

Why Do Some See Putin as a 'Messianic Figure'?

What does Russian President Vladimir Putin believe about God? That's a fascinating question the world can't answer "with any certainty," according to Mark Tooley, president of The Institute on Religion and Democracy.

After all, there's a difference between what Putin says and what he does—and there's strangely a great deal of uncertainty and confusion intermingled with both.

"He had a devoutly Christian mother and has worn a crucifix around his neck for most of his life," Tooley told Faithwire. "Certainly, he has embraced the patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church and used it to advance his own political purposes domestically and internationally, but that is a centuries-long tradition for Russia."

Tooley explained that Russian Orthodoxy, to the outside world, might seem to position Putin's country to be in perfect alignment with Western religious ideals, though fundamental differences between the cultures reveal stark incompatibilities.

Russia's Brand of Christianity

Rather than spiritual compatriots, the Christian faith seen in many Western countries is radically different from the Russian rendition of self-described, government-aligned religiosity.

Watch Tooley explain what Putin *might* believe, Russia's religious background and why Ukraine is in the crosshairs:

"Russia is a longtime nemesis to the West, precisely because of its version of Christianity," Tooley recently wrote in a World Magazine article. "Russian Orthodoxy for centuries saw

itself as guardian of the true faith in contrast to Western Catholicism and Protestantism. Moscow, according to this lore, is the third Rome, the seat of the true Christendom, after Constantinople and the Roman Empire.”

Tooley argued this ideology even permeated the Soviet Union, despite its anti-religious bent, and has colored certain aspects of how Russia views Ukraine today.

The religion expert affirmed, “Russian Orthodoxy has nearly always been a cheerleading nationalist subordinate to the state.” Despite Russia’s penchant for state-sponsored religion, he believes the nation “is more secular than many Western countries,” which might be surprising to some.

Despite the Soviet Union’s initial attempts to kill religion, its political usefulness was eventually recognized, Tooley said. And today, that persists.

Putin Sees Himself as a ‘Messianic Figure’

With all this in mind, it’s easy to see why Putin and the state are so interested in religion, particularly when it comes to Ukraine. Harry Farley of the BBC recently said Putin views himself as a “messianic figure, a savior, to reunite Eastern Orthodox churches under Moscow.”

The theological circumstances in Ukraine and Russia become increasingly concerning when considering the Orthodox Church in Ukraine was granted autonomy just three years ago, freeing itself from Russian control.

Despite a portion of the Orthodox church in Ukraine still recognizing Russian authority, the schism has grown.

“The Orthodox Church in Ukraine, just three years ago, gained its autonomy, and its chief bishop was recognized by the Patriarch of Constantinople as having his own distinct authority, no longer subordinate to the patriarch of Moscow,”

Tooley explained. "Which, obviously, the Russian church and the Russian state did not like."

There's a complex history surrounding these issues, but historian Katherine Kelaïdis has explained the Patriarch of Constantinople, who has claimed the mantle of leadership for Orthodoxy, is more aligned with the West whereas the Patriarch of Moscow, who heads the Russian Church, has a more traditional stance, along with other distinctions.

Regardless of finer points of the history, know this: The Ukrainian Church's decision to split in 2018 was seen as "historic." At the time, former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko praised the move.

"This day will go down in history as a sacred day ... the day of the final independence from Russia," he said.

What Happens Next?

It's unclear what would happen if Russia took complete control of Ukraine. However, it is possible—even likely—the Russian Orthodox Church would attempt to regain control over its Ukrainian counterpart.

Putin has repeatedly made clear he views Ukraine and Russia as sharing a "spiritual space." Thus, this issue presumably hasn't left the forefront of the radical leader's mind.

"Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us," he recently said. "It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space."

Now, let's reconsider how these connections and Putin's pining for control over the Ukrainian people comport with his personal religious practices. Farley offered a compelling recap, shedding some light on Putin's perspective.

"Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church developed, became this huge power ... within the Orthodox Church. But in 2019, the

Ukrainian Orthodox Church split off from Russia and was recognized as independent,” he said. “Religion is hugely important for Putin’s identity, for his psyche. He immerses himself in icy water to mark the festival of Epiphany, he wears his baptismal cross.”

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