Just Peace
Just Peace
Orthodox Perspectives

Edited by
Semgnish Asfaw, Alexios Chehadeh
Marian Gh. Simion

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Introduction

Semegnish Asfaw, Alexios Chehadeh, Marian Gh. Simion

As part of the process leading to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) mandated by the 9th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2006 (Porto Alegre, Brazil), a set of consultations on the notion of peace—in its various dimensions—was launched in 2007 as well. An expert consultation on The Responsibility to Protect—held at the Evangelische Akademie Arnoldshain (Germany) in 2007—revealed the richness of the Orthodox tradition on issues such as war and peace, responsible protection of endangered civilian populations, and legitimate use of force.

As a follow-up to this consultation, two international conferences were co-organised by the Institute for Theology and Peace (ITHF), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Institute for Peace Studies in Eastern Christianity (IPSEC), bringing together Orthodox theologians from the Eastern and Oriental families. These consultations were focused on the Orthodox teachings on peace and justice: Ethics of Peace: An Orthodox Christian Consultation (Bucharest, Romania in 2009), and Orthodox Contributions to a Theology of Just Peace: Developing the Principles of a Just Peace (Saydnaya, Syria in 2010). This book is composed of a selection of the papers presented during these conferences.

Both conferences were welcomed, hosted, blessed and addressed by their respective Patriarchs, namely His Beatitude Daniel Ciobotea, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church; His Beatitude Ignatius IV Hazim, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East; in cooperation with His Holiness Ignatius Zakka Iwas, Patriarch of Antioch & All the East,
Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church – as reflected in the prologue of this volume. Such endorsement was a clear indication of the importance of the understanding and practice of peace and justice; it reaffirmed that peace is a divine gift, that humanity is created in God's image, and that love is the essence of Christianity.

Given the diverse and rich theological, cultural and political experiences of Orthodox churches throughout history, the two conferences explored the differences in perceptions, understanding and practice of peace among Orthodox churches and communities.

The Bucharest conference proposed several questions with the expectation that reflections would be provided from within the experience of each church. Questions included the following: What are the core teachings of the Eastern Church on peace and peaceful coexistence? Does the Eastern Church endorse war? Is war holy? Is war a lesser evil or a lesser good? As no pan-orthodox synod ever endorsed a Just War theory, the agony of war often created sentiments of self-righteousness, particularly when acting in self-defence, while also maintaining a sense of guilt for any act of violence. In order to reach a comprehensive understanding of the ethics of peace in Orthodox Christianity, the invited scholars were challenged to reflect historically and theologically on the experience of their local church over issues such as blessing weapons in times of warfare, the role of canonical traditions, the relationship between church and state, nationalism, globalization, sentiments of victimization, traditional perceptions of good and evil, the role of chaplaincy, and so on.

In engaging such themes, scholars such as Bishop Angaelos, Dr Antonia Atanassova, Dr Alexei Bodrov, Dr Harutyun Harutyunyan, Fr Jacob Kurien, and Fr Philip LeMasters insisted on their theological contextualization by emphasizing the historical experience of each church. On the other hand, scholars such as Dr Georgios I. Mantzaridis, Metropolitan Irineu Popa, Nikolaos Asproulis, Dr Pantelis Kalaitzidis, and Dr Christos Tsironis offered in-depth theological examinations.

At the Saydnaya conference the participants wrestled with questions surrounding the concept of “just peace,” again from the perspective of their own social contexts. The proposed questions included, what is the Orthodox teaching and understanding of a peaceful and just world? What are the role and mission of Orthodox communities as agents of peace? If peace cannot be understood in the absence of justice, then what does
“just peace” entail? Where do Orthodox churches and their communities stand in the face of current controversial challenges to peace, such as intervention for protection purposes, responsible prevention, and legitimate protection, and so on?

In order to reach a comprehensive understanding of the basic principles, and also coin a specific Orthodox Christian concept of “just peace,” the initial attempt was to steer the consultation towards general social ethics. This is because, in the Orthodox Church, the understanding of peace-oriented justice is rooted in a long ethical and canonical tradition centred not only on the Gospel, but also on three basic definitions offered by the Roman jurists Celsus and Ulpianus. While Celsus (+129 C.E.) defined justice as “the art of good and equity” (jus est ars boni et aequi), Ulpianus (170-228 C.E.) emphasized its distributive aspect, saying that, “justice is the constant and perpetual desire to give everyone his/her due.” (justitia est constans et perpetua voluntas, jus suum cuique tribuendi). He described the purpose of justice in non-violent terms saying that, “the precepts of justice are these: to live honestly, to harm no one, and to give everyone his due.” (juris praecepta sunt haec: honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, suum cuique tribuere [Justinian, Institutes I, I, 3; Digest, I, I, 10]) These definitions were adopted not only by the Byzantine state as guiding principles for social justice, but also replicated in the moral teachings of the Orthodox Church. For instance, when all Eastern Orthodox patriarchs adopted Metropolitan Petru Movilă’s Orthodox Confession of Faith during the pan-Orthodox Synod of Iași in 1642, the work of peace was understood as doing justice. As this unanimously-adopted catechism declared, “holy justice means giving everyone his due as deserved, without discrimination by virtue of one’s wealth or social status. Furthermore, Christian justice means responding to evils by doing the good, as the Apostle taught (Romans 13:7).”

The proposed reflective questions focused on concepts extracted from these definitions in order to develop the principles of an Orthodox theology of Just Peace. In this regard, Fr Alexander Vasyutin engaged some Western perspectives on the Just Peace concept, insisting on its incompatibility with the contemporary precepts of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, all presentations maintained to a certain extent a comprehensive analysis, while exploring a specific track.

First, viewing justice as an “art of good and equity,” the question tapped into the coordination of preventive measures required from
the Church in engaging political power. While Dr Aida Avanessian recommended international advocacy for peace and justice, Dr Ciprian Toroczkai presented a case of such advocacy conducted from within the confines of the Cold War. From a different perspective, Fr Kondothra M. George pointed to the UN Millennium Development Goals as a venue of engagement, exemplifying how his local church in India could implement them. Furthermore, Archimandrite Jack Khalil from Lebanon stressed the crucial role played by the interpretation of scripture on issues of peace and justice, and Sister Theodora Ansam Nasser exemplified how the interpretation of such sacred texts could be implemented in places of conflict, particularly in her native Iraq.

Second, the 1642 Orthodox Confession of Faith defined the peacemaker as the one who (1) prays for peace, (2) mediates between the oppressor and the oppresed, and (3) mediates between rival political authorities in order to eliminate military confrontations. The participants were encouraged to describe what their local churches do in this regard, and how strategies and tactics could be shared across cultures. Here, Dr Tamara Grdzelidze offered a case-study analysis of the difficult path which the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church had to carve in mediating the recent military confrontation between Georgia and Russia.

Third, by “giving everyone his/her due,” the participants were encouraged to reflect on their own contextual understanding of justice, asking whether justice should be restorative, distributive, or punitive in nature. Thus, Fr Emmanuel Clapsis offered a comprehensive theological analysis of peace, insisting on justice in its restorative aspect, as historically developed by Orthodox Christianity.

Fourth, concerning the broad expression “to live honestly,” several proposed questions pondered what it means to live honestly in a currently deregulated world economic system. Here, specific reflective questions focused on justice for workers, the relationship between the laissez-faire capitalism and social justice, and whether the interest charged for money lending is a sin, or merely its abuse.

Fifth, the question of inter-religious coexistence was raised in view of the Church’s claim to be the true one, focusing on general attitudes toward other religions, and on the role of dialogue. Here, Dr Pantelis Kalaitzidis offered a magisterial thesis on peaceful dialogue between
Orthodox Christianity and Islam, as driven by modernity, globalization, fundamentalism and multiculturalism.

Finally, the participants were challenged to explore and reflect upon the level of implementation of the ethical teachings into social action. Last but not least, the Bucharest conference hosted the formal launching of the Institute for Peace Studies in Eastern Christianity (IPSEC). Therefore, IPSEC’s founder wishes to record his recognition and gratitude to several people whose role was crucial, starting with Fr Raymond Helmick, SJ, Dr Mugur A Roz, Denise E. Simion, Semegnish Asfaw, Dr Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven, Dr Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, Dr Konrad Raiser, and others.

As editors, we wish to express our gratitude to all those involved in making these conversations possible, particularly to the authors themselves, whose expertise, hard work and dedication are commendable. Special gratitude goes to our hosts in Bucharest and Damascus, such as His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea, His Beatitude Ignatius IV Hazim, His Holiness Ignatius Zakka Iwas, Fr Michael Tita, Fr Alexios Chehadeh, Mr. Samer Laham, and many others.

Today, such reflections on peace and justice are crucial, as the world witnesses profound political transformations, particularly in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Analysts are yet again divided on whether coercive solutions to “protect” the civilian population qualify as just war, or simply as war. Peace is a gift from God—our King of Peace—as well as a vocation. Peace is communion with God—as he gives peace to those who serve him (Psalms 85:8-13)—and is salvation (Rom 16:20) for those who practise it. Peacemaking is therefore a concrete opportunity to connect our theology with ethical witness and praxis, faith with social transformation. We are confident that this volume will make a solid contribution to the emerging field of peace studies.