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THE POST-COMMUNIST SITUATION
MORAL ARGUMENT IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEBATE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Introduction

Over the last decade and a half the Russian Orthodox Church has conducted an intense debate on human rights, initiated by today’s patriarch and former metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, Kirill. In an article published in Nezavisimaya Gazeta on 26 May 1999, Kirill expressed the conviction that human rights are a natural result of the Western cultural development that he outlined as follows: The Renaissance (i.e., the return of ancient paganism) triggered a chain of subsequent cultural changes leading to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, materialism, and atheism, which finally led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ultimate codification of anthropocentrism. Since the Russian Orthodox tradition did not share this history, ran Kirill’s argument, it could not share the concept of “human rights.” Shortly after the appearance of this rather pointed article, Kirill apparently felt the need to express his position in more detail. Thus, on 16 February 2000, he published a second article in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, which began as follows:

A fundamental contradiction of our time and also a major challenge to the human community in the twenty-first century is the confrontation of liberal civilization standards, on the one hand, and the values of national cultural and religious identity. The study of the genesis of the contradiction between these two crucial factors of modern
development and the search for ways to overcome it should take, as it seems, an important place in Orthodox theological studies. Since this is a problem whose solution will largely determine the future shape of the human civilization, it is clear that the very formulation of the problem and attempts to settle its primary definition [here Kirill refers to his previous article] are not only the fruit of a sincere interest, but no less of sincere anger. Anger about those who out of ideological convictions reject the very idea of raising these issues for fear of a possible correction or revision of the liberal ideas which today underpin the attempts to shape the human community into a “melting pot” of cultures and civilizations. Anger also about those zealots and religious and cultural fundamentalists who have made up their mind on these problems long ago and are deeply convinced that the only way to move further is to tightly close the door of their house.3

Kirill concluded that critical and creative engagement with liberal values was among the most important tasks of Orthodox theology.4 It is quite symbolic that Nezavisimaya Gazeta printed this article alongside a reproduction of a nineteenth-century woodcut by the romantic artist Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld entitled The Healing of the Two Blind Men. The symbolism of the image underlined the argument of the article—namely, that there is a conflict between two sides blinded by their ideological fervor.

What Kirill did in this article was to distance himself from both forms of “blindness”: He did not think that Russia should unconditionally adhere to the Western modern and secular trajectory, as liberal secularists would argue, nor did he want to find himself on the side of the religious zealots, who would not even consider the question of human rights because they condemn the intellectual universe that has created them in the first place. In contrast, Kirill argued for the need to find a third way. But of what should this third way consist? In this article, I look at three important documents—The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church from the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity by the Tenth World Council of Russian People, and the Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights—in order to show how the shaping of an ideological middle ground in the Church’s confrontation with human rights took place. A keyword in this process is “morality,” and I will therefore pay
particular attention to the way in which the moral argument developed in the official discourse of the Moscow Patriarchate in the period from 2000 to 2008. Before that, however, I will devote some words to the theoretical challenges related to the study of the relationship between religion and human rights.

**Religion and Human Rights**

How are we to conceptualize the relationship between religion and human rights in the modern secular world? Louis Henkin has described human rights and religion as two separate ideological worlds with good reasons for mutual suspicion. Religions are suspicious of human rights because they are much older than the human rights idea and have seen no need for that idea. Religions laid claim to conceptions of the good, of the good society, long ago, without any idea of rights. . . . They do not welcome the ideological independence of human rights, its insistence on nontheistic support for the idea, its resistance to the higher law of society and even to divine law. [Religions] have not had confidence in an ideology that does not claim divine origin and inspiration and has no essential place for the Deity. Spokesmen for religion have declared secular foundations for human rights to be weak, unstable, and doomed to fail and pass away. Some religions resist what they see as the concentration on, indeed the apotheosis of, the individual and the exaltation of individual autonomy and freedom. The emphasis of religion, of religions, was not upon the individual but upon the community.\(^5\)

The human rights ideology, in turn, is suspicious about religion because it does not see human rights as integral to a cosmic order. It does not derive from any sacred text. Its sources are human, deriving from contemporary human life in human society. Human rights is a political idea and ideology that claims to reflect a universal contemporary moral intuition. Human institutions have adopted the idea to serve the purpose of the good life within national political societies in an international political system.\(^6\)

The quotations from Henkin are helpful in framing the problem of the religious perspectives on human rights that I want to address in this article,
not least because Henkin is slightly overstating the contrast between the two sides. Henkin rejects those theories according to which the human rights idea grew from religious inspiration: “Though some Christian theologians have argued that Western human rights theory is grounded in religious faith, human rights morality is, in fact, autonomous.”7 He also denies any kind of connection between the concept of “human dignity” as it is used in human rights covenants and a religious understanding of human dignity. In his view, the contours of the religious morality developed around this concept [of human dignity] are not congruent with human dignity as commonly conceived in the domain of human rights . . . [because] religions have defined human dignity so that it will coincide with a morality rooted in particular theological foundations and in its historic-sociological manifestations over centuries of life in particular religious societies.8 From Henkin’s perspective, no real dialogue or engagement is possible between secular approaches to human rights and traditional religious positions; all that is possible is pragmatic adaptation and division of tasks. Religions should recognize that their interests can be advanced by the human rights idea, not least because, “if only in self-defense . . . [they have] had to develop attitudes toward modern society and modern political authority.”9 Human rights, on the other hand, are not a substitute for religion, but “a supplemental ‘theology’ for pluralistic, urban, secular societies.”10

Henkin’s sketch of the problem of religion and human rights contains four elements that are important for my interpretation of the contemporary Russian Orthodox approach to human rights: (1) the idea that from a human rights perspective the individual is, first and foremost, endowed with rights, whereas from a religious perspective what comes first are the duties of every single person; (2) the idea that from the human rights perspective the individual comes first, whereas from a religious perspective the community comes first; (3) the fact that “human dignity” has become a contested term that is used both in human rights and in religious discourses, but is endowed with different meanings; (4) the argument that religions adapt to the modern language of human rights out of a pragmatic calculation in order to claim their stake in secular societies, as well as the opposite view that their engagement with the modern world is a sign of genuine modernization.
These four elements—rights vs. duties, individual vs. community, human dignity, and pragmatic calculation vs. genuine modernization—are leitmotifs for the Russian Orthodox discussion of human rights in this article, but I will show that the ascriptions of the different positions to either religion or the human rights regime are not always as clear cut as Henkin suggests. I do not subscribe fully to Henkin’s description since he presents religion and human rights as two closed and unchangeable systems of reasoning. This, I think, is wrong. It is wrong from the perspective of religions, because religious traditions and theologies evolve with time, even if very slowly, and their capacity to confront new topics is not only a matter of self-defense but also of human creativity and, from the perspective of the religious mindset, divine inspiration. It is also wrong from the perspective of human rights, because the human rights regime is continuously changing; human rights treaties and legislation have evolved since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948, and religions are among those actors trying to take an active role in influencing human rights definitions today.

A theoretical perspective that I find more fruitful for structuring the debate on religion and human rights is the idea of “the sacralization of the person” put forward recently by Hans Joas. Joas tries to show both that human rights do not belong to an exclusively secularist terrain, and that they do not sprout from a purely religious soil. He suggests that the modern human rights idea is a genuinely new development, related to religious and secular intellectual traditions and practices, but not reducible to either of them alone: He calls this new development “the sacralization of the person.” Joas provides an excellent summary of the fruitless debate between secular and religious attempts to legitimize human rights. Conventional lay wisdom (not necessarily shared by academics), he writes, holds that human rights emerged from the spirit of the French Revolution, which is in turn considered a political expression of the anticlerical and antireligious Enlightenment: “From this perspective, human rights are clearly not the fruit of any religious tradition, but rather the manifestation of resistance to a power alliance linking state and (Catholic) church, or to Christianity as a whole.” The alternative narrative asserts that the notion of inalienable human rights was able to take root because it could build on an understanding of the human being as cultivated in the Christian tradition. This perspective became prevalent in the course of the twentieth century when the Catholic Church moved from its initial condemnation of the
concept of human rights to its endorsement. Both of these narratives, Joas concludes, are untenable, and he suggests an alternative in which the focus of his analysis is the notion of “sacredness.” He interprets the belief in human rights and universal human dignity as the result of a specific process of sacralization of the human being, “a process in which every single human being has increasingly, and with ever-increasing motivational and sensitizing effects, been viewed as sacred, and this understanding has been institutionalized in law.”

In the early years of the 1990s, the New School professor Adamantia Pollis unequivocally stated:

Individual human rights cannot be derived from Orthodox theology. The entire complex of civil and political rights—freedom of religion, freedom of speech and press, freedom of association, and due process of law, among others—cannot be grounded in Orthodoxy, they stem from a radically different worldview.

This statement is correct insofar as it is indeed difficult to “derive” liberal individual human rights from Orthodox theology. However, it would be equally difficult to derive these rights in a straightforward manner from any other religious tradition. The Christian churches for most of their history existed untroubled by torture and other abuses, rejected the human rights declarations of the eighteenth century, and were even skeptical about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Even today, most Christian churches in the United States are not moved to protest the continuing practice of the death penalty in many American states. Joas is correct, therefore, when he points out that it is erroneous to imagine human rights as something that inevitably springs up from the roots of some traditions and not of others. Traditions as such “generate nothing”—what matters is how specific actors, belonging to certain traditions, in a specific moment of time and under specific institutional circumstances, set themselves in relation to the innovative idea of universal human rights or the process of the sacralization of the person, as Joas terms it. He writes:

As a novel form of the sacralization of the person, the rise of human rights represents a challenge to Christianity—and to other religious and even to secular value traditions and worldviews—in light of which their adherents must inevitably reinterpret them.
This is especially true for the Orthodox churches, which are somewhat delayed among Christians in engaging with the idea of human rights.

In a recent article, Vasilios Makrides mapped the Orthodox theological engagement with human rights on a continuum from “complete rejection” to “accommodation.” At the “complete rejection” end of the scale he situates theologians including Christos Yannaras and Vigen Gurojan, and at the “accommodation” end he identifies writers and churchmen such as Anastasios Yannoulatos and Konstantinos Delikostantis. In the middle, he situates the *Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights.* This middle ground is characterized by what Makrides, with reference to Alexander Agadjanian, calls a strategy of “acceptance-through-rejection”—an acceptance of the human rights language paired with a rejection of the definition and aims of modern human rights ideologies. My own findings regarding the function of moral arguments in the human rights debate in the Russian Orthodox Church confirm the assessment given by Makrides and Agadjanian. However, I have also found that the middle position is not stable: It took shape as a theological and moral strategy over a relatively short period of time from 2000 to 2008, but was then immediately incorporated into the larger and purely political category of “traditional values.” In the remainder of this article I will describe this development and, in the conclusion, offer some ideas on why I think that the middle ground identified by Makrides is destined to remain theologically and intellectually barren.

**Human Rights in the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church**

In 2000, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church approved a document, *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (*Osnovy Sotsial’noi kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*; hereafter, *Social Concept*), which constituted a novelty in the Orthodox world. In this document, the Church laid out its position on a number of issues: church-state relations, law, family, society, biotechnology, and globalization. When *Social Concept* was published in 2000, many commentators interpreted the mere fact of its formulation as an important step of Russian Orthodoxy on its way toward modernization.

*Social Concept* addressed members of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian society as a whole. Though it also found resonance outside of
Russia, especially in the Catholic world, its intended audience was domestic. With this document, the Church quite clearly reacted to the social upheaval in Russian society since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, which had brought many freedoms but also many social and economic problems and, in the eyes of the Church, moral decline. In the document, the Church offered guidelines for Orthodox believers on questions such as abortion, contraception, euthanasia, genetic engineering, and environmental protection. In particular, the political agenda of Social Concept constituted a novelty: The Church defined itself as independent from the Russian state and government. Drawing a lesson from the history of subordination under the Tsarist state and of suppression by the Soviet state, the Church positioned itself as a potential counter-player to the government and an independent force in civil society. This commitment to a separation of church and state was, as I have shown elsewhere, not necessarily liberal in nature, but did constitute a break with the long tradition of the symphonic model of church-state relations, characteristic of Orthodox Christian politics.

Human rights are treated in Section IV: Christian Ethics and Secular Law of Social Concept, wherein they are associated with the rise of secularism and self-sufficient humanism:

As secularism developed, the lofty principles of inalienable human rights turned into a notion of the rights of the individual outside his relations with God. In this process, the freedom of the personality transformed into the protection of self-will (as long as it is not detrimental to individuals) and into the demand that the state should guarantee a certain material living standard for the individual and family. In the contemporary systematic understanding of civil human rights, man is treated not as the image of God, but as a self-sufficient and self-sufficing subject.

Social Concept presented human rights as the product of a Western secular legal positivism, which started to influence the Russian legal space after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, but was essentially alien to the national legal culture. The document clearly remained on a confrontational and ideologically closed plane vis-à-vis the concept of human rights. Though the document is, over considerable stretches, a text of moderation, the section on human rights departs sharply from this trend. Rather, it represents the nationalist and anti-Western viewpoint on human rights that was apparently dominant inside the Church at that time.
The Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity of the Tenth World Council of Russian People

In 2006, a second document concerning human rights emerged from the Moscow Patriarchate. To be precise, the Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity by the Tenth World Council of Russian People (Vsemirnij Narodnij Russkij Sobor’, hereafter often referred to as the Russian Declaration of Human Rights to distinguish it from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) was not strictly speaking a Church document, but the fact that it was issued by the World Russian People’s Council, a nongovernmental organization chaired by the patriarch, with its seat on the premises of the Patriarchate, makes it clear enough that the document was produced with the full knowledge of the hierarchy of the Church. In retrospect we can interpret the Russian Declaration as an intermediate step on the path of the Russian Orthodox Church toward the formulation of the Basic Teaching. In 2006, however, when the Russian Declaration of Human Rights was published, its decidedly anti-Western and antiliberal attitude escalated the reception of the ideas expressed in Social Concept six years earlier.

The Russian Declaration established a link between human rights and morality. In the Russian original this connection is expressed in the rather convoluted phrase “the content of human rights cannot not be connected with morality (ne mozhet ne byt’ svyazano),” simplified in the English translation as “human rights essentially involve morality.” The authors of the Russian Declaration offered a theological argument for this link—they drew a distinction between human worth (tsennost’) and human dignity (dostoinstvo), claiming that the attainment of the latter depends on morally dignified life-conduct: “Each person as image of God has singular unalienable worth, which must be respected by every one of us, the society and the state. It is by doing good that the human being gains dignity. Thus we distinguish between human worth and dignity. Worth is given, while dignity is acquired.”

The distinction between “human worth” and “human dignity” was theologically untenable, however, and it is no surprise that the Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights published two years later corrected this distinction and dropped the term “human worth” altogether. But the very fact that this distinction was made in the document of the World Council of Russian People demonstrates that the Russian Orthodox Church was first and foremost interested in the link...
between dignity and morality, and not in a theological clarification of
dignity as such.

The 2006 *Russian Declaration of Human Rights* made reference to a
“clash of civilizations” as the justification for why the Orthodox world
must defend its position in the international human rights debate. The
first sentence of the *Russian Declaration* states: “Aware that the world,
passing through a crucial point in its history, is facing a threat of con-
fl ict between the civilizations with their different understanding of the
human being and the human being’s calling, the Tenth World Council
of Russian People, on behalf of the unique Russian civilization, adopts
this Declaration.”26 A comparison of this passage with the *Basic Teach-
ing on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* published by the episcopal
Synod two years later shows an ideological shift inside the Patriarchate
between 2006 and 2008. The *Basic Teaching* depicts a very different
scenario:

Without seeking a revolutionary reconstruction of the world, and ac-
knowledging the rights of other social groups to participate in social
transformations on the basis of their own worldview, Orthodox
Christians reserve the right to participate in building public life in a
way that does not contradict their faith and moral principles. The
Russian Orthodox Church is ready to defend the same principles in
dialogue with the world community and in cooperation with people
of other traditional confessions and religions.27

The approach of these two documents is completely different: In the
*Russian Declaration*, Orthodox tradition is described as a culture endan-
gered by the clash of civilizations; in the *Basic Teaching*, the Russian Or-
thodox Church recognized that there is a public debate about values and
rights in which all social groups and individuals are called to participate,
and in which they are permitted to defend their respective positions. With
regard to the significance of the moral argument, in 2006 the Russian Or-
thodox Church presented itself as a bulwark of morality against the im-
moral and corrupted West, whereas by 2008, though the same Church still
perceived itself as a bulwark of morality, it was now willing to enter into a
dialogue with what it described as a crisis-ridden and morally confused
West. Though this may be a limited change in approach, it nonetheless
required considerable argumentative and rhetorical efforts from the hier-
archs of the Moscow Patriarchate, as I will now show.
The Moral Argument in the Russian Orthodox Church's
Basic Teaching on Human Dignity,
Freedom, and Rights

From 2005 onwards, the Church’s standpoint on human rights shifted from mere rejection to a strategy of acceptance-through-rejection. This strategy consisted in both the acceptance of the human rights language in principle and the rejection of concrete human rights regulations in practice. A new feature of the discourse was a more intimate knowledge of the Western human rights regime, of its history, and of existing tensions in human rights legislation. This approach was inaugurated around 2005 by Metropolitan Kirill when he cited for the first time Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a text to which he has subsequently returned many times. Article 29 states (in part):

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.28

The “discovery” of Article 29 had an important effect on the human rights debate in the Russian Orthodox Church, because it provided the means through which the Church no longer had to place itself in opposition to a Western individualistic understanding of human rights, but instead might actively present itself as the vanguard of a more original understanding of human rights according to Article 29—an understanding that emphasizes the importance of morality and duties to the community. This new approach is visible in several of Kirill’s speeches in the years leading up to the publication of the Basic Teaching.

At a seminar entitled “The Evolution of Moral Principles and Human Rights in Multicultural Society” held at Strasbourg on 30 and 31 October 2006, Kirill said:

I am convinced that the concern for spiritual needs, based moreover on traditional morality, ought to return to the public realm. The upholding of moral standards must become a social cause. It is the mechanism of human rights that can actively enable this return. I am
speaking of a return, for the norm of according human rights with
traditional morality can be found in the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights of 1948.\textsuperscript{29}

The same view was expressed in his speech to UNESCO on 13 March 2007:
“The Orthodox Church invites the world to return to the understanding
of the role of human rights in social life that was established in 1948. Moral
rules can put limits to the realization of human rights in public life.”\textsuperscript{30}

The same point was reiterated by Patriarch Alexei II in a speech to the
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 2 October 2007, in
which he made reference both to the Universal Declaration of Human
Rights and to the European Convention on Human Rights:

There occurs a break between human rights and morality, and this
break threatens the European civilization. We can see it in a new gen-
eration of rights that contradict morality, and in how human rights
are used to justify immoral behavior. In this connection, I may note
that morality, with which any human rights advocacy has to count,
is mentioned in the European Convention for the Protection of
Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. I am convinced that the
makers of the European Convention on Human Rights included
therein morality not as something ambiguous but rather as an inte-
gral element of the whole human rights system.\textsuperscript{31}

The point was corroborated once more, two years after the publication of
the \textit{Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom
and Rights}, by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfayev:

It should be noted that the post-war human rights instruments did
reflect the connection between freedom and moral responsibility. The
Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 and the Euro-
pean Declaration on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
from 1950 speak about the connection between human rights and
morality. It is in later international acts such as the Charter of
Fundamental Rights of the European Union from 2000 that the
connection between human rights and morality is not mentioned.
Freedom is therefore completely divorced from morality.\textsuperscript{32}

This series of quotations shows that during the period in which the \textit{Basic
Teaching} was being drafted, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox
Church acquired an increasingly clear understanding of contemporary human rights politics and legislation. Alexei II even spoke about “a new generation of rights,” a term that is habitually used in human rights literature. The Church’s position was no longer determined by the vague inclination toward rejection that informed debates up until the mid-2000s. The Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate had acquired a precise view on the problem and a concrete sense of how to approach it. They saw their mission as affirming the link between human rights definitions and morality.

The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights, published in 2008, provided the script for this mission. It dedicated the entire first chapter to the question of human dignity as a religious and moral category. In this chapter, we read that, from the Orthodox Christian perspective, human dignity is related to the creation of the human being “in God’s image and likeness” (see Genesis 1.27). God’s image in man is described by the document as the source of human dignity that remains “indelible . . . even after the fall”—even man’s susceptibility to sinfulness cannot erase his God-given dignity. With this sentence, the Basic Teaching corrected the distinction made by the authors of the Russian Declaration of Human Rights between “worth” as something given and “dignity” as something acquired. Furthermore, the concept of human dignity does not go unqualified in the Basic Teaching: Divine-human likeness becomes, for the Church, the source for a precise understanding of how human beings should strive to overcome sin and “restore human life in the fullness of its original perfection.”

Dignified life is . . . achieved through God’s grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue. . . . What is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul. Considering the state of human nature darkened by sin, it is important that things dignified and undignified should be clearly distinguished in the life of a person.

The restoration of human life to the fullness of divine likeness is called, in the Orthodox theological tradition, theosis (deification).

In these terms, the authors of the Basic Teaching explained what effectively constitutes a “good life” according to “God’s design for human beings and their calling.”
Moral norms [are] inherent in humanity just as moral norms set forth in the divine revelation reveal God’s design for human beings and their calling. These norms are guidelines for a good life worthy of God-created humanity.  

Knowledge of these moral norms derives from revelation (scripture and the example of Jesus Christ) and from conscience. Human nature is a problematic source for morality because of its potential for sin—“life according to the law of the flesh.” For this reason the document puts a special emphasis on repentance: “The patristic and ascetic thought and the whole liturgical tradition of the Church refer more to human indignity caused by sin than to human dignity.” Chapter I concludes: “According to the Orthodox tradition, a human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms because these norms express the primordial and therefore authentic human nature not darkened by sin.”

The Russian Orthodox Church thus established a direct link between human dignity and morality, to the point that critics have read the chapter as saying that the Church is making the moral behavior of the individual a condition for recognizing his or her human dignity. I suggest that this is a slightly unfair interpretation of the Basic Teaching. It was true of the Russian Declaration of Human Rights by the Tenth World Council of Russian People, which drew a distinction between human worth and human dignity, but the Basic Teaching corrected this view and expressed, in principle, a commitment to human dignity as such. However, this commitment remains ambiguous, and it is this ambiguity that I will now address.

My sense is that one partial reason for the continuing dissatisfaction among observers with the Church’s equation of “dignified life” and “morality” is the use (and translation) of the word “morality.” The Russian version of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights uses the word moral’ three times, but more commonly the term used is nравственность or nравственныj (employed over forty times). In the English translation, both words are rendered as “morality” or “moral,” with the exception of the title of the first chapter, for which nравственныj is translated “ethical.” What are we to make of this difference, and why is it relevant?
For ordinary Russian speakers, the words *moral’* and *nравственность* do not have the same meaning. *Moral’* is understood to mean a “socially formed set of norms and principles” whereas *nравственность* appears to reflect primarily a type of “inner ethical judgment.” I interpret the prevalence of the term *nравственность* in the *Basic Teaching* as indicative of the intention of the authors of the document to define moral behavior in a comprehensive, individual, and social sense, and not merely as obeying rules.

That a real tension exists here is highlighted by the fact that the distinction between “morality” and “ethics” is a topic addressed by several Orthodox theologians throughout the twentieth century, notably Chris-tos Yannaras. Yannaras dedicated an entire book to the difference between ethics and morality, in which he distinguishes between free ethical choice and moral dictate, and accuses the churches of his time of having become moral dictators instead of places for the growth of a free ethos. Another Orthodox theologian, Anastasios Yannoulatos, has defined the moral meaning of the Church’s human rights discourse in terms of the inner makeup and ethical orientation of religious life, rather than in terms of public morality. He calls the churches to their vocation as “centres of moral and spiritual inspiration, nurseries of integrated and sanctified personalities, workshops of selfless love.” The *Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* has been criticized by liberal Orthodox commentators precisely on the grounds of this theology, which is said to lack emphasis on free ethical choice. Marina Shishova has pointed out that there is a tension in the *Basic Teaching*: Does the Church engage in human rights out of commitment to human dignity as seen from the perspective of eternal life, or out of an interest in the community defined in terms of the Russian state?

The document, not least because of the semantics of *nравственность*, remains ambiguous, but in the final analysis, it seems to me, the balance tips from dignity as a religious and ethical category to dignity defined in terms of compliance with a narrow public morality. I think it is not by chance that the Church’s discourse has changed over the last few years since the publication of the *Basic Teaching*, shifting from an emphasis on “morality” to “traditional values.” Tradition is invoked by the Church today as a source for rules of social and moral behavior and for limitations of individual human rights. When “traditional values” are invoked as the source of public
morality, the inner-outer duality of ethical judgment contained in the word morality/nravstvenost’ is lost.

Conclusion

Let us now conclude this analysis of the place of morality in the human rights debate in the Russian Orthodox Church prior to 2009. First, we have to recognize that this debate was as much a sign of the strength of Russian Orthodoxy, as it was a sign of self-defense. Why engage at all with the human rights question, if not because the Church felt affected by this new reality and new understanding of the “sacredness” of the person? Second, the human rights debate within the Church was characterized by a shift from total rejection to a more complex stance of acceptance-through-rejection. This stance was chiefly the fruit of the efforts of Metropolitan Kirill, now patriarch of Moscow, and his collaborators in the Department of External Church Relations. The outcome of this engagement was the Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights, published in 2008, and a well-defined agenda of human rights and morality in the Church’s external relations. But since then, and in particular in Russian domestic affairs, the key term for the Church appears no longer to be “human rights,” nor even “morality,” but “traditional values.” My suspicion is that the “tradition” being invoked here is not the theological tradition, but a Russian cultural tradition.

Why is this invocation of cultural tradition problematic? In reference to the Roman Catholic Church, José Casanova once observed that tradition can never be an argument for uniformity but only for pluralism, because “tradition” has always been the sum total of a multiplicity of visions of religious life and teaching, all gathered under the umbrella of the Church.47 In theological terms “tradition” does not appeal to doctrinal certainty but rather the opposite—openness. Along these lines, the Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis has pointed out that the term “tradition” in Orthodox theology should not be understood in a historical sense:

A certain version of theology has turned Tradition into traditionalism and taught us to associate the identity of the church mainly—or even exclusively—with the past, making us accustomed to an Orthodoxy that is permanently out of step with its time and history in general.48
Instead, the Eastern Orthodox tradition should be conceived in the light of eschatology: “The fullness and identity of church is not located in the past or the present . . . but in the future.” 49 And he quotes John Meyendorff:

Without eschatology, traditionalism is turned only to the past: it is nothing but archaeology, antiquarianism, conservatism, reaction, refusal of history, escapism. Authentic Christian traditionalism remembers and maintains the past not because it is past, but because it is the only way to meet the future, to become ready for it. 50

If one takes this criticism seriously, then, paradoxically, the Russian Orthodox treatment of human rights falls short of its potential not because of an excess of tradition, but because of a lack of it—a lack of tradition in an eschatological sense.

Notes
1. This article draws on material from my book The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights (London: Routledge, 2014).
12. Joas, Sacredness, 4


19. Vasilios Makrides also identifies a fourth group, which defies easy categorization along this continuum: He defines the group by “pragmatic acceptance and self-critique” and includes there authors such as Pantelis Kalaitzidis and Konstantinos Deliakostantis. I would add also Aristotle Papanikolaou. See Vasilios Makrides, “Die Menschenrechte aus orthodox-christlicher Sicht—Evaluierung, Positionen und Reaktionen,” in *Schwierige Toleranz: Der Umgang mit Andersdenkenden und Andergläubigen in der Christentumsgeschichte*, ed. M. Delgado, V. Leppin, and D. Neuhold (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer): 293–320.


26. World Council of Russian People, Declaration.


34. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.1.
35. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.2.
36. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.3.
37. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.3.
38. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.4.
39. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.5.
40. Russian Orthodox Church, Basic Teaching I.1.


50. See Kalaïtzidis, *Orthodoxy*, 89.