

Ecumenical Theses on War. Proposal and Response

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This article raises four theses regarding the ecumenical consequences of the Russian Orthodox Church's position on social ethics. It analyses how social freedoms are often at risk in times of war, applying the securitization theory to the current situation of religious freedom in Russia and Ukraine. The theses are developed from core principles of ecumenical dialogue and show how churches cannot simply promote unity for the sake of it, but must pay attention to socio-ethical developments and criticize one another, if necessary, which can be demonstrated by the end of institutional dialogue between the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Keywords: *Social Ethics, Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodoxy in Ukraine, Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue, Freedom of Religion*

Ecumenical Consequences from Socio-Ethical Perspectives

In times of war, social freedoms are often the first rights to be revoked, or at the very least, are ignored or misused. According to securitization theory, this happens because:

security, instead of objective, is socially constructed. Security is about the construction of *existential threats* to justify *extraordinary measures*, a process that takes place when a *securitizing actor* describes a threat to a *referent object* in a *speech act*, and the *audience* accepts this as such.¹

One example is religious freedom, which has been misused and hence questioned as a means to further one's own agenda during war. When religion or belief is limited, this is constructed as a threat to a referent object, whereby states explain these beliefs as legitimized aims. "States cannot limit a manifestation of religion without securitizing it."² Because securitizing moves are linked with identity constructions, they also create antagonism between "us" and "the other," which enables "the other" to

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¹ Hedwig Bernitz and Victoria Enkvist, *Freedom of Religion: An ambiguous Right in the Contemporary European Legal Order* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), 122 (italics from the original); see also Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 36.

² Bernitz and Enkvist, *Freedom of Religion*, 123.

become friends or enemies of “us.”³ Therefore, moves that are considered securitization are not limited to the actions of states or communities. A church organization can use securitization or a similar course of action to guard and securitize both social and doctrinal claims.

Securitization theory is used in this article as a reminder of how reality can be constructed. As a starting point to build four theses on the ecumenical consequences of war and religious freedom, as defined by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 2008.

Religious Freedom according to the ROC before the War

The ROC began promoting its own understanding of human rights in the 2000s, especially together with the World Russian People’s Council in a document published in 2006 and in its own subsequent document on human rights in 2008. I will refer to only one aspect in the latter document:

The freedom of conscience is sometimes treated as requiring religious neutrality or indifference of a state and society. Some ideological interpretations of religious freedom insist on the need to recognize all the faiths as relative or «equally true». This is unacceptable for the Church which, while respecting the freedom of choice, is called to bear witness to the Truth she cherishes and to expose its misinterpretations (cf. Tim. 3:15) (IV.3).⁴

The document continues as follows:

A society has the right to determine freely the content and amount of cooperation the state should maintain with various religious communities depending on their strength, traditional presence in a particular country or region, contribution to the history and culture of the country and on their civil attitude. At the same time, there must be equality of citizens before law regardless of their attitude to religion. (IV.3).⁵

The ROC stated that, on the issue of religious freedom, it follows the

³ *Ibidem*, 124. During the last few years, several scholarly works have been published on the relationship between religion and secularization theory; see, Marcin Składanowski, “Religion in the Russian National Security System: An Ontological Security Perspective and the Problem of the (De)Secularisation of Putin’s Russia,” *Religions* 16, issue 6 (2025), 762–72.

⁴ ROC, *The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*, old.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/, accessed January 30, 2025.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Orthodox ecclesiological view that claims to hold the only truth.⁶ The idea of having the only truth became a tool for securitization because it was aimed at cementing existing societal circumstances, defining the role of “us” within the society, and thereby attaining the power of securitizing state-church relations from its own perspective. The ROC handed the state a fictitious power to demand whom it should cooperate with. However, the real criteria for cooperation with religious organizations were set from the ROC’s majority church position, an interpretation of its position in history and culture and its view on social ethics - in other words, to safeguard the ROC’s institutional position.

For other churches, those with whom the ROC had ecumenical dialogue, the ROC’s document included a lot of information. The document gave the ecumenical partners of the ROC a chance to understand the ROC’s definition of religious freedom by using a traditional ecumenical method - by focusing on what unites the churches in doctrine and what divides them. The ecumenical dialogues, like the one the ROC had with the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) or with the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), showed that the ROC neither accepted the Western conception of human rights nor share in its theological reasoning.⁷ Still, the ROC’s document on human rights had provided the possibility to talk about these issues theologically in ecumenical dialogue.

However, it seems that these ecumenical partners did not fully understand the contexts in which these claims and theological interpretations had arisen. These ecumenical partners focused primarily on theology, while the connection with societal changes remained largely unobserved. This included developments such as Russian Orthodoxy replacing atheism as Russia’s ideological soundboard at the turn of the 1990s, and the struggles in Ukraine, where the ROC questioned the position of the Greek Catholic Church and opposed attempts to establish an autocephalous church. By the 1990s, the ROC had already appealed to the World

⁶ Making this claim does not grant it final authority. Even within the Orthodox Churches, there are many interpretations of the relationship between religious freedom and ecclesiology. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America’s prepared document *For the Life of the World. Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (2020), goarch.org/social-ethos?fbclid=IwAR2RSPrgYRhPfAgT9p2iIQkd9wqtOYJ74Gtjnpmyq9xYdxshwqr6U1FJFiY, accessed January 19, 2026 is an example of this de facto multiple viewpoints.

⁷ Heta Hurskainen, “Human Rights in the 2008 Bilateral Discussions of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Evangelical Church of Germany and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland,” in *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*, eds. Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 155–68.

Council of Churches to safeguard its own position in Ukraine, appealing to the ROC's right to exist in Ukraine at the cost of other religious or even Orthodox communions.⁸

The WCC's response was that the Orthodox churches should resolve their internal problems themselves, and it has refused (to this day) to grant WCC membership to Ukraine-based Orthodox Churches other than the ROC.⁹ The WCC's position regarding the equal treatment of churches from different denominational backgrounds can also be criticized in light of the Ukrainian case: the Greek Catholic Church as well as various Protestant churches in Ukraine have, until now, also been affected by the ROC's influence.¹⁰

The ROC sought international recognition in the 1990s to strengthen its position not only within Russia, but also in neighboring countries. However, this ambition did not take into account the religious freedom of other churches and religious communities. In the 2000s, the ROC went on to create a theological basis for their societal aims on human rights and religious freedom in its document *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*; continuing in its human rights document from 2008, they gave reasons for claiming a superior position among other religious organizations both in Russia and outside Russia.¹¹ While theology was acknowledged by the ROC's ecumenical partners, its possible practical consequences were ignored by them.

This introduction leads to the following four theses:

Thesis 1: Religious Freedom as a Prerequisite for Ecumenism

My first thesis is that while it is important to pay attention to Ukraine and the acute changes it has made in religious freedom during the war that started in 2022,¹² ecumenical circles should not stop paying atten-

⁸ Hurskainen, "The Russian Orthodox Church: Building a Doctrinal National Identity in the Beginning of the 1990s," *Filosofia* 26, no. 4 (November 2017): 438–52.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ See Pavlo Smytsnyuk, "The New Orthodox Church in Ukraine: Ecumenical Aspects and Problems," in *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2022), 303–32.

¹¹ ROC, *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx, accessed January 19, 2026, Especially paragraphs III 3–4, 6; IV 7. Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (London – New York, Routledge, 2013), 42.

¹² On debates about the law accepted in August 2024 which bans the Russian Orthodox Church led from Moscow in Ukraine, see Catherine Wanner, "How Ukraine is Navigating Russia's Weaponization of Religion?," usip.org/publications/

tion to the ROC and to Russia. Ecumenical dialogue can take place only when religious freedom is practiced and when one can accept the existence of another. Accepting one another's existence as a fact does not automatically mean accepting or understanding one another's theological argumentation or truth claims. However, without accepting each other's existence, there is no way to proceed.¹³ Therefore, I claim that ecumenical circles should take the principles of religious freedom even more seriously. Religious freedom in this context would mean accepting each other's existence as religious organizations. The concept of religious freedom enables churches to recognize other churches as organizations that serve as grounds for achieving their theologically oriented ecumenical aims.

The WCC changed its stance concerning the role of Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the worldwide ecumenical movement after Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. In the WCC's eyes, Ukrainian orthodoxy was no longer an "inner Orthodox" issue, and the turn enabled the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to enter membership negotiations with the WCC.¹⁴ This is an example of how religious freedom as described above enables ecumenical work.

The ROC acts differently. While the ROC pressures states and other churches to behave according to the principle of secular religious freedom in order to secure the conditions for its own spiritual flourishing, it does not apply the same principle consistently in its own actions.

In the contemporary world, state is normally secular and not bound by any religious commitments. Its co-operation with the Church is limited to several areas and based on mutual non-interference into each other's affairs. However, the state is aware as a rule that earthly well-being is unthinkable without respect for certain moral norms – the norms which are also essential for the eternal salvation of man.

accessed January 31, 2025. This website is anymore only a one-site webpage propagating President Donald Trump's "peace-efforts". Reinhard Flogaus, "Liquidierung einer Kirche? Einseitige Wahrnehmungen des neuen Gesetzes," (NOEK August 2024) noek.info/hintergrund/3460-liquidierung-einer-kirche-einseitige-wahrnehmungen-des-neuen-gesetzes, accessed January 31, 2025.

¹³ On different ways to understand recognition and lack of recognition see, for example, Heikki Ikäheimo, "Causes for lack of Recognition: from the Secular to the non-secular," in *Recognition and Religion: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, ed., Maijastina Kahlos (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 51–68.

¹⁴ Cyril Hovorun, "The institutionalized Ecumenism and the Ukrainian War: A Critical Approach," religioninpraxis.com/the-institutionalized-ecumenism, accessed January 31, 2025; Hurskainen, "Fragmenting Ukrainian Orthodoxy and its Impact on International Ecumenism," in *Churches in Contact and Collision: Multiple Ways of Ukrainian and Russian Churches*, eds., Hurskainen and Teuvo Laitila (Boston: Brill, 2024), 159–82.

Therefore, the tasks and work of the Church and the state may coincide not only in seeking purely earthly welfare, but also in the fulfilment of the salvific mission of the Church. (III.3)

The adoption of the freedom of conscience as legal principle points to the fact that society has lost religious goals and values and become massively apostate and actually indifferent to the task of the Church and to the overcoming of sin. However, this principle has proved to be one of the means of the Church's existence in the non-religious world, enabling her to enjoy a legal status in secular state and independence from those in society who believe differently or do not believe at all. (III.6)¹⁵

The ROC does not wish to recognize secular religious freedom for other religious organizations, even Christian. This is seen most clearly in the *Russian World* ideology and in the way it manifests the alignment of the ROC with the Russian state, placing the ROC at risk “losing control of religious nature and autonomy of its beliefs and having them reduced to mere cultural identity dictated by the state.”¹⁶ The *Russian World* ideology having both the ROC's spiritual and the state's securitizing aim is then reflected on many other religious organizations in Russia. For example, the ROC representatives' attitudes towards the state banning Jehovah's Witnesses (who have Christian roots) in Russia was affirmative at the end of the 2010s. The ROC thus aligned with the state, using terms such as “non-traditional” to describe sects other than the Orthodox branch of Christianity. Baptists and Pentecostals had faced various problems before 2022, whereas at that time actions against “religious groups of Western origin are still not as intense as against certain Islamic movements.”¹⁷ Thus, the ROC's theological reasoning on religious freedom does not recognize the very existence of another church as a legitimate religious organization.¹⁸

¹⁵ ROC *Social Concept* III.3, 6.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth A. Clark, “Civil Religion and Religious Freedom in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict,” in *Religion during the Russian Ukrainian Conflict*, eds., Clark and Dmytro Vovk (London: Routledge, 2019), 22–23.

¹⁷ See the interview: “Persecutions of Jehovah's witnesses in Russia: interview with Maria Krawchenko,” in *Religion during the Russian Ukrainian Conflict*, eds., Clark and Vovk (London: Routledge, 2019), 232–33.

¹⁸ The need for the political alignment of minority Christian groups such as Pentecostals and Evangelicals after February 2022 has become evident and reflects the force and threats of the state as well as, in some cases, the voluntariness of the church, having learned to read warning signals from authorities during the Soviet era. See i.e. Maija Penttilä, “War Changes Everything: Russian and Ukrainian Pentecostal Word of Life Churches under War in 2022,” in *Churches in Contact and Collision: Multiple Ways of*

This kind of theological and spiritual interpretation of religious freedom has ultimately made – and continues to make – any form of respectful and reciprocal dialogue impossible.¹⁹ Ecumenical circles should finally admit this fact in their connections with the ROC.

Thesis 2: The Need for Critical Discussion and Engagement

My second thesis stems from the previous one. Perhaps ecumenical dialogue and cooperation lack the tools needed to pay attention to each other's flaws, for example, when it comes to socio-ethical actions that are theologically reasoned. While ecumenical gatherings involving the ROC have condemned war or violence in their documents,²⁰ they do not seem to have the willingness or the capacity to challenge the obvious misuses or misleading interpretations of these concepts. One may reasonably ask whether this is due to the nature of the ecumenical movement, in which formulating a common understanding in witness, doctrine, and practical work serves as a means of seeking visible unity.²¹

Do the churches have tools in their ecumenical endeavors to be critical towards each other? Within the Orthodox World, the then archbishop of the Orthodox Church of Finland criticized Patriarch Kirill by saying that Kirill, as the primate of his church, did not represent the truth.²² Could something like this also be done in the ecumenical sphere? Churches need to have a discussion on how to be critical towards each other in the ecumenical movement as well. I think something more profound would be needed than simply a discussion about the “limits of diversity.”²³ Theological discussion on criticism is, of course, a delicate but

Ukrainian and Russian Churches, eds., Hurskainen and Laitila (Boston: Brill, 2024), 153.

¹⁹ Hovorun, “The institutionalized Ecumenism.”

²⁰ For example, the WCC's General Assembly has been criticized for its stance on the war in Ukraine. This is especially evident in the statement of its Public Issues Committee, which was published on the WCC website in a draft version rather than the final, approved text. The document, for instance, presents the war as if both Russia and Ukraine bore comparable responsibility, as it fails to mention the role of the ROC as a supporter of the aggression. Juha Meriläinen, “Ukrainan sodan käsittelystä ja yleiskokouksen sotaa koskevasta lausunnosta,” *Reseptio* 2/2022, 43–47, 44–45.

²¹ See also similar problematic Dimitrios Keramidas, “Churches Facing War: Ecumenical Deadlocks and Ecclesiological Challenges,” *Exchange* 53 (2024), 62–79

²² Leo (archbishop), “Pääsiäiseen kuuluu ilo, mutta tänä keväänä itkemme enemmän,” hos.fi/arkkipiispa-leo-jumala-tuntee-ukrainan-marttyyrien-nimet/, accessed on January 31, 2025.

²³ About the lack of proper discussion on ecumenical social ethics on the level of the World Council of Churches as well as on the problematics to reach consensus on social ethics see Michael Root, “Morals,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, eds.,

crucial topic. If unity is the driving force in expressing criticism, there is a constant threat that by meeting with the ROC in the present war situation (as the WCC has done when its delegation visited Moscow in the last two years after the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe) that real dialogue would remain only a distant dream or delusion.²⁴

There is good reason to think the WCC could have chosen to proceed differently. The WCC unity statement from Karlsruhe emphasizes an “ecumenism of the heart,”²⁵ defining it as:

§ 20. (ecumenism of the heart) is love that will reject any distorted kind of unity that overcomes, overpowers, or coerces the other, and neither will it settle for a weak type of encounter that is merely formal. This love goes beyond every level of restriction and restraint; it is not abstract, sentimental, soft, or romantic, but is embodied and whole, witnessed in the visible and the practical, in the passionate and the truly challenging, able to address the deepest evil and injustice. We have learned from one another that love which in private is tenderness in public is justice.²⁶

Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 326–41. Root suggests the method of differentiated consensus to be used also in the ecumenical socioethical issues in order to avoid juxtaposing and endless pluralism.

²⁴ Hovorun, “The institutionalized Ecumenism,” states: “In the communique, which was agreed upon by the WCC delegation and its Moscow hosts, the patriarch, while condemning wars in principle, made an explicit exception for the Russian «special operation» in Ukraine. He explained that it is supported by «the political context,» and the churches «must not add fuel to the fire.» The well-intended Western public would read this message as following: The war is waged by the Kremlin, and the Russian Orthodox Church wants to abstain from supporting it. However, the patriarch meant exactly the opposite: The war happens only because the Western politicians want so, and the global Christianity should not solidarize with what they impose on Russia. Unfortunately, many in the global ecumenical community would agree with such reading of the events. The patriarch tried to reach out to them.” See also National Council of Churches in Denmark, ed., “Memorandum on the «WCC statement on the new law passed by the Ukrainian Rada on 20 August 2024» (issued 24th August 2024),” usercontent.one/wp, accessed February 2, 2025. On January 28, 2026 the content is not anymore available, See news about the content of the memorandum Andreja Bogdanovski, “Denmark Churches Criticise WCC stance on Ukrainian law,” *Church Times* (November 2024), churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/22-november/news/world/denmark-churches-critise-wcc-stance-on-ukrainian-law, accessed January 28, 2026.

²⁵ See more about the historical roots of an “ecumenism of the heart”: Sara Gehlin, “Between Stockholm and Lausanne: On Unity, Peace, and an Ecumenism of the Heart,” *The Ecumenical Review* 76, no.4 (October 2024): 344–59.

²⁶ World Council of Churches 11th Assembly, ed., “Unity Statement” (September 2022), oikoumene.org/sites/, accessed January 30, 4–5.

Love in private lives is tenderness, and in societal issues, justice. However, in ecumenical relations, it is not overpowering or coercion; instead, it should address the deepest evil and injustice – even when words such as “peace” and “love” are used but actions speak otherwise. Thus, the unity statement of the WCC lets it act even more critically towards the ROC and even wait until the ROC is ready to listen to the voices of victims before travelling to Moscow. As the statement says, love works against injustice in ecumenical contact. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) took steps in this direction when it confronted the ideology of the *Russian World* at its conference in Helsinki in December 2025. The conference stated clearly: “The «Russian World» ideology constitutes a distortion of the Gospel at its very foundation.”²⁷ In this way, the CEC was able to criticize the ideas and actions promoted by the ROC and its representatives without denying the ROC’s existence - even when it labeled views, such as, depicting a soldier’s death as a sacrificial act, or portraying Russia as a *katechon* in the war against Ukraine, as heretical. The CEC condemned actions and ideologies, not a nation, a church, or a people.

Thesis 3: Opposing Undermining Theologies, even in Peace

My third thesis claims that when peace prevails, ecumenical actors tend to accept each other’s differences in socioethical issues as a consequence of context or theoretical-doctrinal differences. The ROC’s general juxtaposition of itself with the West includes a hidden claim that the “Western churches” endorse the secularized liberal-democratic concept of individual freedom. The argument implies that if the “Western churches” do not represent what the ROC calls “traditional values,” then their reasoning on social ethics is not theological at all - it is distorted by secularized Western liberal ideologies as debates during a dialogue round between the ROC and the Evangelical Lutheran church from year 2005 show.²⁸

²⁷ Conference of European Churches, *Resisting Empire, Promoting Peace: Churches Confront the “Russian World” ideology. Conference Statement*, ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/2025-news/Helsinki%20Conference%20statement_final.pdf, accessed February 2, 2026.

²⁸ See Hurskainen, “Ecumenical Social Ethics,” 395–97, where I describe in a positive and consensus-oriented way the dialogue held in 2005 between the ROC and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland. In later evaluation, it is easy to recognize the foundations of the ROC’s appeal to “traditional values,” as well as the currently widespread anti-Western attitude, in the claims made at the time by ROC Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfejev) about Western society. He argues that Western society is built entirely on secular foundations and he encourages the churches to question the existing reality.

The ROC's construction of the West and its churches does not even attempt to listen to or learn from their theological argumentation. For the ROC, theological reasoning effectively does not exist unless it aligns with its own argument concerning "traditional values."²⁹ Rather, the ROC's construction of the West is based on the process of securitization, where the West is seen as "the other." Thus, the ROC has claimed for itself a position of "traditional" religion in Russia, in order to safeguard its place and role in the Russian society against other actors.³⁰ These arguments and actions have little to do with the way Western churches understand their theology themselves.

Neither had Western churches paid sufficient attention to the theology on which the ROC bases its present-day argumentation on war during times of peace. Attempts to understand societal changes in Russia (and the ROC's role in the transformation of Russian society and global politics from the 1990s onward) have led to a blindness toward the doctrinal reasoning behind these developments within the ROC. What was framed as an "understanding" of the social conditions and of the ROC's position under the heavy pressure of Russia's internal politics was, in fact, a failure to recognize the ROC's evolving doctrinal social ethics and its potentially lethal consequences.³¹

In times of peace, societal issues risk being seen falsely as issues only of context, not as issues reflecting the very core of their theological, doctrinal understanding of person, church, and the world. If theological

I also highlighted the viewpoint of the Lutheran docent Antti Raunio. Aiming at a shared conclusion, Raunio articulated concerns common to both parties regarding the role of the church in the public sphere. However, his theological arguments also refuted Hilarion's unfounded assumption that Western societies have been built in isolation from the influence of Western churches. According to Raunio, it is possible to discern God's work in society even when society is understood as secular.

²⁹ Lucian Turcescu, "Eastern Orthodox Constructions on «the West» in the Post-Communist Political Discourse: The cases of the Romanian and Russian Orthodox Churches," in *Orthodox Constructions on the West*, eds., George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 219–24.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 219–24.

³¹ Western churches' understanding of the ROC stems from the time when the ROC clergy believed the Russian nation to be in great danger in the 1990s – "the harm that «Western» and non-traditional clerics were allegedly inflicting on Russian society, which created the impression that something needed to be done to restrict them." See Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church*, 42. However, the ROC had been active itself to defying "traditional religion" and leaving, for example, Lutheran tradition out of it. See *Ibidem*, 39. Understanding these voices within the ROC requires taking a deeper look at the theology on which the statements and interpretations are based.

misinterpretations are not recognized, their practical consequences will not be thoroughly considered.

Therefore, I ask if in times of peace, general ecumenical aims hinder partners in dialogue from paying enough attention to their socio-ethical teaching. Traditionally, dialogue ecumenism is about aiming to approach each other and to converge and unite in matters of doctrine. If the aim is to reconcile differences in this particular time and context, how can churches address their own imperfections – an inevitable challenge when engaging with societal issues? However, if societal ethics are seen merely as a contextual and not doctrinal issue, then the churches do not need to look seriously at some aspects of their theology in ecumenical dialogues. The problem might not seem crucial during times of peace. Theological social ethics offer a way to correct or guide life and advance the common good. But it needs to be connected with the overall core of Christian doctrine; otherwise, theological social ethics may go completely astray. For example, the ROC constructed its doctrinal argument for its understanding of human rights and dignity and published *The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights* in 2008. Its doctrinal reasoning questions the universality of human rights by claiming that the concept of human rights was developed in the West. In this framework, human dignity is interpreted primarily in terms of what merits respect and what constitutes dignified behavior.³² The argumentation leads to the conclusion that human rights are neither unchanging nor universal, and therefore do not necessarily protect everyone's right to life or guarantee that all people are treated with equal respect. The ROC's views were widely discussed and challenged by scholars from various disciplines, as well as by the ROC's ecumenical partners. Yet one may ask whether the ROC's doctrinal positions were taken seriously enough – and whether they were challenged consistently enough – in ecumenical dialogues.

A good example is the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland. In 2008, the discussions in the dialogue on human rights and human dignity were not easy, and the final theses relied largely on the “results of previous discussion rounds.” Despite their different emphases, the churches did indeed

³² ROC, ed., “The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” see also Lauri Mälksoo, “The Human Rights Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarch Kirill I: A Critical Appraisal,” *Russia and European Human Rights Law: The Rise of Civilizational Argument*, ed., Lauri Mälksoo (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2014), 15–30. 19, 23.

affirm together: “The human dignity is based on their being unique and irreplaceable as creations of God. God created people in his own image and according to his likeness (Genesis 1:26).”³³ After the dialogue round held in 2011, the next round in 2014 was cancelled because the ROC demanded a shared, explicitly negative stance on same-sex marriage as a precondition for continuing the dialogue. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland did not accept such a precondition, insisting instead that difficult issues must be discussed together even if reaching a common understanding is not possible.³⁴ The complex reasons (practical, political, and theological) cannot be discussed in detail here. In practice, the ROC was not only demanding a practical rejection of same-sex marriage but also requiring acceptance of its own theological reasoning. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland could not accept this demand and ended the dialogue, because the conditions for a genuinely reciprocal dialogue were no longer present.

Later during the same decade, The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland decided to ignore the ROC’s anti-dialogical position and claims of harmful Western liberalism for Western churches for the sake of continuing institutionalized ecumenical dialogue between the two churches in 2020, without any attempt to reach common conclusions anymore.³⁵

Times of war are the real stumbling blocks of theological social ethics. War reveals, in a very brutal way, the nature and consequences of theological social-ethical reasoning. When full-scale war started in 2022, the Finnish Lutheran Church not only withdrew all the contacts with ROC and demanded that it condemn the war in order to continue the contacts, but the Finnish archbishop also condemned the ROC’s opinion of Western churches as puppets of liberal, secular Western society.³⁶ The

³³ “St.Petersburg 2008,” *Sinappi, St. Ptersburg and Siikaniemi: The 13th, 14th and 15th Theological Discussions between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church* (Church Council, Helsinki, 2013), 162, ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/uploads/2015/07/KKH_venalaisneuvottelut_2013_verkko_2_.pdf, accessed January 18, 2026.

³⁴ Hurskainen, *Ecumenical Social Ethics as the World Changed. Socio-Ethical Discussion in the Ecumenical Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland 1970–2008*. Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 67 (Luther-Agricola-Society: Helsinki, 2013), 394–97.

³⁵ The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Department for International Relations, ed., “Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon ja Venäjän ortodoksisen kirkon välisten oppikeskustelujen valmistelukokous 30.9.2019.” (Archive of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, 2019).

³⁶ The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, ed., “Sota Ukrainassa”, web.archive.org/web/, accessed February 2, 2025; Tapio Luoma and Arkkipiispa Leo, “Ukrainan

archbishop did exactly what The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland under his command did not want to do in times of peace and refused to accept the ROC's poor and false context-based socio-ethical claims. What remained unspoken was that the ROC had built the foundation for its claims long before the war, and The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, among other churches,³⁷ had decided at some point to ignore these developments.

Thesis 4: Theology underlies Socioethical Practice

Therefore, my fourth thesis is that the war has shown that the theology behind socio-ethical thinking needs to be treated seriously in the ecumenical sphere. It needs to be seen not only as a contextual issue but also as a theological, even doctrinal, issue with practical and tangible consequences. For example, churches must challenge each other regarding how they treat their neighboring churches in the same country or how they want society to treat their neighboring churches. This would reveal not only the churches' attitude towards religious freedom, historical circumstances, and cultural power plays, but also the theology behind the

sotaa ei saa perustella uskonnolla,” Helsingin Sanomat (July 2022), hs.fi/mielipide/, accessed February 2, 2025.

³⁷ The Roman Catholic Church can be criticized for a similar kind of ignorance. For example, Vatican II situated religious freedom within the theological category of human dignity, and it affirmed clear arguments against wars of aggression. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church has also expressed a cautious – sometimes even negative – attitude toward the re-sacralization of human dignity, see ie. David G. Kirchhoffer, “The Roman Catholic church on the secularization of the concept of human dignity,” *Louvain Studies* 39, no:3 (2016), 240–60 and Kristopher Norris, “«NEVER AGAIN WAR»: Recent Shifts in the Roman Catholic Just War Tradition and the Question of «Functional Pacifism»,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no:1 (March 2014), 108–36. On page 113 Norris argues: “Every State, therefore, has a duty to protect its own population from violations of human rights. Pope Benedict XVI took this defense one step further in an address to the United Nations in 2008, endorsing the proposal of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty from six years earlier. If States are unable to guarantee such protection, he asserts, the international community must intervene (Benedict XVI 2008). This principle of the “Responsibility to Protect” obligates other nations, as a moral duty, to come to the aid of victims within other sovereignties if that government is unable to protect them or is, in fact, the aggressor.” The stance of the Roman Catholic Church has changed in the context of the war in Ukraine, and its perceived passivity as well as its efforts to “understand” the Russian side have been heavily criticized; see Thomas Bremer, Regina Elsner, Massimo Faggiolo and Kristina Stoeckl, “To Stop Russian Manipulation, Francis Must Make Vatican’s Stand on Ukraine Clear,” *National Catholic Reporter* May 2, 2022, nchronline.org/news/opinion/stop-russian-manipulation-francis-must-make-vaticans-stand-ukraine-clear, accessed January 18, 2026.

practice. Hopefully, this will help in recognizing inhuman and, therefore, untrue theologies easily.

In this sense, great attention should be paid to the current situation in Russia. What is the position of minority churches there? Are they able to practice their religion? How much has the longstanding pressure to implement uniformity in values influenced them? Do they have similar opportunities to influence society as ROC? What are ROC's answers to these questions? Is it possible for different actors to assert conflicting socio-ethical positions? Perhaps the answers to many of these questions are obvious and not very encouraging.³⁸ However, when these questions are not constantly raised by the ecumenical sphere, they start creating false images. For example, ecumenical circles may start believing that Ukraine and its churches face the most critical problems of religious freedom because they are discussed the most.³⁹

Conclusions

Theology can be used as a tool for securitization. The four theses have sought to demonstrate that religion is not merely a tool of political securitization policies. The Church – in this case, the ROC – has *securitized church-state relations*. It acts as if it alone possesses the correct understanding of the relationship between church and society, an understanding that it claims is grounded in its consistent and long-developed theological tradition. By securitizing church-state relations the ROC disregards the theological interpretations developed by Western churches concerning the relationship between Church and society. It often appears as though Western churches can only react to the ROC's claims. What is needed, however, is clearer theological argumentation with which they can actively confront the ROC's views.

The socio-ethical reasoning and practices of social ethics (especially in times of war) show that the ecumenical sphere cannot ignore how the Orthodox Church has been securitized in Russia, nor how the ROC has securitized the relationship between Church and state.

Theology can be used as a tool for different kinds of actions, including inhuman actions. Therefore, churches should pay more attention to the theological reasoning behind ecumenical socioethical statements.

³⁸ Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church*, 36–56; Penttilä, “The War Changes Everything,” 137–58; Adam Terzyan, “The State of Religious Freedom in Russia: Towards Orthodox Monopoly,” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 9, no.2 (2023): 507–19.

³⁹ National Council of Churches of Denmark, “Memorandum”.

The ROC's Human Rights statement from 2008 shows how the process of securitization had already begun in ecumenical socioethical matters. Experts on ecumenism should now look to Russia and the ROC's theology and ask what kinds of models of discussion are needed in times of peace to avoid the consequences of the ROC's theology in Ukraine.

Response

BY JENNIFER WASMUTH*

The theses presented by Heta Hurskainen raise fundamental questions of ecumenical dialogue and should therefore be the subject of a broader ecumenical discussion. As theses, they are powerful because they are deliberately pointed and provocative. As theses, they are also vulnerable because they cannot provide an in-depth academic argumentation. The following aims to acknowledge the value of these theses while also pointing out areas where further reflection and research would be appropriate.

On the Introduction “Ecumenical Consequences from Socio-Ethical Perspectives”

The use of the concept of securitization to theoretically contextualize the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) can be considered highly innovative: e.g., it makes it possible to highlight the *constructive* nature of the dichotomization between “East” and “West,” propagated by the ROC, while at the same time revealing the need for security as a motive for this dichotomization. It also allows us to tie in explanatory approaches that seek to explain intra-Orthodox conflicts as an unresolved problem of autocephaly in the sense of sovereignty claims, as they also occur in the political context.⁴⁰

However, it remains unclear what significance the concept of securitization, developed in the 1990s, still has in political academic discourse today, or whether it is not merely a reference to an outdated concept,

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⁴⁰ Cf Wasmuth, “Nation and Orthodoxy: Between Universal Claim and Local Patriotism,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 35, no. 1 (2018): 57–76.

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because what is now of greater concern is not so much the element of deliberate dramatization as the constantly changing culture of security.⁴¹ It would also be necessary to show specifically to what extent political theories can be applied to church organizations; the introduction simply states: “Also, a church organization can use securitization or a similar course of action to guard and securitize both social and doctrinal claims.” Finally, to substantiate the thesis, it would be necessary to analyze various statements of the ROC to clarify the extent to which the motif of “security” can actually be identified as a guiding motif here. The motif does not appear in the quotations cited.

Under the title “Religious Freedom according to ROC before the War,” it is convincingly pointed out that, since 2000 at the latest, it has become apparent that the ROC is pursuing its own agenda concerning human rights: to promote human rights as a means of ensuring its own institutional self-preservation and, at the same time, to claim social primacy over other Christian or religious communities by referring to its historical role.

However, the thesis that this agenda and its socio-ethical consequences have not been perceived in the ecumenical context may apply to bilateral dialogues such as those between the EKD or the ELCF and the ROC, as well as to the WCC, although this would still have to be proven in detail. In this context, however, it should be noted that the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) issued a clear and critical reaction to the 2008 Declaration on Human Rights, and further contributions on the subject were also published.⁴²

On the First Thesis

The call not to lose sight of the ROC and Russia and to continue to monitor developments closely appears to be very significant, even if evidence still needs to be provided that the ROC and Russia are currently receiving less attention than was the case before 2022. It also seems reasonable to make handling of religious freedom a criterion for ecumenical dialogue and not to ignore the problematic handling of religious freedom, as evident in the ROC, for the sake of abstract unity.

⁴¹ Cf. Christopher Daase, “Wandel der Sicherheitskultur,” bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/32301/wandel-der-sicherheitskultur/?p=all, accessed October 22, 2025.

⁴² For the CPCE statement and further contributions see: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 59, no 3 (2010): oekumenische-rundschau-zeitschrift.de/ojs/index.php/oekr/issue/view/7230, accessed October 22, 2025.

On the other hand, from a theological-ecclesiological point of view, it seems questionable to make mutual acceptance of the churches a prerequisite for dialogue, since this acceptance is precisely the subject and goal of dialogue. The debates at the “Holy and Great Council” (2016) in Crete showed how little “acceptance” is taken for granted, not only in the ROC but in Orthodoxy as a whole.⁴³ In fact, the document of the Holy and Great Council of Crete of 2016, entitled “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,” describes in §6 as its “conviction that through dialogue she [the Orthodox Church] gives a dynamic witness to the fullness of truth in Christ and to her spiritual treasures to those who are *outside her*, with the objective aim of smoothing the path leading to unity,” and stipulates in § 11, quoting the Toronto Statement (1950): “... *Moreover, from the fact of its inclusion in the Council, it does not ensue that each Church is obliged to regard the other Churches as Churches in the true and full sense of the term.*”⁴⁴ Besides, the concept of “acceptance” would have to be placed in relation to the ecumenically highly relevant concept of “recognition” with its long and intensive tradition of theological and philosophical discussion.⁴⁵

More fundamentally, the first thesis appears problematic in that it is unclear who has the right to define whether religious freedom is affected or not. Conversely, the ROC would claim that religious freedom in liberal Western democracies is being compromised with the support of local churches. Being able to discuss this issue in direct encounters requires ecumenical dialogue, but making one’s own view a condition for entering into or continuing a dialogue is the opposite of a willingness to engage in dialogue that seeks to bring different perspectives into the conversation.

And what does this mean in practical terms? Should all kinds of dialogue be abandoned? By every church that is in contact with the ROC? At every level and in every respect? Is that what is meant when the first thesis states:

[...], the ROC’s theological reasoning on religious freedom does not recognize the very existence of another church as a legitimate religious organization. This kind of theologized and spiritualized interpretation of religious freedom has ultimately made – and continues

⁴³ Cf. *Ökumenische Rundschau* 66, no 1 (2017): oekumenische-rundschau.de/archiv/heiliges_und_grosses_konzil_kreta_2016, accessed October 22, 2025.

⁴⁴ Cf. holycouncil.org/rest-of-christian-world, accessed October 22, 2025; italic emphasis in the original, italic and bold emphasis by jw.

⁴⁵ Cf. Risto Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion. A Historical and Systematic Study* (Oxford: University Press, 2016).

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to make - any form of respectful and reciprocal dialogue impossible. *Ecumenical circles should finally admit this fact in their connections with the ROC.*⁴⁶

On the Second Thesis

The demand that ecumenical encounters must allow for criticism to be expressed without fear of the dialogue being broken off must be emphasized. In retrospect, it seems a mistake that during the last official dialogue meeting between the EKD and ROC, which took place in Munich in December 2015 and which had the topic of “peace and reconciliation” 70 years after the end of the Second World War on its agenda, the current conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and the different assessments of them were expressly not addressed, because “the aim of the meeting was to talk about aspects where common ground could be possible.”⁴⁷ This ruled out from the outset the possibility of an exchange on these sensitive issues and of the EKD, as the Western partner, at least gaining a better understanding of current developments in the ROC. If the sensitive, possibly church-dividing, and politically explosive topics are left out of the dialogue, what is the point of finding common ground? In my view, the aim of ecumenical dialogues is precisely to deal with the confessional counterpart in all its complexity and not to exclude the difficult issues.

However, here too, it cannot be just a matter of criticizing the ecumenical counterpart, but must also and first and foremost be a matter of self-criticism, for example, the question of the extent to which developments, particularly in the ROC, have been followed closely enough in the past, but also the question of the extent to which churches in the Western context have become mouthpieces for the dominant social discourses in their contexts. Therefore, talking here as a representative of ecumenical theology, I see a tremendous need for research in this field: Ecumenical theology must ask itself why a development such as the one that led to the war in Ukraine, with the support of the ROC, was not foreseen, was not anticipated in any way. For me, this is not just about the issue of human rights, on which at least there was a controversy between the CPCE and the ROC, but also about the dialogues that have been going on for decades. What is needed here is meticulous research that reconstructs the

⁴⁶ Italic and bold emphasis by jw.

⁴⁷ “Evangelische und Orthodoxe sprechen über den Frieden” (09.12.2025), ekd.de/news_2015_12_09_6_orthodoxe_frieden.htm, accessed October 22, 2025.

developments of the dialogues. This will also be an important prerequisite for future dialogue.

On the Third Thesis

It seems entirely convincing to view the war in Ukraine as a “game-changer” that has revealed many things that were hidden in times of peace - the consequences that, among others, the ELCF has drawn from this by ending the dialogue are very logical. From my point of view, social-ethical claims should be given greater consideration in the ecumenical context too, especially since they have been brought in by the ROC for years and have now actually been used to legitimize the war. Accordingly, social-ethical differences should not simply be downplayed as theologically less relevant, as they play a role as dividing factors not only in dialogue with the ROC or other Orthodox churches, but also with other churches. There is a broad field here that has already been worked on ecumenically,⁴⁸ but there is certainly a need for further research to be done.

At the same time, it seems debatable to view socio-ethical positions as an expression of the core of religions, as is stated in the third thesis, “of the very core of their theological, doctrinal understanding of person, church, and the world,” and, thus, to assume that this is where their “true” nature is revealed. A brief look at history is enough to raise questions here: What about the New Testament testimony, which presents modern societies with many socio-ethical challenges? What about the social-ethical teachings that were advocated during the Reformation? Do they reflect the “very core”? And is Reformation theology, therefore, as such, outdated? In my opinion, the opposite argument should be made, and the question asked: to what extent can certain context-bound social ethical views be theologically legitimized or must be criticized?

On the Fourth Thesis

The call to closely observe further developments in Russia and to ask how church minorities and their potentially dissenting opinions are being treated is of fundamental importance. There is a strong ecumenical responsibility to pay attention to such developments! But apart from the fact that church and religious minorities in Russia often take similar po-

⁴⁸ See especially the study process on moral discernment and the latest publication related to this process: oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment-iii?keywords=Churches%20and%20Moral%20Discernment&op=Search&vkey=1, accessed October 22, 2025.

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sitions to the ROC about the war in Ukraine, and that it is difficult to imagine them behaving differently given the authoritarian political conditions,⁴⁹ I believe that a central ecumenical task is to listen carefully to and support those *in* the ROC who hold different opinions – not to run the risk of reducing an organization as large as the ROC to its publicly expressed statements and failing to recognize that there are other voices within the ROC.⁵⁰

Beyond Russia, however, developments in Ukraine should also be monitored, particularly those following the 2024 law on religion. It does not seem to me that too much attention is being paid to this; rather, many in the West are adopting an undifferentiated view of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is very common in Ukraine, talking about the UOC as the “Russian Church”, but which does not correspond to the self-image of this church: to be a henchman of the ROC to this day. In view of how the issue of religious freedom is being dealt with in Ukraine, the UOC seems to be becoming a litmus test. Therefore, the treatment of this church deserves special attention – especially in light of the ROC’s attempts to instrumentalize the UOC for its own purposes.

⁴⁹ Cf. the different contributions *RGOW* 52, no. 11 (2024): noek.info/publikationen/3558-rgow-11-2024-nicht-russische-welt-imperiale-politik-und-ethnische-minderheiten-in-russland, accessed October 22, 2025.

⁵⁰ Cf. the work of the organization “Peace upon all”: www.mir-vsem.info/en, accessed October 22, 2025.