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Putin's War Against Ukraine May Have Spiritual, Religious Foundations: "Good vs. Evil"

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LAUREN GREEN

Four faith leaders share insights on the tragedy of the Russia-Ukraine war

The fuel behind Russian President Vladimir Putin's rage against Ukraine probably has more spiritual and religious foundations than most pundits have acknowledged. For religious leaders, the war in Ukraine is a top concern. For faith leaders in media, this conflict is not just about politics.

Dirk Smith is one of the thousands of faith leaders in media who met last week in Nashville, Tennessee, for the National Religious Broadcasters convention. He says Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a simple spiritual matter.

"It's good versus evil ... It is not Russians versus Ukrainians," Smith says. "The Russian people — they don't want this."



A Ukrainian service member holds a baby while crossing the Irpin River on an improvised path under a bridge that was destroyed by a Russian airstrike, while assisting people fleeing the town of Irpin, Ukraine, on March 5, 2022. (Associated Press)

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Smith heads EEM (Eastern European Ministry), an organization that has supplied millions of Bibles to Ukraine's public schools. Yes, Ukraine's public schools — because the Ukrainian government has recognized the value of teaching the Good Book to young, impressionable minds.

The relationship gives Smith insight into the Ukrainian spiritual mindset. "Ukraine, to some extent, is kind of the Bible Belt of Eastern Europe. They have been pushing Christian values, they have been standing up for God for a long time, and they've been a beacon of light for quite some time now."



The Ukrainian government knows the value of teaching the Good Book to young minds: "Ukraine, to some extent, is kind of the Bible Belt of Eastern Europe," ministry leader Dirk Smith told Lauren Green of Fox News Channel.

Dr. Jeff Myers of Summit Ministries believes the spiritual is essential for helping put this war in context for young people. "What is the physical aspect? What's the diplomatic aspect? All of those things are important," says Myers (summit.org). He also notes that the "spiritual aspect" cannot be ignored with "the rising generation." "What they're really asking is, 'Why would God allow something like this?'"

For Sam Brownback, former ambassador-at-large of international religious freedom during the Trump administration, the Russian invasion is a holy war over the politics of religion.

Says Brownback, "Vladimir Putin, at one point, painted himself as the defender of Christendom. That's how he fashions himself — that's part of the impetus."

"We just know that God has told us to pray ... God accomplishes things through prayer that we could not do on our own."

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Brownback, making the rounds at NRB, helped Christian leaders understand the foundation of Putin's rage. It's one most government officials failed to take as seriously as they should have.

Three years ago, the leader of the world's Orthodox Churches in Istanbul, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, granted the Ukraine Orthodox Church independence from the Russian Church in Moscow. It's called autocephaly.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen in this up-close image. "The Ukrainians don't want to be a part of Mother Russia," says Sam Brownback, as Lauren Green of Fox News Channel reports. (Associated Press)

To Western officials, it seemed a victory for religious freedom. But to Putin and the closely aligned Russian clergy, it was a shattering slap in the face.

Said Brownback, "That blew a gasket with the Russian Orthodox church. They were livid. It was also 40 percent of their membership, roughly, in Ukraine."

The break from Moscow was years in the making. After signing the document, Bartholomew said, "The pious Ukrainian people have been waiting for this blessed day for seven centuries."

The Russian Orthodox Church was birthed in Kyiv, Ukraine. In 988, Prince Vladimir was baptized and left the pagan faith to become Christian.

"I believe it honestly is in [Putin's] own heart and soul as to why he thinks he's justified in doing this — which is just totally wrong."

"So, the whole nation was baptized," says Brownback. "That's the start of the Russian Orthodox Church."

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"But then it was later moved to Moscow, their headquarters there. And so, to Putin, this is part of Mother Russia. And the Ukrainians don't want to be part of Mother Russia."



Sam Brownback said that to Putin, "It [Ukraine] is part of Mother Russia. And the Ukrainians don't want to be part of Mother Russia." (Associated Press)

"I believe it honestly is in his own heart and soul as to why he thinks he's justified in doing this — which is just totally wrong," says Brownback. He says there'll be a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking, looking back on that decision that the West applauded. It only poured salt into Putin's gashing wound.



The fuel behind Putin's rage against Ukraine probably has more spiritual and religious foundations than most pundits have acknowledged.

But the hope, at least, for faith leaders who see this as a spiritual battle is that the solution is also spiritual.

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Ron Harris, head of Medialliance (medialliance.cc), says God is still sovereign and is still in control. "We just know that God has told us to pray ... God accomplishes things through prayer that we could not do on our own," he says.

Lauren Green currently serves as Fox News Channel's (FNC) chief religion correspondent based in the New York bureau. She joined FNC in 1996. Her new book is *Lighthouse Faith: God as a Living Reality in a World Immersed in Fog*. She is host of Fox News Digital's "Spirited Debate."

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