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Article

# Christian Churches and the Ukraine War: Introducing Religious Publics in Global Politics

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## Abstract

Publics in global politics are highly dynamic, considering the multitude of actors involved and the issues addressed. When examining Christian churches and the Ukraine War, it emerges that religions not only react to global politics but also contribute to identifying issues and measures of how to tackle them. The interplay of religious publics, therefore, appears particularly dynamic, warranting a distinct conceptualization. This article thus aims to introduce the concept of religious public(s) in global politics by building upon literature on how publics emerge and which manifestations they can assume. First, four manifestations of publics are examined by conducting a case study on Christianity and the Ukraine War. Employing the case study as a plausibility probe, the findings are re-examined in a second step to develop a typology of religious publics. The article concludes by identifying other areas in which studying religious publics and global politics would prove rewarding.

## Keywords

Christian churches; global politics; publics; religion; religious publics; Russian Orthodox Church; Ukraine War

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, not only did the international society of states react to this breach of international law, but so did various religious communities, albeit in very different ways and at different levels—ranging from the domestic to the global. While the official line of the Russian Orthodox Church was to bless the invasion, numerous Russian Orthodox Church priests as well as the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew condemned the war (cf. “Patriarch of Moscow blames,” 2022; “Russian Orthodox leader,” 2022; “You can’t bless the war,” 2022). Beyond the orthodox churches, at the domestic level, religious communities have for example been partaking in the political discourse on the issue of providing arms to the Ukraine (cf. “EKD-Präsident,” 2022). And at the international level, hybrid state-religious institutions such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers issued a joint declaration in which

they state their willingness to “facilitate the dialogue between all sides” (OIC, 2022). At the transnational level, Jewish organizations, among others, have been coordinating support for Ukrainian refugees. And, finally, at the global level, inter-religious organizations such as the World Council of Churches or the Religions for Peace have issued joint declarations, praying for an end to the war, or even calling directly upon the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill to raise his voice against the war (cf. Religions for Peace, 2022; “WCC acting general secretary,” 2022). What can be observed is that religions not only react to global politics, they actively seek to address, promote, or tackle issues, linking the local with the global level. This latter point is one distinguishing aspect of religions in global politics, when considering their widespread local affiliation and transnational representation. Approximately 75% of the world’s population is affiliated with one of the world’s major religions (PEW, 2015) and is thus also transnationally represented as the selection of examples above indicates.

The definition of religion employed here was developed drawing from both a sociological understanding (see Durkheim, 1915/1965, p. 62) as well as a social constructivist International Relations (IR) approach (see Kubáľková, 2000, p. 695). In this context, religion is understood as institutionalized faith:

Religion is the institutionalization of faith in the divine, expressed in a framework of values and rules based on which the constitutive community of followers interacts with its respective social and natural environment, linking the transcendental with the transnational. Religion often provides ideas on existence and mortality, purpose and significance, order and justice, leading to a sense of identity and hope. (McLarren, 2022, p. 19)

The above-mentioned relation between the individual and the transcendental and the local and the global leads me to the hypothesis that religions can constitute highly dynamic publics in global politics and thus warrant a distinct conceptualization. The aim of this article is, therefore, to introduce the concept of religious public(s) in global politics. To develop such a conceptualization, two “building blocks” are necessary. Mende and Müller (2023, p. 92) examine “what forms of publics exist in the global realm and how they overlap and interact.” They identify four manifestations of publics, namely “audiences,” “public spheres,” “institutions,” and “public interests.” These serve as the foundation, or building block, to explore forms and dynamics of religious publics. Mende and Müller (2023) also discuss the aspect of the increasing transnationalisation of publics, though without national or sub-national publics disappearing. Since religion is to be found at all levels, often linking these levels, this point offers an additional point of departure in exploring religious publics and global politics.

In a first step, a case study is conducted employing these four manifestations of publics, which are briefly summarized and then applied to Christian churches and the Ukraine War. The examples for each manifestation were selected to reflect at least one Christian church directly involved in or affected by the conflict and one Christian church which can be termed an “observer” party. Due to the limited scope of the article and the illustrative character of the case study, if at least one example per manifestation can be found, this is viewed as sufficient to fulfil the exceptional quality of religions in terms of publics and global politics and thus deserving a distinct conceptualization of “religious publics.” Employing the case study as a plausibility probe, the findings are then re-examined in a second step to develop a typology of religious publics. The foundations for this part, or second “building block,” can be found in Zürn (2021) in which the author examines when and how publics can and should emerge. He lists three necessary conditions for a public to be able to form as a “collective” in the global space, namely the acceptance of the del-

egation of power, mobilization, and mutual recognition (p. 173). While the first step helps establish the dynamics in the interplay and overlap of religious publics, the second step examines what constitutes such religious publics and how they emerge, subsequently introducing three types of religious publics. The article concludes by identifying other areas in which studying religious publics and global politics would prove rewarding.

Perhaps surprisingly, the literature which links publics with global politics closely examines this transnationalisation of publics, yet it does not offer a systematic conceptualization of religious publics, which arguably always encompass a transnational dimension (cf. Albert et al., 2018; Fraser, 2007, 2021; Holtgreve et al., 2021; Stone, 2020; Zürn, 2018, 2021). This observation also applies to research that focuses on the domestic level, such as the research by Swatos and Wellman (1999) on religious publics in the USA. In particular, Zürn’s (2021) ideas on how publics can evolve and also merge, are revisited here to explore the conceptualization of religious publics. A more general observation can be made regarding the gaps which remain in studying religion in IR. While a “religious turn” was proclaimed by some scholars (cf. Kratochvíl, 2009; Kubáľková, 2013) and others sought to bring religion back from “exile” (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003), religion has indeed enjoyed increasing attention in the past two decades. However, a methodical inclusion of religion in theoretical frameworks and analytical models has been laggard at best (for a more detailed overview of the position of religion in IR see McLaren, 2022). To sum up, the article taps into the overall potential of including religion in IR and the more specific possibility of adding insight into publics and global politics.

## 2. Case Study: Christian Churches and the Ukraine War

In the following, Christianity, as a world religion, and the Ukraine War, as an ongoing issue of global politics, are examined to inductively explore the concept of religious publics. Following up on the assumptions laid out above, this case study seeks to address the hypothesis that religions can constitute highly dynamic publics in global politics and thus warrant a distinct conceptualization. Since, however, one cannot test that which has not been conceptualized and to avoid a tautological trap, this case study is presented as a plausibility probe, i.e., “an intermediary step between hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing” (Levy, 2008, p. 3).

### 2.1. Publics as Audiences

According to Mende and Müller (2023), this type of manifestation can be found when groups of actors share a common attention focus. The attention can be focused on political as well as non-political issues and events and in the case of the former, when considering global politics, the focus can be on one specific aspect, rather than global politics in its entirety. What is more, “the

key characteristic is not co-presence but co-orientation” (Mende & Müller, 2023, p. 92). The audiences relevant to the present article are those who pay attention to the same political issue (e.g., migration) or event (e.g., the war in Ukraine). In other words, the public here is understood as manifested in a group of actors who are observers with a joint awareness or at least attention to a political issue or event. Potentially, such an audience could also be mobilized.

Since religion is constituted by a community of followers, there is, by definition, always an audience when studying religions. However, in this case, the question arises whether there is a joint (religious) audience regarding the Ukraine War. At the local level, such an audience can, for example, be found in the shape of parish members who are joined in their common attention focus on their faith and religious aspects of life (attending church, bible study groups, etc.). Regarding their common interest in the Ukraine War, such a common attention focus can be motivated either intrinsically (e.g., based on their convictions) or extrinsically (e.g., guided by a preacher’s sermon).

An example at a local parish level of such an audience is the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church in Baltimore, Maryland, which has expressed its common attention in the shape of a prayer published on its homepage:

With much anguish we see the tragic events continuing in Ukraine....So much death, destruction, suffering and hatred have been caused by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine....As Orthodox Christians, we do not support violence and aggression....We keep praying for peace, and we call upon our hierarchs to do everything in their power to stop hostilities. (Holy Trinity, 2023)

Speaking as “we” this parish identifies as a group with a joint focus and goes a step further, referring to “brothers and sisters in Christ” (Holy Trinity, 2023), thereby not only referring to the common attention focus but also to the common religious identity. To what extent this prayer was intrinsically motivated by concerned parish members or extrinsically guided by the local parish priest cannot be established based on the material available.

Moving away from the local parish level to the level of leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and, hence, the societal level, an example can be found of how an audience is “created” top-down, namely by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill. The patriarch has repeatedly legitimized the war and addressed the topic in his sermons. In the context of publics as audiences, one representative example shall be included here of how the patriarch has extrinsically sought to establish an audience with the common attention focus on the Ukraine War (the Russian Orthodox Church does not refer to it as the Ukraine War but has adopted the government’s official terminology and speaks of “special operation” or “situation in Ukraine”; see <http://www.patriarchia.ru>).

On 13 March 2022, three weeks after the Russian attacks on Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill celebrated the liturgy of St. Basil at the central Russian Orthodox Church Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, located vis-à-vis the Red Square. During the service, Patriarch Kirill presented the head of National Guard Viktor Zolotov with an icon of Mary. He proclaimed this should serve as inspiration for the young Russian soldiers defending their home country with the words: “Let this image inspire young soldiers who take the oath, who embark on the path of defending the fatherland” (Russian Orthodox leader, 2022). Given the high visibility of such an event and such a gesture, not only did the patriarch guide his religious audience to a common attention focus, he also merged a religious liturgy with political issues. This inextricably linked the religious with the political.

Both examples are taken from the Russian Orthodox Church and both audiences have the same common attention focus, however disparate the attitudes may be. Following the definition of this manifestation of publics, there is more discussion to be had as to whether they constitute one greater audience and what role the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations have in terms of these audiences emerging in the first place. Since the first example is ambivalent as to its direct involvement (friends or family engaged in or affected by the war), another example is presented, namely that of an “observer” party. Such an example can be found in the “general audiences” the Catholic pope regularly holds. As the term already reveals, there is a joint group interested in what the pope has to convey, usually on an overarching theme. When looking specifically at the Ukraine War, Pope Francis has repeatedly taken the opportunity of such general audiences to express his reactions to the war, representing the voice of the Roman Catholic Church as a whole. Over the course of a year, he has spoken of “victims whose innocent blood cries to Heaven” (Vatican, 2022). He pleaded: “Put an end to this war! Silence the weapons! Stop sowing death and destruction!” (Vatican, 2022). “The toll of dead, wounded, refugees and displaced persons, destruction, economic and social damage speaks for itself. May the Lord forgive so many crimes and so much violence” (Vatican, 2023). Similar to the case of Patriarch Kirill, these words are addressed to a wider audience—or public. Significantly, a group of Ukrainian members of parliament was present at the latter general audience quoted above (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023), indicating that the audience is by no means limited to Roman Catholic believers, but rather an audience that is united in its common interest in political issues or events. The three examples listed here demonstrate that religious publics can be found in the manifestation of audiences in different contexts.

## 2.2. *Publics as Public Spheres*

The second manifestation goes beyond mere groups with a common focus and refers to “communicative

spaces” (Mende & Müller, 2023) created by these groups. The members are not simply observers with a common interest, but rather there is interaction within the group which leads to discourse. In this manifestation, the authors also observe that there can be both political as well as non-political manifestations. “Political publics are discursive spheres in which the governance of common affairs is debated and the related decisions are legitimised and contested” (Mende & Müller, 2023, p. 92). Perhaps the central point is the observation that in this manifestation of public the act of engaging with one another’s arguments is what joins the members of such a sphere. There is a dynamic element here since the action and reaction can be perpetuated and therefore endure, possibly leading to an institutionalization, though this is a distinct manifestation discussed further below.

As established above, religions are constituted by their believers, however, this does not yet reveal anything about the structures of the respective religions, for example how democratic or hierarchical they are. In “The Pope, the Public, and International Relations—Postsecular Transformations,” Barbato (2020, p. 2) observes that:

[A] new space emerged when priests, prophets and philosophers no longer restricted their role to that of a critical counsellor to the prince or a disputing scholar among scholars, but instead started to understand themselves as facilitators in their own right for the poor and illiterate masses.

This, arguably, represented the emergence of a public sphere and religion features as a bridge between the private and the public, rather than as an element to distinguish the two from one another.

An example of a public sphere created by religion, and in particular within Christianity in the context of the Ukraine War, is the sphere among Christian churches, namely between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), i.e., an example of a Christian church immediately involved/affected by the war and an observer party. Less than two weeks after the Russian invasion, the president of the COMECE, Jean-Claude Cardinal Hollerich, Archbishop of Luxembourg, wrote to Patriarch Kirill:

I dare to implore your Holiness in the spirit of fraternity: please, address an urgent appeal to Russian authorities to immediately stop the hostilities against the Ukrainian people and to show goodwill for seeking a diplomatic solution to the conflict, based on dialogue, common sense and respect for international law. (COMECE, 2022a)

Nine days later, the then Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations (DECR) Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion, replied on behalf of the patri-

arch, stating that “the relationships between the West and Russia have reached a deadlock....Today His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia does much to restore peace and trust, in the Ukrainian land in particular, working hard every day to make this happen” (Hilarion, 2022). Both the letter and the ensuing actions by the Russian Orthodox Church and the COMECE indicate that no further joint initiatives were sought. The next communication then took place when the COMECE informed Patriarch Kirill of the COMECE’s initiative of calling for a ceasefire during Easter celebrations, appealing to President Putin and President Zelensky in a joint letter (COMECE, 2022b, 2022c). What is significant here is that Patriarch Kirill was not consulted beforehand and ensuing events also show that he did not follow suit.

In this illustrative case, the interaction took place among “official” representatives of the churches, rather than among a broad group of believers. Yet, the example demonstrates that public spheres exist within and between Christian churches which allow for members to engage in a discourse on “common affairs.” These can be viewed here as the overall common affair or “good” of peace and how the churches individually and jointly should position themselves in view of the war or on more specific policy questions. The examples also point to the divisions which can be understood as a space for contestation on the one hand and the discontinuation of a discourse on the other hand. Either way, a (religious) public manifest in a public sphere is available, if the members wish to engage.

### 2.3. *Publics as Institutions*

In this third manifestation, institutions are an expression of agency and are deemed to be public based on their goal of managing common affairs and/or to produce common goods (Mende & Müller, 2023). “This manifestation of publics is...inextricably interlinked with politics as it denotes how a group of actors organises and regulates its common affairs” (Mende & Müller, 2023, p. 92). The main difference to the preceding two manifestations is that there is an element of representation which goes hand-in-hand with an “institutional framework.” In other words, while the first manifestation of public merely indicates a common focus on an issue or an event and the second type of public is manifest in discourse, this third manifestation has a more enduring character combined with the aspect of agency, being able to make decisions and take action with the aim of producing common goods. Not every institution can necessarily act (international conventions, regimes). However, in this understanding of public, the institution has exactly that capability.

Considering the definition of religion employed in this article, the Christian churches studied here can all be understood as institutions. The following examples explore how they can also be understood as institutions



that assume a public character in that they not only provide a public sphere but also claim to act on behalf of a group of actors (their believers).

The Protestant Church in Germany (2022), which describes itself as a “Communion of 20 Lutheran, Reformed, and United Protestant Churches,” is presented here as an example of an institution that acts in the name of a religious public. Its constitution thus already points to its aim of giving the numerous different Protestant churches in Germany agency in terms of having visibility but also the ability to reflect, decide, and act. In other words, the Protestant Church in Germany is a prime example of a public as institution. The common good in question in this context is arguably the greater good of peace and how it can be maintained or achieved. When the question of providing Ukraine with weapons emerged in Germany several weeks after the war started, this triggered a discussion within the Protestant Church in Germany, which can be viewed as the ability to reflect. The “commissioner for peace” of the Protestant Church in Germany, Bishop Friedrich Kramer, addressed the dilemma the Church found itself in, stating that while Ukraine had a natural right to defend itself, peace could only be achieved without weapons. In his essay “Just Peace and Military Violence” (Bedford-Stroh, 2022), one of the Church’s most prominent figures, the Bavarian Bishop and former Chair of the Protestant Church in Germany Council Heinrich Bedford-Stroh, argued that defending oneself with weapons was morally acceptable. Thus, supporting those who were attacked was equally justified, always under the caveat of proportionality or just means (Bedford-Stroh, 2022). These two camps within the German Protestant Church took part in the public discourse, for example by publishing, participating in interviews, or television debates. They also reflect two discourse formations within German society and the government itself. While the Protestant Church in Germany was not able to decide on a joint position on the question of providing arms, they did decide on the common position that they believed that Ukraine had a right to self-defence (see “Beschluss zu Frieden,” 2022). Not only can a public sphere be observed here, but the institution of the Protestant Church in Germany develops positions within its own institution. These joint positions on creating, promoting, or maintaining common goods are then transported into the overall public discourse, either by politicians who are themselves members of the Protestant Church in Germany or by representatives engaging in public debates.

Unlike in the other three manifestations, the second example presented here is not that of a Christian church directly affected by the war. Instead, the second example is the Roman Catholic church as it represents a Christian church and a (religious) public manifest in an institution not only at a domestic/national level such as the Protestant Church in Germany but also at an international and transnational level. The Catholic church arguably has more agency internationally than the Protestant

Church in Germany, since it is officially represented at the United Nations as the Holy See with the status of a permanent observer. As has been indicated above, the Catholic church has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the Ukraine War. What is more, it has also offered to serve as a mediator between the warring parties. The example presented here is how the Catholic church seeks to improve a common good, namely the effectiveness of the United Nations. The Ukraine War has triggered an unusually critical response by the Roman Catholic church aimed at the United Nations. At a general audience in April 2022, Pope Francis stated that, “in the current war in Ukraine, we are witnessing the impotence of the United Nations Organization” (Vatican, 2022). This was elaborated in more detail by Archbishop Caccia, addressing the United Nations General Assembly as the representative of the Holy See, underlining “the significant dysfunction present in this organization’s security architecture and that of the entire multilateral system” (Caccia, 2023). Publics that take institutional shapes can be observed here in that not only a group of over one billion Catholic believers are represented, but, rather, the Holy See is seeking to improve the multilateral system, particularly the United Nations in order to maintain peace and protect the innocent (not limited to Roman Catholics).

#### 2.4. Publics as Public Interests

The final manifestation is perhaps also the least tangible, as public interests are often (legitimately or not) proclaimed by actors in the name of a certain group, which only comes into existence through this act of identifying common goods. It is this act of speaking on behalf of, thereby constructing, and making “the interest or well-being of said group a normative reference point for politics” (Mende & Müller, 2023, p. 93) that makes this manifestation political. This differs from the manifestation as audience, since there is both a normative component and the element of an expressed appeal or even agenda. It also differs from the public sphere, since a discourse as such is not necessarily required, given a joint understanding of what the common good is. This does not preclude that this type could morph into a public as a public sphere or even develop into a public possessing institutional agency.

In the example presented under publics as audience, Patriarch Kirill was mentioned as providing arguments for legitimizing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, blessing soldiers and weapons. The patriarch is officially the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and thus speaks in the name of all believers. This, however, not only happens within religious contexts but also beyond. In January 2023, the new chairman of the DECR (mentioned above under public as public sphere), Metropolitan Anthony, addressed the United Nations Security Council. In this speech directed at a global public, he stated:

Russian Orthodox Church on her own and in cooperation with other Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant confessions and representatives of world traditional religions is taking part within the realm of possibility in defending the rights of religious believers all over the world, and Christians in particular. At present we have grave concerns about the flagrant violation of human and constitutional rights of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine. (Anthony, 2023)

By listing these various Christian churches, the chairman implies that he is not only speaking on behalf of members of the Russian Orthodox Church, but rather in the name of broader (Christian) public interests. He calls upon the “esteemed Council members” (Anthony, 2023), making the well-being of the “largest confession of the country” the normative reference point, which, according to him, is under threat by “unlawful actions of the Ukrainian state authorities.” However, there is another “public interest” found within the Russian Orthodox Church itself. Initiated in March 2022 and signed by almost 300 Russian Orthodox Church priests in the meantime, a joint appeal was published online as an interactive document (CPNN, 2022). These priests explicitly identify the public interest as “the life of every person is a priceless and unique gift of God, and therefore we wish all the soldiers—both Russian and Ukrainian—to return to their homes and families unharmed” (“Russian Orthodox priests,” 2022). While they also point to the suffering of the Ukrainians, they “mourn the ordeal to which our brothers and sisters in Ukraine were unfairly subjected” (“Russian Orthodox priests,” 2022), they do not identify the Ukrainian authorities as the perpetrators. These two brief examples indicate that even within one Christian church different normative reference points and publics are constructed, sometimes reaching beyond the own church and even addressing political leaders directly.

A very prominent example of a specific public interest which has become even more prominent since the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been that of the protection and support of refugees. Representatives from the entire spectrum of Christian churches have been pleading for support and creating awareness of the plight of Ukrainian refugees. This ranges from individual representatives such as Pope Francis offering prayers and providing aid (Vatican, 2022), to joint efforts such as those by the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) providing humanitarian aid (IOCC, 2023). But it is also manifest in joint religious-secular initiatives such as can be seen in the cooperation between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA and the (non-religious) initiative Welcome.US which describes itself as a “non-partisan, non-profit incubator for projects that turn common pain into common purpose” (Welcome.US, 2023). The example above which looks at varying claims to upholding and pursuing public interests

within the Russian Orthodox Church and this latter aspect of differing groups mobilizing own or joining forces to further the public interest of refugee protection all indicate that there is a case for public interests that are based on religious conceptions of publics.

### 3. Conceptualizing “Religious Publics”

The hypothesis that religions can constitute highly dynamic publics in global politics and thus warrant a distinct conceptualization was examined by reviewing four manifestations in connection with Christianity as one religion and the Ukraine War as a global political issue. At least one example could be found for each of the four manifestations, ranging from an audience at the local parish level to the expression of public interests at the international level. As the short overview of manifestations of publics in the context of a religion and a case of global politics illustrated, religion indeed is often manifested in more than one type of public in global politics. What it has also demonstrated is that there is not just *one* religious public. The next step, then, is to explore possibilities of conceptualizing religious public(s), to better grasp the interplay of these manifestations.

Looking at the domestic level, Habermas (2011, p. 27) observes that, “as long as religious communities remain a vital force in civil society, their contribution to the legitimation process reflects an at least indirect reference to religion, which ‘the political’ retains even within a secular state.” Holst and Molander (2015) offer an interesting debate on the status of religious citizens in this public discourse and whether they “suffer an asymmetrical cognitive burden.” What makes religion so complex and at the same time significant when studying public(s) and global politics, is not only the constitution of the religions themselves, but also the political structures within which they are manifested, be it within the state or global governance institutions. Following up on the question, Barbato (2020, p. 16) addresses as to “whether religion is a constitutive or a temporary element of the public discourse”:

Religious discourses in exchange with secular discourses are not only rich enough to prepare cognitive notions and imaginations of a better world but also possess the motivational impact to work for them. Religious discourses which are themselves open to other religious and secular discourses can help to form islands of moral arguing in the transformation process of globalisation. Habermas calls societies which go beyond rigid secularism and accept religion as a moral source postsecular. (Barbato, 2012, p. 1081)

While Habermas (2011) identifies the significance of religious contributions in public discourse in terms of fostering legitimacy, Barbato (2012, 2020) points to the manifestations of religions as public in terms of public

spheres and public interests. The cases discussed here could, arguably, be subsumed in term of postsecular publics. However, that would not do the dynamic interplay of different manifestations justice, since the examples also revealed that religious publics are manifold, can bridge the local with the global, and—at times—even constitute global politics. When reviewing the case study of Christian churches and the Ukraine War and considering the religious reactions mentioned in the introduction, three types of religious publics can be identified: so-called “mono-religious publics,” “joint-religious publics,” and “secular-religious publics.”

The four manifestations introduced by Mende and Müller (2023) were employed as a foundation in inductively grasping religious publics. All four manifestations could be identified within, between, and beyond the Christian churches examined in the case study. These four manifestations are therefore helpful in demonstrating and analytically grasping the manifoldness and dynamics of religious publics. They appear in different constellations—an audience often goes hand-in-hand with a public sphere; institutions enable claims to public interests, etc. What is more, these four manifestations are not limited to one or several Christian churches or Christianity as a whole. While not explicitly mentioned in the case study, there are numerous examples of inter-religious versions of all of the manifestations identified above.

As mentioned above, Zürn’s (2021) work on how publics can and should emerge to overcome the current crisis of global governance provides the second building block, as it helps establish how publics evolve. Some caveats are necessary here. The first caveat is that Zürn explores what he terms a “counterfactual” public, in other words, he studies publics that do not exist. A second caveat is that he argues that the mere existence of a governance system makes a public normatively desirable, though the assumption is that these are only possible in the context of liberal-democratic states (Zürn, 2021, p. 160). He is thus interested in the conditions necessary for such global political publics to emerge. A final caveat is that Zürn’s understanding of publics most closely resembles what Mende and Müller (2023) would term public as institution. The definition of religion employed in this article grasps religions as institutions, yet as the empirical examples have shown, religious publics can assume other manifestations as well. Zürn’s institutional understanding of public is used to conceptualize religious publics. However, it shall not preclude other manifestations.

For a political public to emerge, the following conditions, presented as questions, need to be met. The first one reads: “Are there indications of a broad acceptance of the functional necessity of regulations and decision-making processes that transcend borders?” (Zürn, 2021, p. 173). This refers to an acceptance of delegating decision-making powers to political institutions. The second question he raises is “whether there are societal groups capable of and willing to develop

their own expectations and strategies towards international institutions” (Zürn, 2021, p. 175). He also calls this the condition of being able to mobilize the group’s own resources. Thirdly, he addresses the question as to the mutual recognition of rights of the members of a given public, i.e., whether the freedom of speech and an acceptance of mutual obligations are given (Zürn, 2021, p. 176). Perhaps surprisingly, despite the fact that religions are not per se liberal-democratic, these three conditions can be observed in the emergence of religious publics in the global governance context.

A first explorative conceptualization of religious publics might read: religious publics fulfill the condition of accepting the delegation of power to a higher entity (usually in the form of a religious authority), the condition of being able to mobilize own attitudes and support vis-à-vis this higher entity, and there is a mutual recognition of equality and freedom of speech. When they emerge, religious publics can assume one or more manifestations in the shape of audience, public sphere, institutions, and public interests. They can take on the shape of mono-religious, joint-religious, or secular-religious publics (as illustrated in Table 1).

*Mono-religious publics* are at the core of this article. They are groups (or, in this case, churches) within a single religion that jointly fulfil the condition of accepting and delegating authority to a higher entity. The common higher entity would be the Christian notion of God, yet the individual churches might have religious leaders or institutions to which authority is delegated, and there is also a parallel acceptance of secular authority. There is a potential of mobilization within the religion to devise new standpoints or strategies and this goes hand-in-hand with the aspect of mutual recognition. Even in the case of churches with strong hierarchical and often undemocratic structures, there is space for contestation. They can assume all four manifestations.

When studying the Ukraine War, *joint-religious publics* can be identified, for example, in the shape of inter-religious audiences and the public spheres provided by them. More institutionalized forms such as Religions for Peace can also take on agency and develop public interests. This type of religious public is characterized by the shared identity of being religious, regardless of the religion in question. Inter-religious dialogues are an example of such a public and specifically the Parliament of the World’s Religions represents such a space in which various “religious” come together with the joint vision of a “world of peace, justice and sustainability” (Parliament of Religions, 2021). The aspect of delegating authority to a higher entity can take on different forms, either in that there is a joint (albeit not identical) understanding of a higher power, or in the sense that the authority is delegated to the joint common inter-religious institution. There is once again the potential to mobilize, and the foundations of inter-religious formats are based on the common understanding of equality. These joint religious publics are usually transnational and the issues which



**Table 1.** Types of religious publics.

Type of religious public	Description	Manifestations	Role in Ukraine War
Mono-religious	One or more groups belonging to the same religion	Audience, sphere, institution, interests	Legitimizing the war; contributing to domestic debates on providing arms; mediating between conflict parties; navel-gazing; apathy; appealing to state and international actors
Joint-religious	Can be both ad-hoc as well as institutionalized and can focus on one or more issues; members from at least two different religions are involved	Audience, sphere, institution, interests	Issuing joint statements; calling for dialogue; mobilizing support for refugees
Secular-religious or post-secular	Ad-hoc formations between religious and non-religious groups, usually focused on one issue	Audience, sphere, interests	Political will-formation regarding weapon deliveries; refugee support; combating hunger

are addressed, or the political will, which is formed, targets global political issues. These joint-religious publics can also assume all four manifestations. A sub-type of this category is so-called “single-issue religious publics,” which are formed by followers of various religions and are joined by a common issue.

The example shown above was that of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA cooperating with a non-religious organisation to promote joint public interests. As Fox and Sandler (2004, p. 49) observe, “a policy maker who can successfully portray a political cause as a religious one has a powerful tool for mobilizing support and silencing opposition.” In other words, *joint secular-religious publics* pose a reciprocal strengthening of legitimacy and authority between the religious and secular members in order to promote their global political aims. Or, as Habermas would define it, “societies which go beyond rigid secularism and accept religion as a moral source” (as cited in Barbato, 2012, p. 1081). Unlike the other two types, this type of religious public is unlikely to develop institutional agency, since cooperation is usually ad-hoc and limited to one issue. This does not exclude institutions per se but makes them less likely.

#### 4. Conclusion

The guiding hypothesis of this article is that religions can constitute highly dynamic publics in global politics and thus warrant a distinct conceptualization. This was examined using categories or manifestations of publics as devised by Mende and Müller (2023) and conditions for publics to emerge according to Zürn (2021). The case study itself demonstrated that a single religion can assume all four manifestations. In other words, the hypothesis proved to be true and thus justified a

distinct conceptualization of religious public(s). Yet the case study also indicated the high degree of pluralism within one church vis-à-vis a single global political issue, namely that of the Ukraine War. The case shows that religions cannot be grasped as monolithic constructs and, despite strong hierarchical structures, there is a great dynamic expressed in inter- and intra-church discourse. The case also underlines how intertwined religious publics and global politics are, for example when considering the schism within the orthodox churches of Russia and Ukraine. In other words, due to the manifoldness of manifestations, but also of understandings of authority, the potential for mobilization, and mutual recognition, religious publics can be conceptualized distinctly. The three types introduced here are of an explorative nature. First findings indicate that they can be applied to other religions and inter-religious or secular-religious constellations beyond the one examined here. As mentioned in the introduction, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation is in itself an under-researched religious public that has also reacted to the Ukraine War. Another promising case to consider is that of the broad spectrum of publics within Judaism not just in the case of the Ukraine War. Moving away from the Ukraine War, especially the global issues of migration and climate change could benefit from studying religious publics, as this would help identify (additional) public spheres, argumentations, and mechanisms of mobilization.

Introducing religious publics, however, also serves another purpose, for it allows another take on the question of publics and global politics. When looking at religions, the actors, spheres, and institutions in question are most often not organized democratically. Particularly the two examples of the Russian Orthodox Church and of the Roman Catholic Church examined in this article

represent religious institutions which have strong hierarchies and rigid structures. Yet, the manifestations of public studied here show that contestation is possible and observable. And in those institutions which are more democratically organized, such as the Protestant Church in Germany (in Germany), participants in the discourse agree to disagree, giving space to disagreement rather than forcing unity in the name of harmony. These observations indicate that the forms of public identified by Mende and Müller (2023) can also be applied to non-democratic spaces. An overall argument for studying religions in the context of global politics can also be made, as they can serve as a source for better understanding the emergence or change of public common goods, be it in identifying them, but also understanding in how they are prioritized or legitimized. Finally, by introducing and differentiating between three forms of religious publics, religion(s) in global politics but also in IR can be studied in a more nuanced way.

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