It does not take much effort to trace the contemporary application of the term ‘civilization’ in writings or statements of Eastern Orthodox churchmen and theologians. This is especially true for the Russian Orthodox Church. As the present patriarch of Moscow, Kirill frequently points out, Russia forms a particular civilization, distinct from others (and especially from ‘the West’), based as it is on a specific set of social relations, political structures and moral customs with roots in Russian Orthodox tradition. With his statements the patriarch gives voice not only to a widespread conviction but also to a related program of a sociopolitical character. Scientific institutions, faculties, and university departments are devoted to the discipline of ‘culturology’ (kul’turologiia), which are tasked with fostering the restoration of the traditional values of the Russian people, and therefore the re-birth of its indigenous culture. The focus of this—incidentally, rather new—academic discipline is not on the issue of culture or civilization in generalizing terms (although there are similarities in applied methods to Western ‘cultural studies’), but first of all on the exploration of the ‘Russian civilization’ and its peculiarities, including their moral content, and methods of disseminating these values in today’s Russia—and beyond. Likewise, a foundation under the name ‘The Russian World’ (Russkii mir), founded in 2007 on the initiative of the Russian president Putin, is active in various cities in Russia’s neighbor states (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, Poland or the Baltic states), implementing projects cultivating and spreading Russian language, customs and culture. To be sure, neither ‘culturology’ as an academic

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1 See, as a most recent example, Kirill’s opening speech, delivered on October 31, 2013, before the latest assembly of the All Russian National Council (Vsemirnyi Russkii Narodnyi Sobor— a platform established by the Moscow patriarchate and outwardly similar to, for example, the German Kirchentag, whereas the predominant political orientation of these assemblies is much more conservative and traditionalist), published on http://www.pravoslavie.ru/news/65312.htm.


discipline nor the *Russkii mir* foundation are directly linked with the church or the Moscow patriarchate. But the ideological overlapping is difficult to ignore, when one hears the patriarch reflecting on ways how to strengthen and to develop ‘The Russian World,’⁴ or takes into account such facts as for example the recent establishment of a subject called ‘Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture’ (*osnovy pravoslavnoi kul’tury*) at public schools in Russia, as a result of long-standing lobbying by the Moscow patriarchate. In addition, the regions and cities where the *Russkii mir* foundation regularly pursues its activities are not only located on the territory of the former Soviet Union, but likewise in those countries which the Russian church continues to claim as part of its ‘canonical territory.’ In sum, the ‘Russian civilization,’ the ‘Russian World’ and Russian Orthodoxy’s ‘canonical territory’ are concepts interconnected in terms of their content, meaning and territorial extension.⁵

**The Theological Difficulties of an ‘Orthodox Civilization’**

Concerning the perspective of the Orthodox church, the purely—at first sight—ecclesiological concept of a ‘canonical territory’ does have some merit, as critics have admitted, but at the same time it has been criticized as hardly applicable to a situation where religious pluralism exists, including the century Russia itself.⁶ The claimed coincidence of the ‘canonical territory’ with that of a ‘Russian civilization’ seems even more problematic. Against the background just outlined, the use of terms like ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’—with its apparent parallels to non-ecclesiological ways of thinking—opens the way to a perspective beyond proper theology. First, the context betrays rather geopolitical overtones next to the ecclesiological considerations that could be regarded as the actual domain of a Christian church. Secondly, the terms ‘Russian civilization’ or ‘the Russian World’ ideally operate if we understand ‘civilization’ in a plural sense: there are more than one ‘civilization,’ and the Orthodox therefore implicitly subscribe to a view which would divide the globe into several spheres of influence of a small number of civilizations, claiming one of

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⁵ For further evidence and a systematization see Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (London: Routledge, 2013).