Nationalism and Faithfulness to Christ in Times of War

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Introduction: Doing Theology Inside the Storm

I would like to start by thanking the organising committee for inviting me to speak at this *Hope Lab on Society and Nation*. The topic we are addressing has both a theological dimension and an immediate practical concern: how Christians can understand and engage with national identity without letting loyalty to the nation replace their primary commitment to Christ. My purpose today is to establish ethical guidelines for faithful Christian living, guidelines that support responsible care for one’s people and country while guarding against nationalism that becomes imperialistic or idolatrous.

While systematic theology often explores the theological foundations of the nation, our present task is to direct our focus toward the ethics of action and responsibility. 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?

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 that affect life and survival. As Ukrainian theologian Taras Dyatlik observes: *“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”*.

Contextual crisis theology rejects generic answers that fail to consider painful dilemmas. In the spirit of Jürgen Moltmann’s reflections in *The Crucified God*, any attempt to construct an abstract system after facing catastrophic evil is a crisis of religious thought. Theology that seeks to “pass over this cup” of suffering turns into an ideology of self-justification. Crisis theology seeks to recognise God’s presence within human suffering rather than constructing abstract intellectual categories.

To ground our actions, we must first define 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, 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.

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

1. **Responsibility before God:** Maintaining the integrity of our witness and speaking the truth.
2. **Responsibility before our neighbour and nation:** Protecting, assisting, and sharing in suffering.
3. **Responsibility in relation to truth:** Opposing lies and dehumanisation, especially those perpetrated in the name of God or the church.

2. Theology of Nation: Defensive vs. Expansionist Nationalism

To evaluate nationalism, we must address the biblically grounded concept of the nation (*ethnos*). 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.

However, 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).

To analyse national commitment, I incorporate **Ewa Thompson's** distinction between two different expressions of loyalty to the nation, alongside insights from Old Testament scholar **Helen Paynter**, director of the *Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence*:

> **Expansionist (Imperialist) Nationalism:** Expansionist nationalism seeks to dominate and subjugate others, erasing their cultures and national identities. It rests on claims of civilizational superiority and uses religion to justify violence. Johan Galtung defines this as "cultural violence"—the co-optation of religious symbols, authority, and dogmas to legitimise direct or structural violence. When Christian tradition is used for this purpose, it is Christian nationalism. Helen Paynter warns against what she terms "violence done WITH scripture," defining *Christian Nationalism* as a framework that advocates a fusion of Christianity with civic or ethnic identity. When political movements frame political campaigns as "crusades," or claim that political rallies constitute "Christian revival," they weaponise faith for political hegemony.
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> 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 and the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists 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.

- **Legitimate Defensive National Commitment:** 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. In scripture, preserving one's name and community against an empire (such as Israel in Babylonian exile, Ps. 137) is an act of spiritual resistance against total assimilation.

  Critiques formulated from contexts at a distance, such as missiologist Johannes Reimer's assertion that Ukrainian believers' participation in national defence amounts to a surrender to "party politics" or "chauvinistic nationalism", risk overlooking the concrete ethical conditions shaping such decisions. By treating armed aggression and the defence of a threatened country as equivalent expressions of nationalism, this approach obscures the moral asymmetry between an imperial project that denies another nation's right to exist, and a defensive response aimed at protecting life, freedom, and human dignity. It also underestimates the central claim of contextual crisis theology: that Christian responsibility must be discerned not through principles articulated at a safe distance, but from within the lived reality of those who must protect vulnerable neighbours while violence is still unfolding. This does not exempt Ukrainian Christians from critical self-examination or from resisting hatred and idolatry of the nation; rather, it requires that such dangers be assessed without collapsing responsible defence into the same moral category as expansionist aggression.

Bridge to Discussion Question 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?*

3. The Reality of "New Wars"

To understand Christian action, we must evaluate the nature of contemporary armed conflict. 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*).

However, researcher Mary Kaldor highlights the emergence of **"new wars"** in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Unlike conventional interstate wars, "new wars" are characterised by blurred boundaries between military and civilian spheres, decentralised violence, and, most importantly, a shift in violence directly onto civilian populations. Driven by the politics of identity, the goal of the aggressor in a "new war" is total control or eradication of "the other".

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

Taras Dyatlik asserts: *"Neutrality between oppressor and victim is not a theological virtue. It is a form of theological complicity"*.

4. The Five Dialectical Tensions of Wartime Witness

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

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

In wartime Ukraine, this synthesis is seen in front-line chaplaincy. Operating under the motto "To Be Present," chaplains protect soldiers from the dehumanising forces of hatred, helping them maintain their humanity as they defend their country.

Bridge to Discussion Question 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?*

Tension 2: Rejecting Violence vs. Protecting Victims of Aggression

Scripture presents God as a God of peace, yet it also recognises the need to restrain 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:

1. **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".
2. **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, 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 destruction.

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. 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.

Bridge to Discussion Question 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?*

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 dichotomous division, treating social work merely as a preparatory step for proselytisation.

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.

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"**:

- The first victory occurs when the perpetrator inflicts physical violence upon the victim.
- 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").

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.

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"*.

Bridge to Discussion Question 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?*

Conclusion

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.

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.

As we transition into our Hope Lab small group discussions, these four questions on the screen will guide us. Each question tackles one of the critical dimensions we have examined today. I invite you to join the discussion and explore how these ethical coordinates apply directly to your ministry contexts across Europe