

“There are values no smaller than human rights. These are faith, morality, the sacred, motherland. Whenever these values come into conflict with the implementation of human rights, the task of the society, state and law is to bring both to harmony.”

Moreover,

4 Kirill (2012), *op.cit.* note 3, 63-83, 86.