

## **PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY**

### **MANIFESTATION OF SOCIALLY DESTRUCTIVE VIEWPOINTS OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S WAR CRIMES AGAINST UKRAINE**

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***Annotation.*** *The main focus of this research article is on manifestations of socially destructive viewpoints in the conditions of the Russia-Ukraine war, which may have potentially devastating consequences that could undermine social bonds, particularly in the context often take on a destructive character and can be aimed at destabilizing social connections, including inertia in finding effective mechanisms of protection and mutual support. The material has been processed within the framework of the project “Social Functionality of Religion in Conditions of Extreme Peril: Ideological-Theoretical and Practical Dimensions” under the state registration number: 0121U109446.*

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**Introduction.** Since the first days of the bloody war characterized by cynical invasion, military crimes, and constant acts (torture of civilians and prisoners, rape of minors, air strikes on civilian infrastructure of cities and towns, use of prohibited weapons, abduction of children, activists, representatives of local governments, journalists, volunteers, etc.), of Russia's aggression against Ukraine – thousands of lives have been lost, both faithful and unwavering defenders of their Homeland, as well as innocent civilians, including children. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their homes, some villages and cities remain under occupation, and a large number of individuals have been forcibly displaced abroad. Consequently, providing assistance to the military, organizing and delivering social services to individuals and groups in need to ensure their comprehensive development, and subsequently, facilitating spiritually-guided social and psychological rehabilitation for servicemen, demobilized veterans, and their families, as well as those who have become victims of the war, are critically important and sought-after endeavors today.

What remains exceptionally noteworthy is the active engagement of various religious denominations within Ukraine, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and notably, Protestant churches, in recognizing the grave peril posed by the Kremlin's war crimes. Their commitment to preserving Ukrainian statehood knows no bounds, as they employ every possible and effective means to defend their Homeland. Nevertheless, it is with regret that we must acknowledge the presence of socially destructive trends within certain denominations, trends that all too often take a damaging turn, threatening to destabilize social ties and more. Therefore, the primary objective of our scientific inquiry is to delineate the manifestations of socially destructive stance within Ukraine's Protestant churches in the midst of the cynical aggression perpetrated by the Russian Federation.

**Problem and methodology.** In these extremely difficult realities of war, the religious component is observed to play far from the last role. Indeed, today the role of the Church and religious organizations, which were and remain one of the authoritative segments of Ukrainian society, is becoming more apparent. Their influence on human consciousness, which is indeed of great theoretical and practical importance, is actualized in society as a kind of effective driver of communication and thus of great interest in direct and active participation in social life, in the formation of a legal Ukrainian state and the development of civil society. That is why today quite significant changes are taking place in the church-religious domain of Ukrainian society, which often manifest themselves in both constructive and, unfortunately, destructive forms and are closely intertwined with religious beliefs and political attitudes.

Today, the study of issues related to models of social activity of religious organizations is essential for a wide range of researchers in history, theology, religious studies, political science, etc., and therefore is in demand. Some of the publications only touch on these issues, being primarily concerned with solving other research problems, while others quite consistently outline the essential features, effectiveness, and areas of socially significant initiatives of religious communities, their faithful, and leaders. A wealth of source material pertinent to the issue under scrutiny can be found within the official statements and decisions of the various churches. Nonetheless, the underpinning theoretical framework for this study draws from the works of preeminent Ukrainian and international experts, encompassing theologians, scholars of religious studies, philosophers, historians, psychologists, and journalists along with volunteers, namely S. Schie, S. Guentert, T. Wehner, J. Oostlander, M. Olchman, P. Dzhordan, O. Brodetskyi, Ye. Buha, O. Barsukova [2], V. Verkhohliad [3], I. Horokholinska [4], V. Yelenskyi, O. Kolesnyk, A. Kolodnyi, V. Kuryliak, V. Liubashchenko, H. Mierienkov [6], V. Taranenko [8], A. Olenchuk, O. Sahan, L. Fylypovych, V. Khromets, M. Cherenkov [10, 11], Yu. Chornomorets, A. Yurash, V. Shcherbakov, P. Yarotskyi among others.

The examination of socially destructive manifestations within Protestant churches amid the complex realities of war has employed fundamental methodological tools such as induction, deduction, analysis, synthesis, analogy, and idealization, among others. Thus, from a methodological standpoint, key theological approaches and religious

studies principles of research play a fundamental role. The scientific novelty of our study lies in its endeavor to identify and scrutinize precisely the destructive factors in the social activism of Protestantism in Ukraine within the context of warfare.

This research is part of a series of planned studies which conceptually correlate with the scientific, theoretical and practical tasks being addressed by a team of young scientists from Yurii Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University in the context of the research project “Social Functionality of Religion in the Context of Large-scale Threats: Ideological, Theoretical and Practical Dimensions”.

**Results. Social activity as a key type of functional activity of religious organizations.** When discussing social activism, it is important to recognize that the prolonged armed conflict, which escalated in 2022 following a full-scale invasion by an aggressor country, has led to a significant upsurge in the activities of numerous Protestant churches, as well as other established denominations within Ukraine, including Orthodoxy and Catholicism. These activities have expanded not only in scope but also in terms of methods employed. Indeed, their functional space, like that of the vast majority of other churches and religious organizations in Ukraine, in addition to fulfilling their main tasks (worship and other purely religious practices), is not limited solely to teaching the Faith. As it can be seen, various socially significant projects play an important role in their activities, which is undoubtedly a solid platform for social transformations. In this regard, it is pertinent to recall the assertion of H. Mierienkov, a Ukrainian researcher, who aptly remarks: «[...] without a willingness to give to charity, a convincing sermon is impossible in modern society. [...] After gaining freedom of religion, especially when the era of mass evangelization passed, society could look at the church only if it pursued social activity aimed at something more than the number of baptisms” [6, p. 25]. In this regard, the well-known Ukrainian Protestant theologian M. Cherenkov rightly emphasizes the importance of social service, in particular, the participation of churches in addressing acute social and moral issues of society, stressing that this is “the main direction and way of evangelical churches’ socialization, overcoming their marginality and subculturality, going beyond narrow church and denominational service and entering civil society and world Christianity” [10, p. 406]. Therefore, social activity in all its multidimensionality is nothing other than the core of church life and a key type of functional activity of religious organizations.

Therefore, in this context, there is no need to argue that one of the most important aspects of the productive activity of any denomination for the benefit of its state is, first of all, a clear and unquestioning awareness of its responsibility to society, conscious fulfillment of its duties to fellow citizens, solidarity and a balanced position, especially in the face of large-scale threats and disasters. Therefore, there are indeed grounds to speak of completely new approaches of Protestant churches, especially the – UP, SDA and ECB, regarding the perception of reality and the need for reassessment the events of today. Moreover, such dynamics of social processes in Protestant communities indicate that “most churches are developing in a progressive direction, searching for a balance between innovative effects and unavoidable risks of modernization” [11, p. 220].

However, we must acknowledge the unfortunate presence of socially destructive trends within select Protestant denominations, trends that frequently assume a deleterious form and have the potential to disrupt social ties, including impeding the development of effective protective and supportive mechanisms, such as assistance and mutual aid.

**Destructive models of social activity: essential characteristics, manifestations, and peculiarities.** Before we move on to highlighting certain destructive formats of positioning themselves in the social sphere by Protestant churches in the complex realities of war, it seems appropriate to briefly describe destructiveness in some other forms of expression.

When defining destructiveness as a component of social activity, it is important to understand that it can be disruptive and aimed at destabilizing social ties. However, this characteristic is most often applied to totalitarian sects, neo-religious formations, and various types of cults, whose destructive activities are generally of great concern to society. Destructive religious organizations, according to many religious scholars, cult experts, psychologists, and other specialists in this field, are distinguished not by their beliefs but by their methods of activity. Thus, on the one hand, this can often manifest itself in adherents as a defensive and pessimistic attitude towards any kind of activity, challenges, and large-scale threats, and on the other hand, it can pose a real threat to human rights and freedom of citizens. On this basis, experts identify a number of signs of such destructive behavior of religious groups. For example, here are some of them: “[... ] harming the health of citizens or threatening their lives; using methods in religious practice that harm the mental or physical health of citizens (hypnosis, bombing, coding, etc.); destruction of family and social ties of citizens; religious practice that violates current legislation or encourages citizens to commit illegal or antisocial acts; pseudo-religious practice aimed at mandatory, rather than discretionary, collection of material means and values from citizens in favor of the organization or its leadership; [... ] incitement of inter-religious hatred that degrades the human dignity of believers of other religions and confessions; religious practice that may lead to destabilization of civil society, undermining national security; [...] use of the status of a religious organization to cover other, non-religious, activities” [3, p. 192] etc.

In the context of the above, let us turn to the considerations of the famous Ukrainian religious scholar I. Horokholinska. In particular, the researcher, analyzing approaches to understanding religiosity, highlights aspects of the harmfulness for an individual of focusing on a particular doctrine or personality as an unquestionable and undoubted authority. She adds that such an approach, in turn, determines an individual's life, depriving them of their own reflection on norms and goals: “The destructiveness of such worldview positions is obvious, as is its connection with religious fanaticism and fundamentalism. Within religious communities where the focus is on a charismatic leader or punishment through marginalization for deviating from sanctified norms, it is not humanistic religiosity and sincere responsible observance of religious precepts that flourish, but fear of punishment or persecution; not love, humility, and forgiveness, but hatred, slavish obedience, and contempt for the ‘other.’ Such religiosity has a pronounced

sectarian character, not in the sense of ‘separation’ from a particular religious group, but in the sense of isolation, closeness, imaginary exclusivity, and illusory completeness of piety. This kind of religiosity provokes anti-religious speeches by intellectuals, public figures, etc. It is this kind of religiosity that determines high expectations for secularization in multicultural, multinational societies, because where there is no striving for understanding, there is no peace and security, justice and prosperity” [4, p. 109].

As already noted, today the social activity of a significant number of Protestant churches has indeed substantially expanded in terms of areas, forms, and methods. However, the opposite is also happening, when denominations choose completely different approaches that are incompatible with the public’s demands, the state’s interests, and present-day challenges in general. This may indicate either an uncertain position of the denomination or its backwardness and weakness manifested, first, in the devaluation of countering war crimes and the genocide of the Ukrainian nation by the Muscovites; second, in a pessimistic attitude towards restrictive measures that directly affected religious life; third, in inertia in finding effective mechanisms for protecting and supporting one part of society by another, as a process of assistance and mutual aid, etc.

Unfortunately, not all churches and religious organizations understand the importance of social service and, in particular, charity, volunteerism, missionary work, and chaplaincy as a direct manifestation of the Church’s virtues. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses, although they do not reject individual acts of charity, when it comes to large-scale charitable activities of the church in the society, they do not see the need for it, but focus more on preaching. That’s why it is deeply engrained in their minds that “Whatever the intentions of the donors, charity will not solve all problems. [...] By eliminating the causes of human suffering, God will accomplish what is beyond human power. This is why Jehovah’s Witnesses do not create charities. However, following Jesus Christ, they donate their money and time to proclaim the ‘good news about God’s kingdom’ (Matthew 24:14; Luke 4:43 )” [12]. The position of this religious organization on war is also well known. By the way, according to historical evidence, Jehovah’s Witnesses have never participated in either civil or interstate wars, and during hostilities they have steadfastly maintained neutrality. This “conscientious” position is evidence, first of all, that the use of weapons is allegedly contrary to the Law of God. However, there is another significant reason why they categorically refuse to take up arms and go to war: “Since the Witnesses organization includes people from different nations, in a war they would have to fight against their brothers. This would contradict Jesus’ command to have love one to another (John 13:35)” [13].

Along with this, a recent publication on the official website of Jehovah’s Witnesses titled “Religion and War in Ukraine: What Does the Bible Say?” has caught our attention. The authors selectively reference biblical quotes to argue that any involvement in war or its justification is a great sin before God. However, they do not provide any quotes from Christian Sacred Scriptures that, on the contrary, testify to the duty to protect one’s own family and loved ones from attackers and aggressors, emphasizing sacrificial love for others, and so on. Here we will cite several biblical references where God commanded

the Israelites to initiate wars against other nations (1 Sam. 15:3; Josh. 4:13), prescribed the death penalty for wickedness (Ex. 21:12, 15; 22:19; Lev. 20:11), and others. From this, one can infer that God does not prohibit killing altogether but specifically refers to intentional killing. Thus, the Hebrew words in the book of Exodus “You shall not murder!” (20:13) literally mean “do not commit deliberate murder of another person with malice.”

Moreover, the publication also focuses on such questions as “Should Christians participate in war?”, “What awaits religions that support violence?”, “The role of religion in wars,” and so on. We were particularly interested in the opening paragraphs of this publication, in which Jehovah’s Witnesses present a series of striking headlines from mass media about the stance of religious leaders on the war in Ukraine. In doing so, they make no distinction between Russia, the aggressor, and Ukraine, the victim, placing both sides on the same level of culpability. Notably, they mention Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, who continues to consciously support the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine, and His Beatitude Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine Epiphanius, who, sympathizing with his compatriots, openly supports and blesses the struggle against Russian occupiers, fully understanding that it is precisely in this way that Ukrainians can safeguard their loved ones, securing freedom for future generations, and ensuring a just peace and independence for their Homeland. In their publication, the authors presented the following headlines: “Head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, did not condemn the Russian aggression... The propaganda systematically conducted by the Church is used by Putin to justify the war” (EUobserver, March 7, 2022), “Patriarch Kirill... effectively supported Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, referring to the conflict as a battle against sin” (AP News, March 8, 2022), “The leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarch Epiphanius, on Monday blessed his compatriots ‘to fight against Russian occupiers’... He also said that killing Russian military is not a sin” (Jerusalem Post, March 16, 2022), culminating these resounding titles with a few questions: “What are your thoughts? Should those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ encourage their faithful to take part in the war? What does the Bible say about it?” [7]. It is evident that these narratives are not only destructive in a socio-political sense but also in an inter-religious and communicative sense, as they stand against those religious denominations that actively support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and more.

But is such a position of Jehovah’s Witnesses really perceived positively by the society today, and under what conditions does a person going to war not violate the 6th Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”? In addressing such existential questions, we would like to cite the eloquent words of Jesus Christ, who affirmatively emphasized that “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Indeed, a person who consciously goes to defend their Homeland, family, relatives and friends from invaders, sacrificing the most valuable thing – their life, shows, without exaggeration, the greatest manifestation of love for their neighbor. In addition, we confidently assert that defending against the enemy by killing him is not a sin, and that defending one’s land is the immediate duty of every conscious citizen

of any country. Therefore, this position of Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of other Protestant denominations on the war is perceived by today's society quite negatively; it is, in our opinion, erroneous and has no logical justification either in secular law, since religious beliefs do not exempt a person from the obligation to defend the state, or in the law of God, since sacrifice and love for the sake of God and neighbor are the highest good. And this, along with other reasons, gives us grounds to state that their approach to solving the problem of war – neutrality – threatens the security not only of individuals, cities or villages, but also the security of the whole state or even interstate relations.

**Religious beliefs and military mobilization: legal aspects.** Today a significant number of Protestant churches keep to the doctrine which does not allow the use of weapons. This is about, in particular, Jehovah's Witnesses with their categorical refusal to take part in hostilities. In addition, these also include Reformed Adventists, Seventh-day Adventists, Evangelical Christians (and churches equated to them according to their registered charters), Evangelical Baptists, Penitents, Charismatic Christian churches, the Society for Krishna Consciousness, etc. Meanwhile, we have already pointed out that some of them have partially violated this principle. Therefore, this may indicate not a violation of the Commandments of God, but rather a clear and balanced position, responsibility to the society and awareness of the importance of protecting our country.

If, however, participation in hostilities contradicts religious beliefs, there are a number of other well-known ways to help one's country, including charity, volunteering, chaplaincy, etc., but not withdrawing oneself from reality or avoiding responsibility. In the context of the above, there is a provision of the Constitution of Ukraine, Article 35: "No one shall be exempt from his/her duties to the State or refuse to abide by laws on religious grounds. If the performance of military duty contradicts the religious beliefs of a citizen, the performance of this duty shall be replaced by alternative (non-military) service" [5]. However, this norm is, as it is known, valid in peacetime, and therefore it is de jure impossible to replace military service with an alternative service during wartime. However, we came across one recent case of 2023, when a SDA church member was acquitted by a court of a charge of evading military service during mobilization. According to the verdict of the Kremenets District Court of Ternopil Oblast, "[...] a man who was appointed to military service but refused because of his religious beliefs was acquitted. He presented the court with proof of his water baptism, which took place in 2002, confirming his affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. [...] The defense used Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 2066, which includes the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the list of religious organizations whose beliefs do not allow the use of weapons" [14]. The court concluded that the defendant did not evade mobilization, but "[...] used his right to freedom of conscience and religion, as well as the right guaranteed by the Constitution of Ukraine to undergo alternative service" [14]. There is another relevant case, but with diametrically opposite verdict, as the conscript was found guilty of evading military service and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Examining the case of a person who refused to fight because he considers it a gross violation of God's Commandments, the Ivano-Frankivsk City Court drew attention to several important nuances, namely: "[...]

in the military ID card of the accused, a military specialty is indicated: turner, mechanic, painter, master; in the draft documents of the accused military specialty 851 is indicated, which provides for the repair and storage of armored, engineering, airfield engineering, airborne equipment [...] So, in fact, the mobilization of a conscript is carried out in a specialty that involves the repair of equipment, and not direct damage to the enemy's manpower. [...] There are a significant number of professions and positions in the AFU that are not related to direct participation in hostilities and whose occupation does not contradict the commandment 'do not kill.' [...] the accused refused to be mobilized on religious grounds, because killing people is a sin. However, the Bible does not deny that when you are killed, you must defend yourself" [8].

A number of legal issues may arise here. That is why, the comments of A. Novak, an attorney for the Miller Law Firm, are worthy of attention: "If a person wrote a statement and confirmed that he belongs to religious organizations that prohibit the use of weapons, he can only be appointed to a non-combat position. He can be a cook, driver, engineer, etc. Theoretically, if a person, for example, a reformed Adventist, wrote such a statement and attached the relevant documents, but the military commissar insists on assigning him to a mortar crew, he can write a complaint, or file a lawsuit, referring to Article 35. But I have not seen such cases in practice, and I doubt that this can be done in military enlistment offices" [2]. At the same time, it is important to understand that pacifism or other anti-violence ideologies are not religious beliefs, and therefore cannot exempt one from military duty. Similarly, denial of war and unwillingness to take an active part in the defense of the state shall not exempt anyone from their duty of protecting their Homeland. "[...] the defense of the state is the duty of citizens. A person can be prosecuted for avoiding mobilization, regardless of ideological beliefs" [2] the lawyer adds. That is why the position of Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of other Protestant denominations, which show destructiveness, passivity and neutrality at a crucial time for every Ukrainian, makes no excuse at all, but on the opposite, is fraught with the danger of creating conflict situations.

To summarize the above, here are some thoughts of the already mentioned M. Cherenkov, a Protestant philosopher, Vice-President of the Spiritual Renaissance Foundation. The researcher draws attention to the importance, responsibility, awareness and clear position of every citizen of Ukraine on participation in the defense of their land from the occupation and war crimes of the Kremlin. In particular, he notes: "We believe that God gives us peace, but today in our country there is a war and blood is being shed. The time has come for the churches to reframe their attitude to issues of war and peace. It is necessary to support those who are already doing something and to awaken those who are standing on the sidelines" [9]. According to him, "[...] the worst sin under such conditions is indifference. In addition, it is important to remember three points concerning the activity of the Church in such times: 1) evangelical theology does not justify inaction; 2) the position of the Church is sympathetic and active; and 3) the field of war is the field for forgiveness" [9]. The same opinion is shared by O. Bloschuk, the pastor of the Skelya Church of Evangelical Christians. He emphasizes



that such problems arise due to the norms of church pacifism. As a result, “[...] churches move away from an active position, being in an information vacuum and elevating the past to the rank of dogma. [...] after all the events, the churches should adopt answers to the urgent questions of believers. Currently, the ‘theology of total pacifism’ no longer provides the necessary answer” [9]. That is why, he is certain, it is necessary to change the existing theology, otherwise the churches simply will not be able to move forward. So, based on these considerations, we see again that the tragic events of the war have significantly impacted the self-awareness of the Ukrainian people, and many have more than once had the opportunity to see what the ideology of the “Russian world” really is, imposed by Russia for years to justify its aggressive plans. But sadly, not everyone has come to these conclusions.

**Conclusions.** Today, the active engagement of denominations in addressing the most urgent social and moral issues of the society, focusing on social ministry, active public, Christian-patriotic, and socially responsible position are powerful messages, main directions and ways of socialization of the Church, which lead it beyond the narrow confessional ministry into the active public life, thus bringing Christian values to different spheres of life. In contrast, degradation, passivity, and manifestations of socially destructive trends within select Protestant denominations, trends that frequently assume a deleterious form and have the potential to disrupt social ties, including inertia in finding effective defense and support mechanisms, including processes of assistance and mutual aid. Being aware of the complexity of problems associated with the Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine, it is important to realize that today each of us – Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic – is called to protect the borders of our Homeland, steadfastly defend its territorial integrity by all means possible and be able to rise to any challenge for the sake of tranquility, just peace, free will and the victory of the long-suffering Ukrainian people. Therefore, it is our firm conviction that with courageous soldiers, balanced and wise decisions and joint efforts of the state and the Church, Ukraine will definitely prevail, because every day, every hour it fights for the right to be a sovereign, united and strong state.

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