HOPE FOR EUROPE
albania 2026

HOPE LAB: SOCIETY AND NATION | 5-9 OCTOBER 2026 | ALBANIA

NATIONALISM AND FAITHFULNESS TO CHRIST IN TIMES OF WAR

ROMAN SOLOVIY

Introduction: Doing Theology Inside the Storm

- Our focus today is on defining ethical guidelines for faithful Christian living when national identity becomes a matter of life and death.
- What are we, as Christians, called to do when the world around us is torn apart by war and conflict?
- On what grounds should we act when our commitment to Christ conflicts with the demands of belonging to a nation?

Contextual Crisis Theology

- Nearly five years of ministry experience amid Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine compel Ukrainian theologians to adopt a methodological framework I would like to call **contextual crisis theology**.
- This approach focuses on the existential struggles faced by people caught in socio-political turmoil and the demanding ethical decisions affecting life and survival.

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Contextual Crisis Theology

"There is a difference – and it matters – between a theology written in the aftermath of evil and a theology that must be lived inside it while it is still happening"

Taras Dyatlik

Contextual crisis theology rejects generic answers that fail to consider painful dilemmas.

Crisis theology seeks to recognise God's presence within human suffering rather than constructing abstract intellectual categories.

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Christian Responsibility

- As ethicist **Wolfgang Huber** notes, responsibility means “the accountability of human persons for their deeds before an ultimate instance of accountability”.
- Biblically speaking, humans are created as “answering, responsive, and therefore responsible” beings.
- **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, in *Sanctorum Communio*, grounds responsibility in Christ’s vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*), which forms the life-principle of the new humanity.
- In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer links responsibility to the doctrine of vocation, where a responsible person risks their life in its wholeness as a response to God’s call across all life domains.

Three Areas of Responsibility

From this foundation, we identify three interconnected areas of responsibility:

Responsibility before God:

Maintaining the integrity of our witness and speaking the truth.

1

Responsibility before our neighbour and nation:

Protecting, assisting, and sharing in suffering.

2

Responsibility in relation to truth:

Opposing lies and dehumanization, especially those perpetrated in the name of God or the church.

3

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Theology of Nation

- National diversity is not a consequence of sin, but part of God's intentional creation and historical design (Acts 17:26, Rev 7:9).
- The nation provides a concrete socio-cultural sphere where believers exercise their ethical responsibility toward their neighbour.
- A critical theological line must be drawn regarding **ultimate accountability**.
- When a nation, state, or political movement claims ultimate allegiance, demanding actions that violate God's moral law, it commits idolatry.
- As the apostles declared, "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29).

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Defensive vs. Expansionist Nationalism

To analyse national commitment, we incorporate Ewa Thompson's distinction between two fundamentally different expressions of nationalism:

Expansionist (Imperialist) Nationalism and Ideological Christian Nationalism

- Expansionist nationalism seeks domination, subjugation, and the eradication of other cultures or national identities.
- It relies on claims of civilizational superiority and instrumentalizes religion to provide an ideological foundation for violence.

Defensive Nationalism and Legitimate Civic Care

- In contrast, defensive nationalism arises when a community faces an existential threat, military aggression, or colonial eradication.
- Its objective is not the subjugation of others, but the preservation of physical survival, freedom, language, and human dignity.

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Expansionist Nationalism

- Sociologist **Johan Galtung** defines this as **“cultural violence”**—the co-optation of religious symbols, authority, and dogmas to legitimise direct or structural violence.
- **Helen Paynter** warns against what she terms **“violence done WITH scripture,”** defining *Christian Nationalism* as a framework that idealises and advocates a fusion of Christianity with national civic or ethnic identity.
- When political movements parade crosses, frame political campaigns as “crusades,” or claim that political rallies constitute “Christian revival,” they weaponize faith for political hegemony.

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The “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir)

- We observe this distortion in the ideology of the “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*) and the submissive stance of Russian evangelical unions.
- Leaders of the Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (ROSKHVE) and the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) have publicly blessed state leadership, accepted state honours amidst ongoing aggression against Ukraine, and labelled calls for repentance as “russophobic”.
- This alignment represents a collapse of prophetic integrity and a surrender to expansionist imperial nationalism.

Defensive Nationalism

- In scripture, preserving one's name, history, and community against an empire (such as Israel in Babylonian exile, Ps. 137) is an act of spiritual and existential resistance against total assimilation.
- Defending one's nation against destruction is a valid ethical stance within a free society and a duty of love toward one's neighbour, whereas using Scripture to justify imperial aggression crosses the boundary into unchristian violence.

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Critiques from Detached Contexts

- Critiques from detached contexts, such as missiologist **Johannes Reimer's** assertion that Ukrainian believers' participation in national defence is merely a surrender to "party politics" or "chauvinistic nationalism", suffer from a flawed moral equivalence.
- As **Helen Paynter** notes, we must be careful not to fall into the trap where extreme voices persuade moderates to label any legitimate national concern as "extremism."

Conflicts and Wars: “New Wars”

Old wars

- Classical political philosophy, rooted in Carl von Clausewitz’s paradigm, defined war as an interstate clash governed by the “remarkable trinity” of the people, the government, and the military.
- In those “old wars,” Christian responsibility was largely framed by traditional Just War parameters (*jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*).

“New wars” (Mary Kaldor)

- Unlike conventional interstate wars, “new wars” are characterized by the blurring of boundaries between military and civilian spheres, the decentralization of violence, and most importantly, shifting the focus of violence directly onto civilian populations.
- Driven by the politics of identity, the goal of the aggressor in a “new war” is total control, deportation, or eradication of “the other”.

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Abstract Pacifism and Passive Neutrality

- When war becomes an asymmetric, total assault on the physical existence of an ethnic or national group, the church cannot maintain abstract pacifism or passive neutrality.
- In conditions of genocidal violence, neutrality de facto amounts to solidarity with the aggressor.

"Neutrality between oppressor and victim is not a theological virtue. It is a form of theological complicity"

Taras Dyatlik

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Five Dialectical Tensions

Christian responsibility during war is best understood not through static formulas, but through five dialectical tensions.

Justice	vs.	Peacebuilding
Nonviolence	vs.	Protection of the Vulnerable
Safety (Distance)	vs.	Vulnerable Proximity
Evangelism	vs.	Holistic Social Ministry
Memory	vs.	Forgiveness

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Tension 1: Justice vs. Peacebuilding

- While the church is called to proclaim reconciliation, reducing its entire responsibility to peacemaking without justice strips the church of its prophetic voice.
- As peace scholar **Rula Mansour** observes, proposing compromise or forgiveness while conflict rages can function as a demand for the victim's surrender.
- Advocating peace without accountability legitimises aggression and promotes "amnesia," denying victims' pain.
- **True peacebuilding is rooted in justice, truth-telling, and restoring violated human dignity.**

Tension 1: Justice vs. Peacebuilding

Agape

A historical example is the work of the "Agape" relief organization, founded by Peter Kuzmič during the Balkan Wars (1991–1995), which provided aid to all ethnic groups without discrimination while opposing nationalist violence.

Front-line chaplaincy

- In wartime Ukraine, this synthesis is seen in front-line chaplaincy.
- Operating under the motto "To Be Present," chaplains protect soldiers from the dehumanizing forces of hatred, helping them maintain their humanity while carrying out the defense of their country.

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Tension 2: Nonviolence vs. Protection of the Vulnerable

- Scripture presents God as a God of peace, yet it recognizes the necessity of restraining evil in a fallen world.
- Old Testament ethical frameworks introduced redemptive trajectories to limit vengeance, prohibit terror tactics, and protect prisoners (Helen Paynter).
- When innocent lives face imminent destruction, how far should the church go in living out solidarity?

We observe two historic models:

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Tension 2: Nonviolence vs. Protection of the Vulnerable

André and Magda Trocmé (Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, 1940–1944)

- A model of nonviolent resistance.
- By establishing a clandestine network of shelters in mountainous France, this Protestant community saved nearly five thousand refugees, including three and a half thousand Jews, risking their lives to obey the commandment “thou shalt not kill”.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- A trajectory moving from nonviolence to active political conspiracy against the Nazi regime.
- Recognising that systemic mass murder could not be stopped by safety zones alone, Bonhoeffer embraced vicarious representative action.
- He willingly took upon himself the guilt of action, sacrificing his moral purity to stop the machine of death.

For many Ukrainian evangelicals, taking up arms is not an embrace of secular militarism, but a transition into Bonhoeffer’s realm of responsible action to protect the defenceless from total destruction.

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Tension 3: Distance (Safety) vs. Proximity (Vulnerability)

- An incarnational mission requires the church to renounce comfortable safety for the sake of solidarity.
- As **Rowan Williams** notes, the church realises its true nature by sharing in the defencelessness of Christ.
- In the initial days of the invasion, while some chose distance, Ukrainian pastors, volunteers, and chaplains chose proximity.
- Chaplains serving in combat zones embody a kenotic presence occupying the same space of physical vulnerability as those facing death.

Tension 3: Distance (Safety) vs. Proximity (Vulnerability)

- While Catholic ethicist **Marc V. Rugani** suggests framing the Christian soldier's sacrifice as an imitation of Christ's *kenosis*, Bonhoeffer's more sober language of *guilt* remains a necessary corrective to prevent transforming an act of tragic necessity into a virtue.
- Distancing oneself behind abstract statements of neutrality when atrocities occur constitutes a form of moral detachment that aligns with the oppressor.
- Authentic mission demands sharing the risks of the afflicted.

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Tension 4: Evangelism vs. Holistic Social Ministry

- Historically, evangelicalism has debated the priority between verbal proclamation and social action.
- The **First Lausanne Congress (1974)**, influenced by René Padilla (*misión integral*) and John Stott, established that evangelism and social responsibility are equal partners: “the two wings of a bird”.
- **Henning Wrogemann** outlines five models of mission: *diastatic*, *preparatory*, *consecutive*, *complementary*, and *identification*.
- In Eastern Europe, Soviet legacy long enforced a dichotomic division, treating social work merely as a preparatory step for proselytization.

Tension 4: Evangelism vs. Holistic Social Ministry

- The war has compelled a shift toward a **complementary, holistic model**.
- Evacuating civilians, operating shelter hubs, and distributing food are no longer viewed as tactical tools to attract listeners to sermons; social ministry is recognised as intrinsically valuable—an authentic expression of God's love.
- This mirrors the experience of *Agape* in Bosnia, where holistic service across ethnic lines built trust and established vibrant faith communities amidst ruin.

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Tension 5: Memory vs. Forgiveness

In wartime, memory serves as an act of existential resistance against erasure. As Helen Paynter notes, "Refusal to forget is the first act of resistance against a violent oppressor".

Miroslav Volf warns against the **"two victories of evil"**:

1. The first victory occurs when the perpetrator inflicts physical violence upon the victim.

2. The second victory occurs when the victim allows hatred to fill their soul, adopting the enemy's mindset and becoming consumed by *zlopam'yatnist'* ("remembering in an evil way").

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Tension 5: Memory vs. Forgiveness

To break this cycle, Volf separates forgiveness into two stages:

1 **The Will to Embrace**

An unconditional inner readiness to boundary-crossing love, refusing to let hatred dictate one's moral nature.

2 **The Embrace Itself (Reconciliation)**

A conditional act that **cannot** occur until truth has been spoken and justice has been done.

Tension 5: Memory vs. Forgiveness

Demanding immediate, unconditional reconciliation from traumatised victims while violence continues is theological violence. As Taras Dyatlik concludes:

"Do not ask the traumatised to perform peace as a condition of your theological comfort… Forgiveness is the refusal to let the wound and grief define everything forever; it is a gift freely given by the one who was harmed, not demanded by the one in a comfortable, peaceful context who was not".

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Conclusion: Doing Theology Inside the Storm

- These five dialectical tensions are not isolated options; they form the interwoven coordinates of faithful Christian witness during wartime.
- Justice requires proximity; proximity compels holistic ministry; holistic ministry demands a practice of memory that resists both premature forgiveness and consuming hatred; and all of these are tested by how the church responds to violent oppression.

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Conclusion: Doing Theology Inside the Storm

- Contextual crisis theology does not provide easy answers from a safe distance.
- It is theology done from within the storm, where decisions must be made in real time and amid unresolved tensions.
- For the European church gathered at Hope 2026, the test of our theology is whether it can support those for whom war is not an academic topic, but the air they breathe.
- Such a theology, forged inside the storm, calls not for detached evaluation, but for active solidarity and shared responsibility.

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Hope Lab Discussion Questions

1. How is it possible for the church to remain faithful to Christ when nationalistic or imperialistic ideologies demand loyalties which are in conflict with the Gospel?

2. How can the church carry out its prophetic function (that is, to speak the truth, to protect the vulnerable, and to seek justice) and at the same time promote peace during times of war or in the event of a national crisis?

3. What does it mean for Christians to remain in vulnerable proximity to those who are suffering and address their needs, rather than maintaining a safe distance, when serving a nation in crisis?

4. How can we develop a kind of memory that opposes oppression and recognises the victims of injustice and aggression without letting resentment turn into destructive hatred?

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