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MASTER'S THESIS
**«PREACHING IN WARTIME UKRAINE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
THROUGH THE LENS OF RELIGIOUS COPING THEORY»**

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of religious coping have traditionally studied how individuals draw on faith to make sense of stress, loss, and threat, framing coping as an individual cognitive and emotional process. Less attention has been paid to the group level and to the institutional context in which religious messages about crisis are articulated, normed, and circulated to parishioners. This thesis examines how three Ukrainian Christian denominations – the UOC, the UGCC, and the OCU – speak about war in their Christmas sermons preached between 2022 and 2025, against the backdrop of full-scale war and confessional pluralism. Drawing on the theory of religious coping and the broader psychology of meaning-making under stress as analytical lenses, the thesis conducts a qualitative content analysis of 81 sermons, describing and interpreting the messages addressed to parishioners. The analysis describes different types of church rhetoric that emerge in the three denominations in the context of the war.

Keywords: religious coping, sermons, war in Ukraine, content analysis, collective meaning-making, public religious communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Under conditions of large-scale social threat, religion can serve as an important resource for meaning-making, emotional support, and psychological stabilisation. In the academic literature, the role of religion in coping with stress has most often been analysed through individual forms of religiosity: prayer, trust in God, spiritual regulation of emotions, the search for meaning in suffering, or hope in conditions of uncertainty. Such a perspective is indispensable, yet it largely ignores the social-psychological and group dimensions of crisis experience.

The full-scale Russian war against Ukraine has produced a situation of prolonged collective threat that extends well beyond individual stress. War disrupts the sense of safety, dislocates the routine order of life, alters social ties, and creates an experience of loss, danger, and radical uncertainty. Under such conditions, coping is not only a matter of the individual's capacity to withstand tension; it also involves the restoration of meaning, the reworking of collective experience, and the maintenance of social solidarity in the face of an enduring threat (Hirschberger, 2018). For this reason, studying religious coping in wartime requires attention not only to the inner experience of a single person, but also to how ways of experiencing threat are produced, sustained, and normed at the group and institutional levels.

Responses to threat do not emerge in a social vacuum (Revenson & Lepore, 2012): they are tightly connected to processes of social identification, because belonging to a meaningful group can shape how stress is experienced and which social support is available (Haslam et al., 2005), as well as to collective emotions that shape the context of shared emotional experience (Goldenberg et al., 2014).

What counts as a proper response to a crisis—which emotions should be sustained and which restrained, how to interpret suffering, loss, danger, or hope—is to a significant extent defined by the social context. In this sense, religious institutions may act not only as a source of support, but also as actors who shape the social context in which events are interpreted. Park (2005) shows directly that religion is capable of producing a frame through which people interpret loss, suffering, and threat. Religion can offer a sense of hope and can construct a meaningful interpretation of the crisis itself.

One of the most influential theoretical frames for analysing the role of religion in coping is Kenneth Pargament's theory of religious coping, within which religious coping is understood as the use of religious beliefs, practices, and symbolic resources to make sense of and master stressful or traumatic events (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000). This frame shows that religion can perform the functions of meaning-making, support of control, emotional intimacy, social support, and inner transformation. At the same time, the bulk of empirical work on religious coping has focused on the individual level: it analyses personal strategies, subjective experiences, and individual ways of religiously responding to a crisis. This is precisely where one of the key gaps in the current literature becomes visible. What remains under-studied is the institutional and contextual dimension of religious coping: how, through public addresses, sermons, and symbolic narratives, the church frames the interpretation of war, norms emotions, and articulates models of appropriate behaviour.

Ukraine combines the experience of full-scale war, collective trauma, and a high level of confessional pluralism. Elsner (2025) shows that Ukraine's religious landscape is being shaped under conditions of war, religious pluralism, and societal transformation, and that the Orthodox churches in particular represent different historical trajectories, public positions, and conceptions of conflict, unity, and reconciliation. This creates rare conditions for comparing how different denominations make sense of one and the same collective threat and which framed responses and interpretations they offer to their believers. Sermons are especially valuable analytically in this context, because a sermon is an act of intentional religious communication.

Following Cummins and Stille (2021), a sermon should be understood not as a one-way monologue but as an event of religious communication in which reception, the agency of the audience, the place of delivery, the repetitive character of the practice, and the historical context not only mediate the emotional effect but also participate in the very constitution of the sermon's meaning.

For this study, Christmas sermons preached between 2022 and 2025 were selected as the empirical material. In the Christian tradition, Christmas is understood as the sacred event of the birth of Christ, connected with the motifs of salvation and with the spiritual-ethical values of faith, humility, mercy, and hope (Husar, 2025), which makes Christmas sermons appropriate material for analysing how religious discourse links the experience of war with coping. In addition, in the Ukrainian setting the Christmas period has a further confessional dimension linked to the calendar split in the celebration, which sharpens the visibility of boundaries between church traditions and makes a comparison of their rhetorical models particularly meaningful.

Direct study of parishioners through surveys or interviews is methodologically valuable but constrained in the wartime context by issues of access and self-report bias. The analysis of public texts offers a complementary approach: as Iñiguez and Antaki (1994) note, language does not merely report social reality but actively participates in shaping it, making institutional texts such as sermons legitimate empirical objects in their own right.

Accordingly, the research question of this thesis is formulated as follows: What patterns of interpreting war can be identified in the Christmas sermons of different Ukrainian Christian denominations, and how can these patterns be understood through the lens of religious coping theory?

Research tasks:

1. To collect and systematise a corpus of sermons from different denominations (UOC, OCU, UGCC) for the period of the full-scale invasion.
2. To carry out a content analysis of the sermons in accordance with the functional approach to religion.
3. To compare inter-denominational differences in the construction of religious messages, interpreting them through the lens of religious coping theory.

Methods of the study: qualitative content analysis of public sermon texts using Pargament's functional frame of religious coping; comparative analysis; interpretation within religious coping theory.

Theoretical expectations. It is expected that the sermons of different denominations will display differences in the way the war is interpreted, which can be read through the categories of meaning-making, symbolic control, closeness to God, closeness with others. Accordingly, the sermon will function as a form of structuring collective meaning-making through which the institution publicly outlines legitimate ways of experiencing the threat.

Research design. The thesis follows an exploratory design. Studies of religious coping are predominantly concentrated at the individual level, while the role of institutions in shaping the context of coping is largely overlooked. The analysis of sermons as a form of public religious discourse makes it possible to examine the modes of interpreting the war, the normative prescriptions, and the publicly articulated religious responses to the war. A limitation of this approach is that it does not permit direct conclusions about the impact of sermons on the audience.

Scientific novelty. The thesis shifts the focus of the analysis of religious coping from the individual to the institutional and group level and examines the social context within which coping is formed.

Structure of the thesis. The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusions, recommendations, a list of references, and appendices. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, reviewing literature on coping, religious coping, social identity, collective trauma, and the role of religious institutions in wartime Ukraine, while also outlining the research frame and analytical approach. Chapter 2 describes the methodology of the empirical study, including corpus construction, the coding frame, procedures of qualitative content analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 presents the results of the analysis, including the descriptive distribution of codes, the visibility of war across denominations, and the discussion of the main denominational patterns of publicly articulated religious responses to the war. The conclusions summarise the main findings of the study, outline its limitations, and provide recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

1.1. Coping as a subject of psychological and social-psychological analysis

The study of how people respond to stress and danger is one of the central topics in psychology. The concept of coping is traditionally used to describe the processes through which a person attempts to manage the demands of a situation appraised as threatening, exhausting, or exceeding available resources. The classical and still one of the most influential definitions belongs to Lazarus and Folkman, who understood coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

At the same time, the very breadth of this definition is frequently criticised in the literature. The concept of coping can encompass very different phenomena: from active problem-solving to avoidance, from cognitive reappraisal to emotional restraint, from seeking support to temporary disengagement. Coping has been described as a “diffuse umbrella term,” that is, an umbrella concept that brings together strategies with different psychological logics and different consequences; without clear boundaries of the construct it is difficult to determine what exactly falls under coping (Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996).

Coping differs from other behaviour not by its form, but by its function and context. In the literature coping is treated as a contextually and dynamically determined process, which complicates its operationalisation, the construction of non-contradictory classifications, and the clear demarcation of strategies; moreover, the effectiveness of coping is usually considered dependent on the match between strategy and situation, rather than as a universal property of a given strategy (Skinner et al., 2003). The problem of operationalisation is central to research on coping. If coping is defined too broadly, almost any reaction to difficulty can be called coping, and the concept loses analytical sharpness. If it is defined too narrowly, a considerable portion of the actual ways of adapting to threat falls out of view.

These tensions become especially visible in the study of crisis situations. In the case of stressful events, meaning-making acquires special significance, because in situations where the person cannot directly change the circumstances, psychological adaptation largely depends on how the event is interpreted and integrated into a person’s system of meanings (Park, 2010).

Classical stress and coping models predominantly conceptualised coping as an intra-individual process, in which the focus is placed on how the individual appraises the significance of threat, experiences stress, and mobilises cognitive, emotion-regulation, and behavioural resources to respond (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While remaining fundamental, this perspective is analytically insufficient for explaining responses to enduring social crises, collective trauma, and mass threats, because the reaction to stress is shaped not in isolation but in the context of interpersonal relations, social expectations, group norms, culturally defined scripts of response, and access to shared resources (Kuo, 2013; Drury et al., 2019). From this it follows that coping is best understood as a process with not only an individual but also an interpersonal and group dimension. Research on communal coping shows that under conditions of

significant threat the problem can be experienced not as “mine” but as “ours,” and responses to it are organised through shared appraisal of the situation, communication, cooperation, and coordinated action (Lyons et al., 1998; Helgeson et al., 2018). In a broader sense these processes may also include mutual support, the coordination of resources, and the joint construction of the meaning of an event (Kuo, 2013).

Coping is treated here as a broader process of mastering threat that can be socially mediated and collectively sustained. Coping and its behavioural expressions therefore depend on group norms, identity, and meanings established in the significant environment.

Accordingly, the social group is not only the context in which stress is experienced but also a potential resource for its mastery. Belonging to a group can substantially shape which interpretations of events appear convincing, which emotions are normatively acceptable, and which response strategies are perceived as approved or undesirable. Within the social identity approach it has been shown that shared group membership can be associated with better psychological adaptation and well-being and, in conditions of crisis, with solidarity, mutual support, coordination of actions, and the experience of a “shared fate” (Drury, 2018; Haslam et al., 2018). Social identity influences not only how a person defines herself, but also the very process of appraising threat: what is perceived as a danger to the group can trigger not only individual but also collectively organised forms of coping (Drury, 2018). In this sense social identity is linked to the fact that people more often choose behaviour consistent with the behavioural norms of the groups with which they identify (de Hoog & Pat-El, 2024). It follows that coping is not only a psychological but also a social-psychological phenomenon, because it is mediated by group norms, social identity, and systems of shared meaning.

Religious communities are one type of group in which norms, identities, and shared meanings are articulated with particular institutional intensity, and the sermon – as a public address from the institution to the community – can therefore serve as an indicator of the processes of meaning-making and mastering threat that unfold at the collective level.

1.2. Religious coping: main approaches and the limits of individual-level analysis

The theory of religious coping developed within the broader tradition of stress and coping research as a distinct line of inquiry focused specifically on the role of religious resources in mastering threat. The most influential framework within this line is Kenneth Pargament's theory of religious coping.

Within this theory, religion was conceptualised not only as a system of beliefs or a cultural tradition, but as an active resource to which people turn in situations of danger, stress, or radical uncertainty. In the most general sense, religious coping refers to efforts directed at making sense of and mastering life difficulties in ways linked to the sacred (Pargament, 1997). What is central in this definition is not simply turning to religion as such, but its functional involvement in the process of responding to crisis. The advantage of Pargament's approach is that it allows religion to be treated not as a homogeneous and always positive phenomenon, but as a multidimensional resource

capable of performing different psychological functions. In this logic religious coping is not reduced to prayer or religious self-identification. It refers to a wider process in which religious beliefs, symbols, the image of God, rituals, moral norms, and community can be used to interpret events, reduce anxiety, restore a sense of orderliness, and preserve the capacity for action under crisis (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000).

Within this theory the concept of the sacred plays a central role. Pargament emphasises that religious coping covers not only the turning to God in a theistic sense, but any way of mastering threat that is connected with what is experienced as holy, absolute, or transcendent. In crisis situations religion can give events meaning, symbolically order chaos, sustain hope, connect the individual to a community, and offer morally justified scripts of action—that is, function as a central mechanism of experiencing stress, not as a side variable (Pargament, 1997).

First, religion can perform a meaning-making function, that is, help the person to embed a traumatic or threatening event in a broader picture of the world (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014). Suffering, loss, war, death, or radical uncertainty cease to be merely chaotic facts and can be interpreted as a trial, a moral lesson, a part of a higher design, or an opportunity for inner transformation. In psychological terms this matters because meaning reduces the sense of absurdity of an event and sustains a feeling of cognitive orderliness (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2010).

Second, religion can perform the function of restoring control. In situations where the person cannot directly change the circumstances, a religious frame allows control to be experienced in a symbolic form—through prayer, trust in God’s design, the conviction that events are not ultimately chaotic but are held within a higher order. This is what the literature describes as religious compensatory control (Kay et al., 2010).

Third, religion can be a source of emotional and social support: through the image of a close God, through support from the religious community, and through rituals and shared practices that reduce loneliness, fear, and disorientation (Weber & Pargament, 2014). These ideas were developed in the RCOPE instrument created by Pargament, which has become one of the most widely used ways of empirically measuring religious coping.

Within this approach, a map of numerous religious strategies that people can use in response to stress has been proposed, together with several key functional domains of religion in the process of coping: meaning-making, restoration of control, closeness to God, closeness with others, and transformation of experience (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000). It is precisely this functional logic that is particularly productive, because it enables us to see, behind different religious practices, not a random set of themes but systematically organised psychological mechanisms. The overwhelming majority of empirical work on religious coping is built at the individual level of analysis: it uses questionnaires, self-reports, and scales rating personal experiences, private beliefs, or individual religious practices.

Recent Ukrainian scholarship illustrates how productive this individual-level approach has been in the context of the full-scale war, while also showing its limits. Several lines of empirical work have begun to map how Ukrainians draw on religious

resources to cope with war-related stress. Survey-based studies of Ukrainian Christians have used personality-level instruments such as the Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire and the Religious Orientation Scale to link types of religiosity with coping repertoires, reporting that intrinsic religiosity is weakly associated with lower aggressive and avoidant coping, while extrinsic religiosity correlates with avoidance and manipulative strategies (Pyroh & Lytvynchuk, 2025). A larger-scale study of 208 people affected by Russian aggression, conducted with the Ukrainian adaptation of the RCOPE alongside anxiety and perceived-stress scales, documented a wartime shift in the relative weight of coping strategies - a sharp decline in interpreting suffering as God's punishment and a marked rise in collaborative coping, seeking support from clergy and parishioners, religious focus, and framing events as the work of the devil - as well as significant associations between positive religious coping and lower anxiety and stress ("Dialogue in Action", 2024). Other Ukrainian authors have approached the same field theoretically, examining religion as a value-and-meaning resource that sustains resilience in wartime (Prorok et al., 2025), as a mechanism for managing post-traumatic stress alongside military chaplaincy (Shavrina & Soloviova-Kalish, 2026), or as a ritual-based way of restoring a sense of control under chronic stress while warning against the cultural pressure of "toxic resilience" (Veberova, 2024). Taken together, this body of work establishes religious coping as an active research field in Ukraine and confirms its relevance for understanding war-time experience. At the same time, all of these studies operate at the level of the individual believer - what people report about their own faith, their own practices, and their own emotional state - and therefore leave open the question of what religious response to the war is being articulated for them from above, at the level of churches as institutions speaking publicly to their communities.

At the centre of such studies is the question of how a specific person uses religion to cope with crisis, what she feels, what she believes, which practices she uses, how she interprets the event, and what consequences this has for her psychological state. This level of analysis is extremely important and certainly productive, yet it does not exhaust the spectrum of religious coping as a social-psychological phenomenon.

By religious coping this thesis means the use of religious beliefs, practices, symbols, and conceptions of the sacred to make sense of and master life stressors (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000). This definition is foundational because it allows religion to be seen not only as a worldview, but as a resource for responding to threat. In functional terms, religious coping covers such dimensions as the provision of meaning, the support of control, the experience of closeness to God, the support of connection with others, and the transformation of experience. At the same time, in this thesis the concept is not used to describe the psychological state of specific believers directly. What is examined is the social context in which believers may form their response to the event.

The problem is that individual scales do not give full access to how religious ways of responding are formed within a community, proposed by institutions, and legitimised as morally right. Individually oriented instruments measure what a person has already internalised or is able to report about herself. They capture much less well the processes of the public production of meaning, the group norming of emotions, and

the collective formulation of appropriate behaviour. In other words, such instruments work well when the object of analysis is personal experience, but much less well when the object is the institutionally articulated, publicly proposed religious responses to threat that precede individual appropriation or do not coincide with it at all.

Transferring the individual level of analysis to the level of a community or institution without conceptual adaptation is methodologically problematic. This boundary becomes especially clear in the case of public religious communication. If individual religious coping captures how a specific person uses religion to master stress, the institutional level asks a different question: which ways of experiencing threat are proposed to the group as proper, legitimate, and morally approved. In this case, religion functions as a system of symbolic orientations, norms, and models of action that are diffused through sermons, rituals, addresses by leaders, and collective practices. It is precisely here that the analytical space opens up which individual scales such as RCOPE cannot exhaustively describe.

Because of this, a number of categories relevant at the level of individual experience can be either nearly absent or stylistically smoothed out in institutional communication. The direct transfer of RCOPE to sermons is problematic (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2023). Doubt, anger at God, the feeling of abandonment, and other ambivalent forms of religious experience may show up in personal experience but will not necessarily be voiced publicly in a sermon.

Thus, religious coping theory provides an extremely important conceptual foundation for understanding the role of religion in the mastery of stress. It shows that religion can be a resource of meaning, control, support, closeness, and transformation. However, in its classical empirical application the individual level of analysis dominates, which does not allow the institutional and discursive dimension of religious responses to crisis to be fully described. The present study therefore attempts to adapt this theoretical framework to a different type of empirical material – the sermons, in which religiously grounded responses to collective threat are publicly articulated for the community.

1.3. Religious institutions and their research relevance

For a social-psychological analysis of religious and church practices, it is crucial to consider religion not only as a set of individual beliefs or practices, but as a form of collective organisation of meaning, norms, and behaviour. In this sense the classical idea of Emile Durkheim remains productive: he described religion as a system of beliefs and practices that unites people into a moral community within which conceptions of the proper, the permissible, and the forbidden are formed (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Such an approach makes it possible to see that religion has not only an existential or symbolic but also a clearly normative dimension: it not only provides a language for speaking about suffering, but also articulates models for how this suffering should be interpreted and responded to. This is why religious institutions can be described as producers of ways of response.

They do not merely aggregate already existing beliefs of the community; they actively shape them through rituals, language, authoritative interpretations, and public addresses. In crisis situations this function becomes particularly visible. Under crisis

conditions, religious communities can contribute to psychosocial support of people by helping them cope with fear, anxiety, and stress, and by offering spiritual support tied to the search for meaning and purpose (Goodwin & Kraft, 2022). Moreover, the church gives events a sacred meaning.

Religious leaders play a particular role in this process. In a study of the role of religious leaders in the restoration of hope after natural disasters, religious actors are considered as agents capable of shaping values, attitudes, behaviour, and public discourse precisely under conditions of uncertainty and crisis. While in the table of helping factors the item “sermon” was not among the highest in significance compared with financial aid, food, housing, medical support, or counselling—meaning that sermons are not presented in that article as the main instrument of help but rather as one of the secondary ways of religious response (Hirono & Blake, 2017)—the church as an institution provides a much broader spectrum of support and interpretation than the sermon alone, which is one of the limitations of this study.

Unlike individual testimony, private prayer, or personal reflection, a sermon is a public address directed at a community. It does not only interpret the event; it also shapes the frame within which the event is to be understood. In a sermon the institution publicly articulates what the moral nature of the crisis is, what is central within it, which emotions are appropriate, what must be endured, what should be avoided, and how the “right” community is to behave. In this sense the sermon is a mechanism of injunctive norming: it does not merely describe but prescribes, does not merely explain but orients. The normativity of the sermon may show up both in direct formulations of prescription and in more mediated forms. It is expressed through the sanctioning of certain emotions and the restraint of others, and through exemplars of paradigmatic experiences of suffering, hope, loss, or struggle.

Within this study, this implies that a sermon can be analysed as a mechanism of production of group norms and collectively legitimate ways of responding to the crisis. Under crisis conditions this function of the sermon is intensified. Threat creates a situation in which people seek not only explanations of events but also moral orderliness, support, and certainty about how to act properly. It is precisely here that the religious institution can serve as a source of stability. It is able to translate chaotic experience into a symbolically ordered form in which evil is named, suffering is meaningful, hope is legitimised, and the unity of the group is confirmed.

Thanks to this, the sermon performs not only a theological or ritual function, but also a function of social-psychological coordination: it publicly proposes to coordinate meanings, emotions, and permissible behavioural models within a community. For this study it is also important that the sermon is institutional rather than purely individual communication. Even when delivered by a specific clergyman, a sermon represents not just his personal experience but is shaped within a wider denominational frame. The thesis assumes that the analysis of sermons allows one to observe not only individual utterances, but also the patterns of public religious communication that are characteristic of each denomination. In this sense the object of analysis is neither the psychology of the preacher nor the actual emotional state of the audience, but the publicly articulated ways in which churches address their communities – the meanings, emotional accents, and orientations to action that recur in their wartime preaching.

If at the individual level religion can be a resource of meaning, control, and support, then at the institutional level it additionally becomes a source of morally legitimate scripts of how the community ought to experience threat. It is for this reason that in the subsequent analysis the sermon is treated not as purely religious material, but as the main channel of broad communication between the clergy and parishioners.

1.4. The Ukrainian context and confessional pluralism

The war extends far beyond individual experience, reshaping the entire social space. A study by Cedos shows directly that the full-scale war has become a “major societal shock” and affects emotional state, daily life, public opinion, interpersonal relations, socio-economic position, employment, and civic engagement (Cedos, 2025). The war extends far beyond individual experience and changes the entire social space of the country.

Under such conditions, one can assume that “coping” acquires a collective dimension, because it concerns the restoration of the order of meaning, moral orientation, group solidarity, and the capacity to live with a prolonged threat. The literature describes processes of collective coping in which entire groups respond to a situation by a common principle (Afifi et al., 2020).

In the social-psychological literature, such situations are increasingly described through the concept of collective trauma. Unlike individual trauma, which concerns the experience of a particular person, collective trauma denotes an event that undermines the basic fabric of social life, dismantles the sense of continuity, security, and moral orderliness of a shared world (Hirschberger, 2018). Its consequences are visible not only in personal symptoms of distress, but also in shifts in collective conceptions of normality, the future, justice, evil, and the boundaries between “ours” and “others.” In the case of war, this collective component is particularly important, because what becomes traumatic is not only an individual experience of loss or threat but the very fact that danger acquires a society-wide scale and forces the group to revise its own conceptions of the world, of safety, and of moral order.

For this thesis it is important that collective trauma need not be measured solely through individual psychological symptoms. From a discursive perspective it can be tracked through the systematic presence in public communication of themes of loss, danger, destruction, radical uncertainty, crisis of meaning, and the need for symbolic restoration of order. Such an approach is precisely what is relevant for the analysis of sermons. If religious institutions regularly address themes of pain, suffering, threat, hope, resilience, and moral endurance, this means that they function within an environment of collective trauma and at the same time participate in its normative interpretation. War, then, is an environment in which the collective work of making sense of and reacting to a stress situation unfolds particularly intensively.

The research value of the Ukrainian case lies also in the fact that it combines the experience of collective threat with a high level of confessional pluralism. For this study, three of the largest churches in Ukraine were selected, which operate in a shared social space but have different historical trajectories, symbolic repertoires, modes of public presence, and confessional ways of interpreting social reality.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) has increasingly become associated with Ukrainian statehood, national consolidation, and the decolonization after 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion of 2022.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), historically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate, retains communities and parish networks across the country but occupies an increasingly contested position in public discourse because of its perceived ties to the Russian religious sphere.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), the dominant faith group in western Ukraine, which during the Euromaidan contributed a "religiously infused concept of dignity" to Ukraine's democratic mobilization and continues to articulate a public ethical vision distinct from both Russian and Western neutralist positions. (Coleman & Wanner, 2025).

Despite these institutional differences and the challenges of the war, both domestic and Western researchers note the resilience of Ukraine's model of religious pluralism. Ukrainian society largely rejects the idea of a single state church and continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to religious freedom and interconfessional tolerance, distinguishing Ukraine from many other post-Soviet states (Elsner, 2025; Surzhko Harned, 2022).

That makes Ukraine a particularly valuable case for studying religious coping across different church traditions. An analysis of religious rhetoric in the Ukrainian context shows how the institutions themselves participate in the collective processing of threat and formatting of how the group is to experience the crisis.

The Ukrainian context is thus theoretically important precisely because it combines three analytically significant conditions: war as a prolonged collective threat, collective trauma, and confessional pluralism as a condition for the variability of institutionally articulated religious responses to that threat.

1.5. The research gap and societal relevance

As noted above, the bulk of research on religious coping remains predominantly individual-centred, with RCOPE designed to measure personal coping strategies. This gap is especially evident in the case of war.

This gap is especially evident in the case of war. War is not just intense stress for a single person. It is a prolonged collective threat in which what matters is not only private experience but also shared languages of hope, loss, sacrifice, justice, and endurance. It is here that the church can be not only a source of personal support, but also a producer of legitimate meanings: it can explain what is happening, how suffering is to be interpreted, and which reactions are right.

Ukraine is a particularly good case for such an analysis. First, here the war coincides with a high public visibility of religion. Second, the Ukrainian religious landscape is pluralistic and competitive, so that different churches act in a shared public space but do not necessarily offer the same interpretations of the threat.

In wartime, the sermon is not only a religious text but also a form of public explanation of reality. Through the sermon, churches support, mobilise, calm, norm emotions, and outline the moral boundaries of the permissible. The analysis of sermons therefore helps to understand how a wartime society produces meanings of solidarity,

hope, patience, responsibility, and action. Academically this thesis extends the theory of religious coping beyond the individual level; in societal terms it allows a more precise view of the role of churches in the symbolic ordering of the experience of war.

A similar imbalance is evident in Ukrainian humanitarian scholarship on religion. Most existing research has focused on the official voice of the churches – declarations of synods and bishops' councils, pastoral letters, public statements of patriarchs and primates, addresses delivered on state and ecumenical occasions, and the messages circulated through official church media and websites. Another line of work has looked at the views of church representatives themselves, usually through interviews or surveys of clergy and laity. What has been largely left out, however, is what is actually said at a much lower level – in regular Sunday services in ordinary parishes, in the sermons of ordinary priests speaking to their own communities. It is precisely here, where the official position of the church meets the everyday experience of parishioners, that the war is interpreted in the most direct and tangible way – and it is precisely this level that has not yet received systematic scholarly attention.

1.6. The research frame

Sermons delivered in parishes during the war are not isolated personal statements; they form recurring patterns – in the themes they raise, the images they use, the explanations they offer, and the religiously framed responses they propose to parishioners. These patterns are what makes sermons accessible to systematic analysis and what allows the study to move from individual texts to broader tendencies within and across churches. The present subsection sets out the analytical approach used to identify and interpret these patterns in the corpus.

The orientation adopted here is informed by discursive social psychology, a tradition that took shape after the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s and was systematically presented in Potter and Wetherell’s *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In contrast to a cognitively oriented tradition that treats language as a transparent channel to inner states, discursive psychology treats language as a form of social action: utterances do not merely describe reality, they construct it and perform functions of evaluation, legitimation, norming, and the distribution of responsibility (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2012). In this logic, classical themes of social psychology such as attitudes, emotions, memory, or group belonging are reconceptualised not as stable inner entities but as publicly constructed practices visible in speech (Potter, 2012; Wiggins, 2017).

Four interrelated features of this orientation are relevant for the present study. First, the focus on naturally occurring material: discursive psychology works not with answers to standardised scales but with speech practices that arise in real social and institutional situations (Potter, 2012). A sermon as a public address by a clergyman to a community is precisely such material—it is delivered regardless of the presence of the researcher and performs its own institutional function. Second, systematic attention to normative practices: discursive psychology analyses how speech formulates what is proper, expected, and morally approved, and how participants in communication orient to these norms (Potter, 2012; Wiggins, 2017). This analytical focus matches the subject of the study, because the publicly articulated, institutionally proposed religious coping

orientations constitute a set of normative prescriptions about how the community is to interpret war, experience loss, and act under threat. Third, the reconceptualisation of psychological phenomena as public and socially distributed: emotions, belonging, and responsibility are treated not only as private states but as categories produced and sustained in communication (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2012).

Taken together, these features make this orientation methodologically adequate for work with sermons as institutional material. Standard psychometric instruments, including the RCOPE scale (Pargament et al., 2000), were developed to measure individual religious coping through respondent self-report and are not designed for the analysis of public communication. Attempts to transfer such instruments mechanically to sermons collide with the cultural and confessional specificity of the material and with an uneven distribution of categories (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2023). The approach adopted here retains the theoretical frame of religious coping as an analytical grid while at the same time recording what a sermon does publicly: it proposes interpretations, norms emotions, constructs the boundaries of “we/they,” and legitimizes particular religious ways of responding to the threat.

This methodological choice fits the broader understanding of religion within coping theory itself. Pargament et al. (2013) define religion as the search for significance that takes place within established institutions designed to support spirituality. The institutional dimension is therefore part of the subject from the outset, not an external addition to it. Looking at what churches communicate publicly is thus a natural extension of religious coping research. A useful precedent here is Kroesbergen-Kamps (2023), who applies the logic of RCOPE qualitatively to a corpus of sermons delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic – a direct model for the analysis of wartime sermons.

Several concrete analytical decisions follow from this frame. The focus of the analysis is what the sermon offers to the community: how the war is interpreted, which emotions are presented as appropriate, and which forms of action are proposed as the right ones. The functional categories of religious coping – meaning-making, control, closeness to God, closeness with others, and transformation – are used as guides for recognising recurring patterns in the texts, rather than as measurement scales. The comparison between churches is built on the qualitative juxtaposition of these patterns, which is consistent with an exploratory qualitative design. The approach also has limits that should be stated openly. Sermons make it possible to describe the patterns of response that churches put forward publicly, but they do not provide direct access to the inner states of preachers or to how parishioners actually receive and rework what they hear. The question of the real impact of a sermon on its audience requires a separate study with a different design and lies outside the scope of this thesis. The present work is concerned with the social context in which religious coping takes shape, not with the coping of individual believers.

The analytical logic of this study rests on a distinction between individual religious coping and institutionally articulated coping orientations. RCOPE was originally developed to measure how individuals use religion to cope with stress through self-report instruments. Sermons do not provide direct access to believers' internal psychological states. Instead, they publicly articulate socially legitimate ways

of interpreting war, experiencing suffering, and responding to threat. The present study therefore does not treat sermons as evidence of parishioners' actual coping. Rather, sermons are analysed as an institutional repertoire of religiously framed responses - the publicly proposed orientations that may structure or make available particular ways of responding within a religious community. The analysis therefore describes what the institution publicly proposes, not what individual believers appropriate or experience.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.1. Empirical material and the rationale for the choice of sermons

The empirical material of this study is a corpus of publicly available Christmas sermons of Ukrainian Christian churches, posted in open access on YouTube. These are video recordings and broadcasts of services of major Ukrainian churches, from which the parts of the sermons in which the priest addresses the parish have been extracted. All the sermons were delivered by clergymen during Christmas in the period 2022–2025 (Appendix A, Table 1). During the coronavirus pandemic, in response to quarantine restrictions, churches began to adapt to the new conditions and to post recordings of services online more actively, which gave a strong push to the digitalisation of the church and made it possible to collect the present material. The sermons were transcribed; the resulting texts are an adequate empirical material for the analysis.

The choice of Christmas sermons in particular has several grounds. Within the Christian tradition, Christmas is interpreted as the sacred event of the birth of Christ, linked to the idea of salvation and to such spiritual-ethical orientations as faith, humility, mercy, and hope (Husar, 2025). For this reason, Christmas sermons are productive material for the analysis of how, in religious discourse, the experience of war is interpreted through coping strategies. In the context of war, this creates a particularly tense symbolic space, in which the institution is required to combine a celebratory frame with the experience of danger, loss, and prolonged uncertainty. This is why Christmas sermons make it possible to see how religious institutions publicly reconcile the themes of joy, mourning, endurance, and hope, producing a discourse that can be interpreted through the lens of religious coping theory. Second, the Christmas period is a stable shared point for all the churches under study, which makes a comparison between denominations possible within a symbolically equivalent moment.

It is separately important that the study focuses not on any wartime addresses by churches but specifically on Christmas sermons, because these allow not only situational reactions to particular events but also more stabilised models of meaning-making and normative response to be observed. The period in question is one in which the war is no longer an initial shock but remains an acute collective threat, so that recurring rhetorical patterns may settle in the discourse. This is what makes Christmas sermons suitable material for examining confessionally specific styles of religious sense-making of war.

Christmas sermons therefore function in this thesis not simply as thematically relevant material but as an analytically privileged type of data: they combine theological interpretation, moral orientation, emotional regulation, and a collectively addressed repertoire of proper responses to war. Their selection is methodologically justified within a study devoted to institutionally articulated religious ways of responding to collective threat. Sermons are not neutral descriptions of reality - they are oriented speech, designed to comfort, mobilise, and give meaning to a gathered

community. This generic character shapes what appears in them and what does not, and was taken into account in the construction of the coding frame.

The corpus was assembled through purposive selection of sermons that met the research criteria. The main source of material was publicly available video recordings of sermons in the digital environment, especially on YouTube. Additional searches were carried out through the official channels of church structures, dioceses, monasteries, and parishes, as well as on the personal channels of individual clergy.

Materials were included in the corpus only if they met a set of selection criteria. First, they had to be Christmas sermons specifically, and not other types of public addresses, interviews, or non-liturgical commentary. Second, the material had to belong to one of the denominations that are the subject of comparison in this study. Third, the sermon had to be publicly available and contain a sufficiently complete content for analysis. Fourth, the selection was restricted to a time frame relevant to the study of war as a chronic collective threat. In practical terms, this covered Christmas sermons delivered on 7 January 2023 and Christmas sermons of the subsequent wartime years 2023, 2024, and 2025. One sermon was delivered in an OCU parish on 25 December 2022, since the local tradition had already moved to the new calendar style earlier.

The search for material was carried out manually. Keywords were used that were associated with Christmas, sermons, liturgy, and confessional belonging, as well as navigation through official channels, church websites, and personal social media pages of the clergy. The total amount of available Christmas sermons on the Internet is unknown. The corpus was therefore assembled not as a statistically representative sample but as an analytical corpus, gathered in line with the goals of qualitative comparative research.

The logic of stopping the selection followed the principle of theoretical saturation. At a certain stage of the search, new materials stopped offering new content. This was the basis for considering the corpus sufficient for the beginning of the analysis.

The resulting dataset therefore does not claim to be representative; it serves as an illustrative source that gives a glimpse into the stories being told at the level of parishes.

2.2. The methodology and the coding frame

This study uses directed qualitative content analysis - an approach in which an existing theoretical framework provides the initial categories, which are then refined through engagement with the material (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is one of the most established techniques in the social sciences for the systematic study of communication, allowing the researcher to move from a body of textual material to a structured set of categories in a transparent and verifiable way (Krippendorff, 2019), and it is equally well established in the study of religion - the Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion identifies it as one of the standard approaches to religious texts, including sermons (Badzinski, Woods, & Nelson, 2022).

The theoretical basis of the coding frame is Pargament's religious coping theory and the functional logic of the RCOPE instrument (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al.,

2000). Although RCOPE was developed to measure individual religious coping through self-report, its underlying functional logic - the question of what religion does for people under stress - transfers to institutional public speech, even if the specific categories require reformulation. Earlier work has shown the limits of applying RCOPE categories directly to sermon texts, owing to cultural and confessional specificity and to differences in how particular codes can be interpreted (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2023). The functions of religious coping were therefore used as analytical orientations rather than as a fixed scale, and the concrete coding categories were developed in dialogue with the texts themselves.

The coding frame was organised around four of Pargament's five core functions.

- Meaning-making covers the ways sermons interpret what has happened - how the war is explained, what religious sense is given to suffering and loss.
- Control covers the forms of response the sermons propose when direct agency is limited - prayer, action, or their combination.
- Closeness to God covers the images of God that the sermons construct - whether as a companion in suffering or as a source of strength for struggle.
- Closeness with others covers the ways sermons sustain or construct communal belonging - through solidarity, shared prayer, or the drawing of boundaries between groups.

The fifth function, life transformation, was excluded from the frame: it yielded too few fragments in the material to support analysis, and Christmas sermons - addressed to a gathered community rather than to an individual working through a personal crisis - are not the genre in which this function typically operates.

Coding focused on what the sermons publicly offer: how the war is framed, which responses are proposed as appropriate, and which images of God and community are made available. Categories were identified contextually - through combinations of thematic content, rhetorical function, and linguistic formulation - rather than through automatic lexical matching. The codes were developed by the author based on the theory of Religious Coping, drawing on the material found in sermons.

Meaning-making codes were identified through causal and justificatory constructions linking war or suffering to religiously framed explanations.

The distinction between prayer only (2.1.1) and prayer and action (2.1.2) was drawn on the basis of whether concrete practical action was discursively linked to prayer or absent from it - though as discussed in the results, this distinction may lose some of its analytical force in a wartime context and would benefit from more contextually sensitive frameworks.

The suffering frame (3.1.1) was identified through images of God as companion or co-sufferer; the mobilisational frame (3.1.2) through constructions presenting God as a source of strength or victory.

The negative boundary code (4.1) was identified through explicit contrastive constructions opposing the in-group to religious others in an evaluative way.

These indicators served as interpretive guides rather than rigid criteria; final coding decisions were made contextually, taking into account the broader rhetorical function of each fragment within the sermon. Coding was carried out by a single

researcher; the implications of this for the reliability of the analysis are addressed in the limitations section.

2.3. Procedure of data analysis

The data analysis in this study consisted of several sequential stages. At the first stage, the corpus of Christmas sermons was assembled in accordance with the established selection criteria. At the second stage, an initial familiarising reading of the material was carried out in order to gain a general understanding of the structure of the sermons, recurrent themes, and potentially relevant analytical patterns. This reading made it possible to relate the empirical material to the theoretical frame of religious coping and to prepare a preliminary system of codes. At the third stage, pilot coding of a portion of the material was conducted, during which the suitability of the initial coding scheme was tested and the boundaries of particular categories refined. After this, the coding frame was adjusted and applied to the entire corpus.

To verify the robustness of the revised coding frame, the pilot subsample was subjected to a second round of coding after an interval of two weeks, when the initial interpretive impressions had faded. The re-coded fragments were then compared with the results of the first pilot round. Where discrepancies emerged, the relevant category boundaries were revisited, discussed in relation to the theoretical frame, and further clarified before the full corpus was coded. This iterative procedure ensured that the final coding frame rested not on a single pass of interpretation, but on a tested and internally consistent set of category definitions.

Subsequent coding was performed sequentially by a single researcher, which ensured a unified analytical approach to all texts. In the course of coding, both the functional domains of religious coping and the main dimensions of comparison relevant to the inter-denominational analysis were recorded. At the final stage, the coded fragments were grouped according to recurrent patterns, after which a comparison between denominations was carried out. The analysis was directed not at the counting of frequencies as an end in itself, but at the interpretation of confessionally specific repertoires of response to the war; the procedure of analysis therefore combined systematic coding with subsequent interpretation.

2.4. Ethical considerations and limits of interpretation

Ethical considerations. The empirical material of this study consists of Christmas sermons that were originally delivered in public worship and then placed by the churches themselves in open access on YouTube. The study does not involve recruiting participants, collecting personal data, or any direct interaction with respondents, and therefore does not raise the standard ethical risks associated with human-subjects research. The wartime context, however, makes the material sensitive: sermons speak about loss, suffering, the enemy, and moral judgement. Two principles have therefore been followed in the work with the texts. First, the analysis is directed at institutional patterns, not at the personal qualities of individual preachers; the unit of interpretation is the church as a public actor, not the priest as a private person. Second, direct quotations are used only where they are necessary to illustrate analytical categories, and are always presented with enough surrounding context to preserve their meaning.

Limits of interpretation. The design of the study sets clear boundaries on what its conclusions can claim. The analysis describes the institutional models of response to war that are publicly articulated in sermons. It does not describe the psychological coping of parishioners, their inner states, or the degree to which the messages of the preachers are accepted, reworked, or resisted by those who hear them – questions of this kind would require a different research design. The study is also not an evaluation of the theological "correctness" of the positions found in the sermons; the perspective taken here is that of social psychology, which describes how religious institutions structure meaning, emotion, and proper conduct under conditions of collective threat, rather than how well their statements conform to doctrine. Within these limits, the thesis offers a qualitative, theoretically grounded description of confessionally specific ways of interpreting the war through the lens of religious coping theory.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results of the study

The coded fragments yielded the raw distribution of codes by denomination (Appendix B, Table 3) and the separate count of war mentions (Appendix B, Table 2). This subsection gives a descriptive overview of the codes, organised by the four functional groups of religious coping – meaning-making, control, closeness to God, and closeness with others – while the main patterns are interpreted in the subsections that follow. Where appropriate, the descriptions of the codes are interspersed with quotations from the sermons in order to illustrate the results. Frequency counts are reported not for purposes of statistical generalisation, but as a descriptive orientation to the corpus that supports the selection of patterns for subsequent qualitative interpretation.

Religious methods of coping for meaning-making

The first group, religious methods of coping for meaning-making, brings together three codes through which the sermons assign the war a place within a religious order of meaning: code 1.1 (war as a spiritually beneficial experience), code 1.2 (war as part of a higher order), and code 1.4, which records the internal or external focus of the explanation of the war.

The code “war as a spiritually beneficial experience” (1.1) proved the most frequent in this group, appearing in 18 fragments overall – six in the UOC, five in the UGCC, and seven in the OCU – and the fragments were read not only by function but also by content, where the denominations diverge sharply. In the UOC, four of the six fragments cast the war as a trial sent by God and a part of a higher Divine plan, so that suffering acquires a deeper spiritual meaning. The OCU material is more varied. Four of its seven fragments turn to defenders and soldiers and to their sacrifice, holding them up as an example of true love and treating the war as a spiritually significant event:

“Blessed are those who lay down their souls...” – said by an OCU priest in the context of the war.

Two further OCU fragments speak instead of a struggle between good and evil, of *“our struggle for God’s truth,”* without foregrounding soldiers, while one frames the enemy as *“needed so that we may come to our senses,”* reading the war as a lesson from God. The UGCC stands between these poles: two of its five fragments, like the OCU, ascribe a heightened religious meaning to the service of soldiers, while the remaining three leave soldiers aside and present the war more broadly as a struggle against evil.

Closely related is the code “war as part of a higher order” (1.2), which subordinates the war to the general plan of God and was identified in five UOC fragments, three in the OCU, and two in the UGCC. Across all three denominations it overlaps with code 1.1, yet it differs in emphasis: rather than the “benefit” of suffering, it stresses the orderliness of events, which are understood as having been foreseen by God.

“One could go mad from everything happening around us, were it not for knowing that the last word belongs to God – that nothing that happens does so without God, without His will or His allowance.” – said by a UOC priest in the context of the war.

The third code in this group, “focus of explanation of the war” (1.4), captures where the explanation of the war is anchored, and it falls into two sub-codes. An external focus (1.4.2) locates the cause in the external enemy or in diabolical forces, whereas an internal focus (1.4.1) locates it in the inner spiritual state of the community.

The internal focus (1.4.1) appears in five UOC fragments and three OCU fragments, and is absent from the UGCC. In the UOC the cause of the war is tied consistently to the inner or spiritual state of the person, though the formulations vary: the moral corruption of society is said to bring war as a punishment from God; *“peace on earth begins with our hearts”*; sin settles in the soul and gives rise to war; and the faithful are urged to pray, because otherwise *“the enemy will become even more enraged.”* What unites these fragments is that external aggression and the inner world of the person are placed on the same plane of meaning.

The three OCU fragments are each distinct – war *“because we do not repent,”* *“because of our sins,”* and the formula *“if there is no peace within, there will be no peace on earth”* – while one further fragment voices, in the context of the war, the thought that *“a person becomes ill when there is a reason to be ill,”* conveying the idea that nothing that happens is accidental.

The external focus (1.4.2) shows the mirror image: it is present in seven UGCC fragments and six OCU fragments but absent from the UOC. All seven UGCC fragments tie the war to diabolical or *“dark forces,”* and among the six OCU fragments four likewise associate it with a dark force while the remaining two speak purely of political causes. This sharp asymmetry between the denominations, evident already at the level of raw frequencies, is analytically significant and is taken up further in subsections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

Religious methods of coping for the achievement of control

The second group, religious methods of coping for the achievement of control, rests on a single code, 2.1, which separates two ways of seeking to regain control: through prayer alone (2.1.1) and through prayer combined with action (2.1.2).

The first of these, “prayer” (2.1.1), was identified in five UOC fragments, thirteen UGCC fragments, and six OCU fragments, making it the single most frequent code in UGCC sermons. The five UOC calls split into three prayers for peace in Ukraine and two more abstract blessings in time of war. The thirteen UGCC fragments are weighted towards concrete addressees: six are prayers for peace and for soldiers at the front, four for peace and the Ukrainian state, and two for “*peace and calm*” in general. The six OCU fragments divide into two for peace, three for soldiers, and one for victory.

The second sub-code, “prayer and action” (2.1.2), was identified in nine UOC fragments, two in the UGCC, and eight in the OCU. In the UOC the calls remain largely abstract: six are general in direction (one urging the faithful to “do good deeds”), while only three name something concrete – volunteering for the needs of the army, support for refugees, and going to a hospital to support those in need, this last being the only explicitly defined concrete action in the entire UOC corpus. Both UGCC fragments refer to the army, and in the OCU seven of eight concern the military, volunteering, and support of the army, with one abstract. The contrast is striking: the absolute frequency of calls to action in the UOC and the OCU is outwardly similar, yet their content differs fundamentally, since the UOC offers mostly general moral exhortations whereas the OCU articulates concrete support for the army.

Religious methods of coping for the achievement of closeness to God

The third group, religious methods of coping for the achievement of closeness to God, draws on two codes: code 3.1, which concerns the images of God invoked in time of war, and code 3.2, which records a shift of religious focus away from the war.

Code 3.1 distinguishes two images of God. The first, “God as co-present in suffering” (3.1.1), the suffering frame, was identified in five UOC fragments, five in the UGCC, and one in the OCU. In the UOC this image takes shape through the temporary character of mourning, suffering described as “*useful*,” repentance and patience as a “*trial for sins*,” the carrying of the cross and prayer for enemies, and the call “*not to grow embittered and to endure*.” The five UGCC fragments present a God who will “*enfold, avert, and bring an end to suffering*,” who will “*give strength to endure*” and sustain the community in solidarity, a Saviour who “*comes to share our suffering*.” The single OCU fragment turns to Christ, who “identified Himself with everyone who weeps, and with everyone in pain”.

The second image, “God as a source of strength for struggle” (3.1.2), the mobilizational frame, was identified in two UOC fragments, eight in the UGCC, and eleven in the OCU, and the gradient between the denominations is telling. Both UOC fragments are restrained, speaking of how “*the struggle continues and we must hold on*” and of labour in God, “*and then we will prevail*.” Of the eight UGCC fragments, five speak of struggle alongside God against the enemy and of an inevitable victory, while three turn to steadfastness, the need to hold on, and prayer that strengthens in the

struggle. In the OCU all eleven fragments are openly mobilizational, invoking victory, victory over the devil, an inevitable victory with God, the state, and its defence.

Code 3.2, “shift of religious focus,” captures rhetorical moves that deliberately redirect attention from the war to Christmas, to spiritual peace, and to inner joy; it was identified in four UOC fragments, seven in the UGCC, and six in the OCU. In the UOC it appears as talk of *“living in harmony with oneself despite the war,”* of *“peace in the soul of a particular person”* as the true peace, and of Christmas joy that *“fills our souls and hearts.”* It is most varied in the UGCC, ranging from calls to greet one another even in wartime and to keep *“joy and peace in the heart,”* through debates over whether to light Christmas trees and sing carols during the war (answered firmly: *“we carolled, we are carolling, and we will carol”*), to wishes for *“a modest yet still joyful celebration”* and calls to come out to the newborn Christ in prayer in spite of *“despair, disappointment, and discouragement.”* In the OCU it surfaces in motifs of a Christ who is *“present in the world even when there is war all around,”* in calls to focus not on the war but on the One who was born, in the affirmation that it is *“worth celebrating, because the Lord came to give salvation,”* and in wishes for *“spiritual peace.”*

Religious methods of coping for the achievement of closeness with others

The fourth group, religious methods of coping for the achievement of closeness with others, brings together two codes: code 4.1, a “negative we/they” opposition, and code 4.2, the sense of chosenness before God.

The “negative we/they” code (4.1) was identified in seven UOC fragments and a single UGCC fragment, and not at all in the OCU. In the UOC it carries a clear tendency to criticise *“others”*: a harsh society, those who *“debated about when to celebrate but did not come to the celebration,”* (In the context of the disputes over the church calendar, criticism is directed at the OCU and its followers) the abstract “world” that *“seeks where it is well-fed... where God’s commandments are needed,”* (In the context of other people who think only about the earthly) and generalised “other” believers who *“have no loving cry of Abba Father”* (Emphasizing that believers other churches may not hear God's voice) and supposedly *“easily move from street to street, from temple to temple.”* Belonging here too are formulations about the “devil” who *“destroys the holy Church”* and *“persecutes the followers of Christ,”* read in the context of the pressures on the UOC itself. Interpretations of such statements are extremely difficult due to the position of the UOC in society. The lone UGCC fragment criticises the UOC, and the code is absent from the OCU.

The code of “chosenness before God” (4.2) was identified in three UOC fragments and one each in the UGCC and the OCU. In the UOC chosenness is voiced through the motif of *“the Lord will bless His people,”* with the stress falling on *“His,”* (In the context, it was emphasized that it is the representatives of the UOC who are truly people of God, unlike others) and through the pointed formulation *“the Orthodox Christians of the canonical Church”* and the recurring word *“canonical.”* The single UGCC fragment speaks of Ukrainians who *“glorify the Lord in their own special way,”* interweaving religious identity with collective pride and a sense of being special, and one comparable fragment is registered in the OCU.

Visibility of the war in sermons

A separate pattern concerns not the content of codes but the very visibility of war in the sermons. The count of sermons without any direct mention of war (Table 2) showed a substantial inter-denominational asymmetry: in UOC sermons the war is not mentioned in 18 out of 30 (60%); in UGCC sermons, in 5 out of 25 (20%); in OCU sermons, in 2 out of 26 (approximately 7.7%). This asymmetry is an analytically significant pattern and is discussed in subsection 3.2.

On the basis of this overview, the results section that follows is structured not as a listing of individual codes but as the foregrounding of three most systematic patterns—one per denomination. For the UOC the most pronounced pattern was the rarer mentioning of the war compared with the other churches, which forms the basis of the UOC case discussion (subsection 3.2.1). For the UGCC, the most characteristic became the theme of prayer for the army and for those who suffer (subsection 3.2.2). For the OCU, the most striking became a more patriotic and state-oriented stance with a clearly mobilizational frame (subsection 3.2.3). A cross-denominational pattern of internal causes of the war is treated separately as a significant additional cross-section (subsection 3.2.4).

3.2. Discussion

The quantitative overview above shows that the three denominations differ not only in how often they mention the war, but in how they frame it, whom they address, and what forms of response they propose. These differences are the entry point for the qualitative interpretation that follows, which reads each denominational profile through religious coping theory.

3.2.1. The absence of the theme of war as an institutional pattern: the UOC case

The most distinct pattern in the corpus of UOC sermons was the rare mention of the theme of war. According to the data in Table 2 (Appendix B), in 18 of 30 analysed UOC sermons (60%) the war is not mentioned at all; by comparison, in UGCC sermons this share is 20% (5 of 25), and in OCU sermons it is about 7.7% (2 of 26). The asymmetry is multiple: UOC sermons bypass the theme of war roughly three times more often than UGCC sermons and almost eight times more often than OCU sermons. Even when the war is mentioned, in UOC sermons it is almost never linked either to a specific aggressor or to another religious force as an external source of evil. This distribution is in itself an analytically significant pattern and admits a number of complementary interpretations.

The first of them is connected to religious coping. In Pargament's early work religious coping was described, among other things, through the mechanisms of religious focus and religious distraction—that is, the redirection of attention from the stressor to religious practices, texts, and sacred meanings as a way of reducing emotional tension and restoring inner order (Pargament et al., 1990). In such a logic, the low frequency of mentions of the war can be read in more than one way: it may be a simple avoidance of a painful reality, but it may equally be a different way of

responding, in which the threat is deliberately kept off-centre and the community's attention is redirected toward prayer, the liturgy, and other religious practices.

This second possibility deserves a closer look, because the effect of religion may lie not in what is said about the war but in the form of religious practice itself. Studies of ritual and prayer show that the psychological effect of religion can be achieved not only through explanatory content, but also through the repetitive, ordered form of action. In a small experiment, reading the Rosary reduced anxiety more strongly than watching a religious video, which the authors linked precisely to the effect of ritual practice rather than the cognitive content of the message (Anastasi & Newberg, 2008). Another study showed that prayer can shift the availability of attention and weaken fixation on the stressor, that is, function as a mechanism of switching from rumination to a more ordered inner state (Upenieks, 2023). Given that in the Orthodox tradition the sermon is only one part of a wider liturgical experience, the concentration on the service, on prayer, and on ritual repetitiveness may be an institutionally proposed way of emotional regulation that does not require a constant explicit speaking of the war.

Whichever of these sources is at work, the model should not be labelled as unambiguously adaptive or maladaptive. The literature gives grounds for caution in both directions. On the one hand, when religious practices are used mainly to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, they can edge closer to avoidance: work on experiential avoidance in religious coping shows that it is the way religion is used, rather than religiosity as such, that determines whether it is linked to better or worse psychological adaptation (Krok, 2014), and a related study places part of religious responding within an avoidance cluster, alongside self-distraction, denial, and disengagement (Lucchetti et al., 2021). On the other hand, the same turning of attention away from the war and toward religious practice can equally be a way of holding the community steady rather than a flight from reality. This is why low visibility is not the same as denial: at the level of public speech the threat is acknowledged but kept off-centre, while whether this works as adaptive regulation or as defensive avoidance is an individual-level question that the present material cannot settle. Without data on the parishioners themselves, reading the pattern as avoidance would be premature; at the level of this study one can speak only of an institutionally proposed model.

A psychological reading alone is not enough: it matters, but only alongside the institutional and political context, not instead of it. This is clearest in the UOC case. After 2022 the church came under particular public suspicion because of its ties to the Moscow Patriarchate and the ambiguity of its break with it. OSW describes its position after the full-scale invasion as ambivalent: part of the clergy openly supported Ukraine, while the senior hierarchs took a wait-and-see stance and did not distance themselves from Russia clearly enough; the 2022 statute amendments and the leadership's restrained condemnation of the aggression were widely read as a defensive move under public and state pressure rather than a genuine break with Moscow (Rogoža, 2023). Against this background, the low visibility of the war in UOC sermons cannot be put down to coping alone – it is also shaped by the institutional constraints that follow from the church's ambiguous position in a society at war.

In this sense, the low visibility of the war in sermons may also serve a function of institutional safety: when clergy avoid a clearer political articulation, they avoid

sharpening internal contradictions and keep a wider field open for different interpretations within the community itself. In this sense, keeping the war at the margins may also simply be safer for the church: a vaguer political stance avoids deepening internal divisions and leaves room for different readings within the community.

At the same time, the political explanation is not the whole story. A similar muted response to a societal crisis can be traced earlier, during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Brik et al. (2024) show, the UOC acknowledged the pandemic as a real threat, yet in its synodal discussions it did not treat the pandemic as a unique or central problem, issued no clearly articulated official stance on social distancing or staying at home, and tended to place it among many other matters on the church's agenda. The same pattern recurs with the war, which suggests that what is at work is not only political caution but a more general way in which this church responds to crisis: the threat is recognised, but it is not placed at the centre of speech and is not allowed to become the main frame through which the community is called to respond.

The theological frame deserves emphasis in its own right. Although the UOC and the OCU share the same Orthodox doctrine, in the UOC corpus it is theology and religious meaning that consistently move to the foreground, and talk of peace easily detaches itself from the concrete war: peace is understood not only as the absence of fighting but as the state of a person before God, with oneself, and with others. Within such a frame the sermon slides naturally from the aggression itself toward the more general themes of sin, the soul, patience, and salvation. This converges with the internal focus in explaining the war (code 1.4.1), which was most frequent precisely in the UOC: together, the universalising theological register and the inward, spiritual reading of the war's causes form a single coherent pattern, in which the war is acknowledged but dissolved into a wider religious horizon rather than addressed as a concrete event. The sermons themselves show this clearly. Even where the war is not named directly, the texts offer abstract formulas that can be read in a wartime context without ever moving into concrete political or social analysis:

“So that we, despite all the evil that the modern world brings us, would not grow embittered, but would cultivate peace in ourselves, would find in ourselves the courage that Christ commands to pray for your enemies.”

Here the present evil is designated in maximally generalised terms, while the normative response is immediately moved into the plane of inner peace, courage, and prayer for enemies. In another fragment the priority of a supra-historical horizon over a concrete historical event is even more striking:

“And then the earthly homelands, which, as we saw even in the prophecy, in history have constantly lost their value, changed borders, shifted in this or that direction. That is something else. But no one has ever defeated Christianity and the Church and never will.”

Here the changeability of earthly borders and states is directly subordinated to the theme of the higher resilience of the Church. Even when the word “war” does appear, it is often embedded in a very general series of spiritual trials:

“And so God creates for us such a condition—a time of trials, of sorrows, for each one of his own... some through war, through trial, through persecution, through oppression...”

In this case the war does not appear as a discrete event with concrete political causes, agents, and consequences, but is included in a wider universal chain of suffering, trial, and salvation. Even where a mention of the war is present, it is often framed within an abstract spiritual register rather than as a concrete socio-political fact.

What emerges in the UOC case is a distinctive type of church communication that can be read through the lens of religious coping. Its first and most telling feature is comparative: talk about the war itself is markedly less pronounced than in the other two churches, and this relative quiet is significant in its own right. In its other codes the UOC is not unusual – like the OCU and the UGCC, it makes sense of the war as a trial sent by God or as part of a higher order and pattern of things. What sets it apart is precisely the muted presence of the war, the same reticence the church had shown earlier toward the COVID-19 pandemic. This recurring tendency to keep a societal crisis at the margins of preaching is what opens a window for psychological interpretation: it may point to a heightened concentration on religious practices and rituals as the church's characteristic mode of response, although any firm claim of this kind would require direct study of believers themselves. Most cautiously, then, this type of communication appears to have formed at the intersection of political, theological, and – one may reasonably suggest – psychological responses, in which the war is acknowledged but consistently translated into a wider and more enduring religious horizon rather than confronted as a concrete event.

3.2.2. Prayer in time of war: the UGCC case

Prayer occupies a central place in the life of any church, but for a psychological reading what matters is how it functions in religious speech: what it asks of believers and what social and emotional consequences it may carry. Prayer is not a homogeneous practice. It can be turned toward expecting God's intervention, toward inner emotional regulation, toward the support of others, toward mobilisation for action, or toward a passive acceptance of the situation. In the UGCC corpus it is the orientation toward others that stands out, and it is this that gives the denomination its distinctive profile.

The raw distribution of codes confirms this quantitatively. Code 2.1.1, “Prayer,” was identified in 13 fragments of UGCC sermons – 52% of the denomination's sermons and the highest figure in the entire corpus (against 5 fragments in the UOC and 6 in the OCU); prayer is the single most frequent code in all the analysed material precisely because of the UGCC's contribution. More telling than the bare frequency, however, is its direction. Of these 13 fragments, six are prayers for peace and for soldiers at the front, four for peace and the Ukrainian state, and two for a general “peace and calm.” Prayer here is consistently turned toward others – soldiers, their families, the bereaved, the sick, those separated from loved ones – which sets this discourse apart from an individualised or purely ritual use of prayer and lets it function as a way of sustaining the moral community and giving collective loss a shared meaning.

This orientation is visible in the sermons themselves. A typical formulation prays for those at the front:

“We pray today for our soldiers-heroes who daily, risking themselves, their lives, protect us and defend us. ” – a UGCC priest

Elsewhere believers are urged *“to enfold them with prayer,”* and in one case a prayer for peace and calm in the state is tied directly to naming the war as “unjust, cruel, and absolutely unjustified.” Such utterances build a symbolic frame in which suffering is given a collectively recognised meaning and in which soldiers and the bereaved are kept within the community’s field of moral attention. The same work is done at the level of imagery: when a priest speaks of mothers weeping for their children and identifies their faces with the image of the Mother of God, a private pain is raised to the level of a sacrally intelligible and socially recognised suffering.

To interpret what this orientation does, it helps to turn to the theory of religious coping. A useful starting point is the work of Pargament et al. (1988), who describe three styles of problem-solving in the interaction between the person and God. In the deferring style the person waits for God to resolve the problem and minimises her own activity; in the collaborative style she treats herself and God as joint participants, praying while also taking responsibility and acting; in the self-directing style she relies mainly on her own effort, with direct appeal to God moving into the background. In this study that logic is shifted from the individual to the level of the sermon as public religious speech, so the question becomes whether the priest calls only for prayer or for prayer and action.

A caveat follows from this. Coding cannot capture the finer nuances of what is said; it raises speech to the level of broader categories, so that identically labelled codes may carry different meanings, and the formal presence of “prayer and action” does not guarantee the same psychological or social content across denominations. This is consistent with the broader understanding of religious coping as the pursuit of “the sacred and the search for significance” (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015), in which prayer may serve emotional regulation, meaning-making, the support of group identity, the experience of solidarity, or, conversely, the avoidance of action. Empirical work points in the same direction: structured prayer has been linked to lower depression and anxiety and higher optimism (Boelens et al., 2009), while different types of prayer carry different consequences, with gratitude-based and contemplative prayer associated with lower anxiety and petitionary prayer sometimes with higher (Upenieks, 2023). These results should be read with caution, given small samples and the correlational nature of the data, but the central point holds: the function and type of prayer matter more than the bare fact of praying. Cultural specificity matters as well – Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015) stress that religious coping takes different forms across traditions, so prayer in Ukrainian wartime preaching cannot be read through ready-made categories alone, without regard for the war, the national context, and the experience of collective trauma.

Read against this background, prayer in the UGCC may come closer to the collaborative style at the level of public speech. Although the sermons do not always issue a narrow call to act, prayer does not appear to be offered as a substitute for responsibility: it can be read as performing moral mobilisation, emotional solidarisation, and the symbolic inclusion of those at the front or in mourning, suggesting a shared standing in the face of war rather than a passive wait for God's

intervention. As a social-psychological resource it could work to reduce the sense of isolation, sustain collective identity, and help structure the experience of pain. The comparison with the other denominations may sharpen this point further.

Code 2.1.2, “Prayer and action,” appears in only 2 UGCC fragments (against 9 in the UOC and 8 in the OCU), yet both concern the army specifically, so that even these few calls are concretely addressed; in the UOC, by contrast, the analogous fragments are mostly abstract moral appeals to “do good deeds” with no named recipient. Outwardly close frequencies thus conceal different content, and it is exactly here that qualitative reading complements the counting of codes.

These readings have clear limits. The material does not allow any claim about how believers actually experience these calls – whether prayer eases their anxiety, strengthens their sense of agency, or partly stands in for practical action. What the analysis captures is the publicly framed narrative, not its immediate effect on the audience, so it is more accurate to speak of the response the church’s speech offers than of a proven influence.

Taken together, the UGCC case can be read as a rhetoric of communal prayer, in which prayer primarily serves collective support, the symbolic recognition of suffering, and the moral inclusion of those who fight, lose, or are separated. The wider configuration of codes is consistent with this reading: the closeness of God in suffering (5 fragments of code 3.1.1) is balanced by a mobilising image of God (8 fragments of 3.1.2) that is almost absent in the UOC, the war is kept within a concrete frame of an external aggressor (7 fragments of 1.4.2, with the internal focus 1.4.1 absent), and the acknowledgement of war is joined with the Christmas themes of joy and hope (7 fragments of 3.2). Rather than a petitionary or passive register, prayer here works as a form of shared bearing of the war, in which religious language helps to make sense of loss, sustain solidarity, and hold together the front, the home front, and the church community. On the evidence of this study, its rhetoric can be read as predominantly supportive and positively oriented; in the terms of religious coping theory, it offers the community a consolidating rather than an avoidant way of responding to the war at the level of public speech, although any conclusion about its effect on individual believers would require separate empirical work.

3.2.3. The rhetoric of struggle: the OCU case

In the public and homiletic rhetoric of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) one can observe the most distinct patriotic position among the main Ukrainian ecclesial actors, supported by several quantitatively expressed patterns. First, the visibility of war here is the highest: only 2 of 26 sermons (about 7.7%) do not contain any mention of the war, that is, over 92% of sermons directly address the wartime context. Second, the image of God is shifted in a mobilizational direction: code 3.1.2, “God as a source of strength for struggle,” is found in 11 OCU fragments (42.3%—the highest figure in the entire corpus), while code 3.1.1, “God as co-present in suffering,” appears in only one fragment. This mirror-like ratio sharply distinguishes the OCU from the UOC (5 fragments of 3.1.1 and 2 of 3.1.2) and from the UGCC (5 and 8 respectively). Third, calls to action in the OCU are concretely addressed: 7 of the 8 fragments of code 2.1.2, “Prayer and action,” concern the military, volunteering, and support for the army.

Fourth, code 4.1, “negative we/they,” is entirely absent in OCU sermons (0 fragments against 7 in the UOC), that is, religious speech is not built through distancing from “wrong” believers.

In this case religious speech is not reduced to a description of suffering, prayer, or inner spiritual life; it is actively combined with motifs of struggle, resistance, sacrifice, truth, and victory. Accordingly, the war is interpreted not merely as a tragic circumstance, but as a morally significant struggle against evil, in which the religious and the civic-patriotic are frequently intertwined. Yet this mobilizational rhetoric is almost always interwoven with motifs of suffering, pain, and sacrifice, and is therefore not a blind call to fight but a summons bound up with mourning, compassion, and an awareness of the cost of war.

At the same time, the literature that would allow a direct interoperating of the psychological impact of this specific type of church rhetoric remains limited. A substantial part of psychological studies focuses either on the problem of political violence or on the link between religion and aggression in general. Such an optics is not entirely adequate to the Ukrainian case, since what is at issue is not offensive or criminal violence, but a situation of defensive war, in which religious rhetoric functions under conditions of an existential threat to the community.

A related, though not fully congruent, body of work is the study by Trevino et al., 2019. It shows that even in a military and veterans’ context, negative religious coping is linked to greater psychological distress, while positive religious coping correlates with a greater capacity to find growth after trauma. This study does not address homiletic rhetoric directly, but it demonstrates an important principle: religion in wartime experience can be a factor of psychological protection or a factor of harm, depending on the form in which it is interpreted and experienced.

This is precisely where the rhetoric of the OCU shows its specificity. In the analysed sermons of the clergy there are, on the whole, no direct calls to violence, radicalism, or extremism. What dominates is rather the attribution of moral meaning to the war as a struggle of good against evil, and to suffering as the meaning of sacrifice, love, and calling. This allows the rhetoric of the OCU to be treated not as a language of aggression but as a language of mobilisation, of support, and of the moral legitimization of resistance.

Especially telling in this regard is the motif of benevolent religious reappraisal, in which the experience of war and loss is embedded into a positive religious frame. This is well illustrated by the following quotation:

“He showed that he loves us, because there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life. Who is ready to give such love? Parents for their children, for their friends. And today we have our soldiers who sacrifice the most valuable thing—their life—out of love for Ukraine, for their land, for their family, for their parents. This is the greatest love.”

In this fragment, military sacrifice is presented not only as a civic duty but as the form of the highest love, directly linked to the Christian ethics of self-sacrifice. One of the central aspects of OCU preaching is therefore the conferring on the struggle of a sacred-moral meaning.

Another important element is the combination of the religious and the military-patriotic dimensions in a single narrative construction:

“Here we see that Christmas also shows us that we are here on earth for a short time. And it would seem that all these events that are happening around us—one would want to leave here as soon as possible. But the Lord has granted us time for struggle. And this struggle will last to the last minute of our life.”

Struggle here appears not simply as a political or military necessity, but as a part of human and Christian calling. A similar function is performed by another statement: *“It is us, Ukrainians, and our mission with you is very great. To show that we are fighting for the truth.”* In this logic, national identity is joined with a moral mission, and the struggle for the state is at the same time presented as a struggle for the truth.

Characteristically, in the homiletic rhetoric of the OCU the war with Russia is often interpreted in higher religious terms—as a struggle against evil. A symbolic continuity is frequently drawn between the gospel text and contemporary events, in which, for example, the figure of the Russian dictator is associated with King Herod. Through this device the contemporary war is not merely mentioned in church discourse, but is included in a larger history of the moral confrontation between good and evil, of the persecution of innocents, and of the defence of truth.

At the same time, this mobilizational rhetoric does not exist in isolation from the theme of suffering. On the contrary, in many cases suffering and the aspiration to victory are structurally linked.

“But for all the desires, we want victory. We want victory because we understand that if there is victory, peace will come. If peace comes, our own will return home alive, healthy, and unharmed. If there is peace, nothing here will frighten us any more. But all that one can ask in prayer—today we have come to the birthday of Jesus Christ.”

The rhetoric of the OCU is therefore not a rhetoric of direct aggression; it is rather a rhetoric of morally justified resistance, in which God is often portrayed as a source of strength in struggle, and patriotism acquires a religious-ethical meaning. In contrast to the UOC, where the emphasis shifts more toward suffering, inner life, spiritual practices, and the experience of trial, the OCU integrates the patriotic and state-oriented dimension into its discourse much more strongly. In this sense, the UGCC appears as a more balanced model, in which both inner-spiritual and patriotic motifs are combined, but without such a pronounced dominance of mobilizational rhetoric.

This position of the OCU should be explained not only psychologically but also institutionally, through the very character of its formation as both an ecclesial and a national project. As Elsner (2025) shows, the emergence of the OCU in 2019 and its public role during the full-scale war are tightly linked to national self-affirmation: autocephaly is conceived as the spiritual dimension of state independence, while the UOC-MP, through its ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, is seen as failing the criterion of a nationally oriented church, and after 2022 the war accelerated the transition of parishes to the OCU.

The state-oriented position of the OCU can be read against the broader political and institutional context of its formation, which appears to align with the configuration of codes found in the corpus. Together these codes may form a relatively consistent

repertoire: the enemy is named externally, the community is not fragmented from within, God tends to appear as an ally in struggle, and prayer is often tied to concrete action. It should be stressed that the reading proposed here is interpretative: religious coping theory was developed at the level of the individual, and it offers no direct equivalent for what is observed in this case. Yet it is precisely here that the Ukrainian material may extend the theory, since the case is in many respects unique – a national church articulating a collective response to a full-scale war. With this caveat in mind, the codes might be read as pointing to something like coping at the level of the community rather than the person: a shared frame through which the war is given meaning, a sense of agency and control is sustained, suffering is made bearable, and the moral cohesion of the group is preserved.

This reading remains tentative and points toward further inquiry. In psychological terms, the rhetoric of the OCU seems to combine meaning-making and emotional support with consolidation and moral mobilisation. How it actually affects believers, how it relates to their individual religious coping, and where the line might run between support, mobilisation, and possible radicalisation are questions that would require separate empirical study – a promising direction for further research on religion in conditions of war and collective threat.

3.2.4. Internal causes of the war: from external aggression to self-blame

Another pattern that emerged in the corpus is the appeal to internal, spiritual causes of the war. In contrast to the explanation of war through external aggression and the aggressive intentions of another state, which dominates in public discourse, some sermons articulate an alternative interpretive frame: the war is presented as the consequence of an inner spiritual state—of sinfulness, of moral unfaithfulness, of people’s turning away from God, of the forgetting of tradition, or of collective responsibility for evil deeds.

In the literature on religious coping such interpretive moves are described within the categories of reframing God as a punishing God and of moral reframing of crisis. Empirically it has been shown that reframing a crisis as a punishment from God may, on the one hand, help embed chaotic experience into a system of meaning, and on the other hand, potentially heighten guilt, helplessness, and anxiety (Pargament et al., 2000; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). For this reason, at the institutional level this way of explaining war is ambivalent: it may mobilise moral responsibility, but it also risks shifting the focus from the real aggressor onto the victim of aggression itself.

In the corpus, this pattern is not dominant in any of the three denominations, but its distribution is sharply asymmetric. According to Table 3 (Appendix B), code 1.4.1, “Internal focus of explanation of the war,” was identified in 5 fragments in the UOC and 3 in the OCU; in UGCC sermons this code was not identified. In UOC sermons such interpretations are of a more universal character and embed themselves within a general theological narrative about the modern world’s turning away from God, spiritual decline, and a crisis of faith. War in this case appears not as a discrete historical fact with concrete causes but as one of the forms of God’s trial or as a consequence of “*evil in human hearts*”:

“Every time we want peace, we have to understand that peace can exist only when in those who are next to us we see the image of God. And here lies an enormous problem.”

In OCU sermons, this internal-focus interpretation has a different inflection: war is explained either by collective lack of repentance or by the absence of an “inner peace” that must come before peace on earth. In all the OCU fragments, however, the internal focus is combined with a clear external focus (6 fragments of code 1.4.2), so that self-examination does not replace the naming of the aggressor.

The internal focus, found in the UOC, can be read as a shift toward the self – a turning of attention onto one's own community and its moral state – which may, at its edge, come close to collective self-blame, where the victim begins to look for the causes of the catastrophe in itself. Notably, this inward orientation appears only in the Orthodox material (the UOC, and OCU) and is entirely absent from the Greek Catholic sermons, which is itself telling: it suggests that this mode of interpreting the war is tied to a to Eastern Christianity tradition as such. At the same time, even here God is not described directly as punishing. Classical religious coping theory speaks of punitive religious appraisals and of an image of a punishing God, yet in these sermons the connection between sin and war is drawn without naming God as the one who punishes. This more nuanced understanding of God and of divine action seems characteristic of Eastern Christianity, whereas religious coping theory was developed largely in a Western context – which may make this material useful for interpreting and adapting the theory to an Eastern Christian setting. These observations, however, remain interpretative and operate at the level of public religious speech rather than individual experience. The material does not show how believers themselves receive such framings, whether the inward focus is actually experienced as guilt, or how it relates to their personal religious coping; establishing this would require separate study at the individual level.

CONCLUSIONS

Religious coping theory looks at religion functionally - not only as a set of beliefs, but also as a resource through which people make sense of suffering, restore a sense of control, and sustain belonging in conditions of crisis. If that functional logic is relevant, it should be visible not only in what individual believers report about their inner experience, but in what religious institutions publicly say to their communities - in how they frame collective suffering and propose ways of living through it. This study applied that theoretical lens to 81 Christmas sermons delivered by three Ukrainian denominations between 2022 and 2025. The primary contribution of the study is that the functional logic of religious coping is indeed traceable in institutional public speech: the sermons proposed ways of making sense of the war and the suffering it produces, offered orientations for living through an experience of collective threat, constructed images of God as present and caring. This is itself a finding: religious coping is traceable not only at the level of individual experience, but in ordinary parish-level church communication - in the recurring, publicly addressed speech through which institutions propose how their communities should understand and live through crisis.

That extension required adaptation. The theory was built on the basis of individual self-report, and its categories do not transfer mechanically to sermon texts. Among the functions proposed by the theory, life transformation - the reorientation of a person's values and purposes under the weight of crisis - did not appear in the analysed material at all. Christmas sermons contained substantial content about inner renewal and spiritual change, but it was grounded in Christian theological categories - repentance, conversion, the encounter with the newborn Christ - rather than in any direct engagement with the war. It was therefore not captured by the coding frame. The remaining functions - meaning-making, control, closeness to God, closeness with others - were all present, but had to be operationalised from the theoretical logic of the original framework rather than borrowed directly from its instruments.

Within these limits, the sermons of the three denominations showed different patterns of publicly articulated religious response to the war - though given the non-representative character of the dataset, this should be understood as a set of interpretive patterns rather than generalisable claims. The themes that emerged are varied in character: they were derived from the functional categories of coping theory, which are broad enough to encompass content touching on theology, politics, the experience of war, and communal life at once. This is why the raw distribution of codes requires interpretation to become meaningful - the same functional category can be voiced in very different registers depending on the denomination, the context, and the theological tradition in which it sits.

In the OCU material, the war appeared in over 92% of sermons, against 80% in the UGCC and 40% in the UOC. The dominant image of God in OCU sermons was that of a source of strength for struggle, present in 42.3% of sermons - the highest figure across the entire corpus. Prayer was regularly linked to concrete calls to action: support for soldiers, volunteering, civic engagement. The war was framed as a moral struggle against evil. At the same time, OCU sermons are saturated with compassion for soldiers and solidarity with those who suffer - in this regard they share more with the UGCC .

In the UGCC material, communal prayer was the most frequently coded response in the entire corpus. Formally, most UGCC sermons did not include explicit calls to action - a distinction that matters in the original terms of religious coping theory - but this distinction, drawn in the present study on the basis of that theory, may lose much of its analytical force in context: the line between praying and acting is far less clear than the coding categories suggest, and would require more contextually sensitive frameworks to assess meaningfully. The prayer was directed toward soldiers and bereaved families. The rhetorical work was less about mobilisation and more about sustaining solidarity - making sure the community held together across the distances that war creates, keeping those at the front and those at home within a shared moral and spiritual space.

The UOC material presents the sharpest contrast. In 60% of the analysed sermons the war was not mentioned at all. When it did appear, it was typically embedded in a universal theological frame - the spiritual condition of humanity, the nature of suffering, the eternal order of things - rather than in a named political situation. At the same time, the UOC corpus showed the highest frequency of negative boundary construction between religious communities, defining its own identity partly through the failings of other denominations - though even here the absolute numbers remain analytically modest. The near-silence about the war is not straightforwardly explicable as a single thing. It may reflect a habitual theological universalism, a reliance on religious refocusing as a coping orientation, and the institutional caution of a church that after 2022 found itself under serious public suspicion because of its historical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate - probably all operating at once and reinforcing each other.

Already on the basis of these patterns one can suggest that the OCU and UGCC cases point toward something the existing literature has largely not engaged with. Most scholarship on religion and political violence focuses on its destructive potential - radicalisation, fundamentalism, the sacralisation of aggression. What the sermons of both churches raise is a question the literature has mostly not asked: whether religion can play a constructive part in war at all - and in the Ukrainian case, that question arises within a war of defence, which makes it all the more pressing.

A further assumption of this study was that the positive and negative dimensions of religious coping - as distinguished in the theory - should be traceable in institutional public communication as well. Religious coping theory draws an important distinction between its positive and negative forms. Positive coping includes benevolent reappraisal of crisis, collaboration with God, and support from the religious community. Negative coping includes appraising crisis as divine punishment, experiencing God as abandoning or wrathful, and spiritual struggle marked by anger and guilt. The theory gives significant attention to the negative register, because religion can bring out the worst as well as the best in human response to suffering. Against that background, the negative register did appear in the corpus - but its identification was contextually difficult, and its presence was limited. What was absent entirely is: no denomination represented God as sending the war as punishment, and no sermon constructed an image of a wrathful or absent God. Even under the conditions

of a full-scale war, the churches examined here consistently maintained a loving and present image of God in their public speech - and that consistency is itself a finding.

Some of the patterns identified in the corpus can be named as negative more directly. Constructing the identity of one's community through criticism of other denominations, as the UOC does most visibly, is one such pattern. The sense of chosenness before God is another: it strengthens belonging, but by drawing a sharper line between those inside and those outside.

The most significant finding in this domain is the pattern of internal attribution of the causes of war. In some UOC and OCU sermons - and entirely absent from the UGCC - the war is explained not through the aggressor but through the community's own spiritual state: its sins, its lack of love among believers, its moral failings. In effect, the community is led to look for the cause of the catastrophe in itself. This comes close to what coping theory describes as a punitive appraisal, and at its edge it approaches victim-blaming. Notably, even in these fragments God is not explicitly named as the one who punishes; the connection between moral failing and war is drawn without a directly punitive divine figure, which may reflect something specific to the Eastern Christian theological tradition - a tradition that developed its understanding of divine action in ways that differ from the Western context in which religious coping theory was largely constructed. This pattern, found only in the Orthodox material and absent from the Greek Catholic sermons, that revealing of theology traditions.

Across all three denominations, and despite all their differences, the analysed sermons consistently offered their communities symbolic resources for living with uncertainty, loss, and collective threat. They proposed frames for understanding suffering, forms of response available when direct action was impossible, and images of a God who had not withdrawn from the world. Whether those offers translated into actual psychological benefit - whether they reduced anxiety, helped people carry what the war demanded, sustained their capacity to keep going - cannot be established from sermons alone. That question requires direct work with parishioners and lies beyond the scope of this study. What the study establishes is the prior condition: the resources were publicly available and structurally oriented toward the functions that matter under conditions of collective threat.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study is based on the analysis of public sermons and does not permit direct conclusions about the actual psychological states of parishioners, the individual effectiveness of one or another type of religious coping, or the empirical degree of influence of the institutional discourse on its audience. The analysis reconstructs the publicly articulated religious responses that the institution makes available, not how those responses are received and interpreted by believers. Relatedly, the functional categories of religious coping are used here as heuristic analytical lenses, not as measurement scales applied to parishioners. The theory was developed at the individual level; its application to sermon texts is an analytical adaptation, not a direct transfer of the original instrument.

The corpus is analytical rather than statistically representative. It was constructed through theoretical saturation and purposive sampling from publicly available material, and its conclusions cannot be mechanically generalised to the full universe of sermons in the digital space. In addition, the use of YouTube as the primary source may systematically bias the corpus toward those communities and preachers who are actively present in the online environment.

The study is focused on only one genre of religious communication—the Christmas sermon. Other genres (Easter sermons, addresses of hierarchs, pastoral letters, weekday sermons, interviews, social-media communication) may carry different emphases. The Christmas context was chosen deliberately for its symbolic density and comparative convenience, but this is at the same time a boundary of the study.

Coding was carried out by a single researcher without inter-coder verification. This was offset by iterative refinement of the coding frame, but it remains a limitation in terms of intersubjective verification of results. Future research would benefit from coding by multiple coders with measures of agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined what churches say from the pulpit, not how believers receive it. The most direct next step, therefore, is to study the audience. Surveys, interviews, or experimental work with parishioners of the three churches would show how far the patterns identified here correspond to the way believers themselves cope: whether they differ in positive and negative religious coping. Combining the analysis of sermons with research on their audiences would make it possible to connect what is offered publicly with what is actually experienced.

The material can also be broadened. This study was limited to Christmas sermons, so a natural continuation would be to analyse Easter and ordinary Sunday sermons, as well as pastoral letters and communication in social media. This would show whether the ways of responding observed here are stable features of each church or whether they shift with the symbolic context of a particular feast.

For the churches themselves, the central implication is that, within the framework of this theory, religion is a resource for working through trauma, and the clergy should be aware of this. The church can set the frame in which a community experiences loss, giving meaning to suffering and helping people carry it – and it does so not only through sermons but through the whole range of its practices: prayer, ritual, pastoral care, and communal life. This is why basic training for clergy in psychological support and crisis communication would be valuable: it would help them use this resource consciously rather than intuitively. Such awareness matters both during the war, when communities are living through acute loss, and in the post-war recovery that will follow, when the long work of making sense of that loss continues.

It should be noted that while this study identified patterns that carry psychological ambivalence - in particular the internal attribution of the causes of war - translating these observations into direct recommendations for religious practice is not straightforward. These are questions of faith and theology, and any external prescription about how churches should preach risks overstepping the boundary between research ethic and religious life.

For state bodies, and for civil-society organisations, work of this kind may help to assess the situation and serve as a reference point in deciding how to respond when religious communication becomes a source of tension in society. As the first study to examine the communication of clergy at the parish level, it provides a valuable source of information on how churches shape the way their communities make sense of the war.

More broadly, public religious speech in wartime is a valuable source not only for social psychology but for a wider conversation among psychology, religious studies, sociology, and political analysis. Further work at this intersection seems worthwhile from both an academic and a practical point of view.

For future researchers, this study provides a methodological template for analysing sermons as institutional religious coping. For theological seminaries and clergy training programmes, the findings highlight the importance of awareness regarding how wartime preaching may shape collective meaning-making.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Distribution of the corpus and coding results

Table 1

Distribution of the corpus of sermons by denomination and year

Denomination	2022 (January 2023)	2023 (January 2024)*	2024 (January 2025)	Total
UOC	12	5	13	30
UGCC	10	8	7	25
OCU	9	7	10	26
Total	31	20	30	81

* Ukraine has two liturgical calendars in use: the Gregorian (New Style), on which Christmas falls on December 25, and the Julian (Old Style), on which it falls on January 7. The OCU and the UGCC follow the New Style; the UOC historically followed the Old Style, celebrating Christmas on January 7. In May 2023 the OCU officially adopted the New Style, and the UOC followed in late 2024. As a result, within the same calendar year the denominations sometimes celebrated Christmas on different dates, and sub-samples from different denominations were therefore combined into a single column by liturgical year rather than calendar date.

Appendix B

Frequency of the war theme and of codes by denomination

Table 2

Presence and absence of the theme of war in sermons, by denomination

Denomination	Sermons (n)	Sermons without mention of the war	Share, %
UOC	30	18	60.0
UGCC	25	5	20.0
OCU	26	2	≈7.7

Table 3

Frequencies of codes by denomination*

Denomination	Meaning-making				Control		Closeness to God			Closeness with others	
	1.1 <i>War as benefit</i>	1.2 <i>Higher order</i>	1.4.1 <i>Internal focus</i>	1.4.2 <i>External focus</i>	2.1.1 <i>Prayer only</i>	2.1.2 <i>Prayer + action</i>	3.1.1 <i>God in suffering</i>	3.1.2 <i>God as strength</i>	3.2 <i>Refocusing</i>	4.1 <i>«Negative they»</i>	4.2 <i>Chosenness</i>
UOC (n=30)	6 (20.0%)	5 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)	0	5 (16.7%)	9 (30.0%)	5 (16.7%)	2 (6.7%)	4 (13.3%)	7 (23.3%)	3 (10.0%)
UGCC (n=25)	5 (20.0%)	2 (8.0%)	0	7 (28.0%)	13 (52.0%)	2 (8.0%)	5 (20.0%)	8 (32.0%)	7 (28.0%)	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)
OCU (n=26)	7 (26.9%)	3 (11.5%)	3 (11.5%)	6 (23.1%)	6 (23.1%)	8 (30.8%)	1 (3.8%)	11 (42.3%)	6 (23.1%)	0	1 (3.8%)

**Table 3 presents the distribution of all coding categories across the three denominations, expressed as the number of sermons in which each code was identified and its share of the denominational sub-sample. Each cell reflects the presence of a given code in at least one fragment of a sermon, not the total number of fragments. The table is the basis for the denominational comparisons discussed in section 3.2.*

Appendix C

1. Religious methods of coping for meaning-making

1.1. War as a spiritually beneficial experience

This code was taken directly from the religious coping model. War is presented as a spiritually beneficial event: a trial, a path to repentance, an occasion for moral growth and for the manifestation of Christian love. In essence, this is a discursive strategy through which the institution publicly proposes a meaning-making frame, presenting collective suffering as spiritually purposeful—for example, the way people reframe a negative event (war) as an “opportunity for spiritual closeness to God.” The preacher does not call the war useful directly, but speaks of its spiritual fruits. Examples from the sermons:

“We are still here, the Lord in His mercy has not let us taste this bitterness of cruelty, this godlessness, of this evil war. And believe me, many people have tasted it. And they know what it is. And today the Lord gives us the opportunity to be such that we do good, that we help. And we have such a time and such a chance now.” – UOC priest

The war is here interpreted as an occasion for showing kindness and mercy; a higher meaning is attributed to it.

“All of us must understand that this price we are paying for this freedom is needed so that our eyes might open.” – UGCC priest

The reference is to spiritual eyes, a higher religious meaning, an interpretation of war as something that transforms a person and carries a larger meaning.

“Blessed is he who lays down his soul for his soul. May these Christmas holidays mark our already approaching victory.” – OCU priest

A clear attribution of a higher religious meaning to death in war, through a biblical reference. Such quotations are heterogeneous, but all of them can be interpreted in the same way from the standpoint of religious coping theory.

1.2. War as part of a higher order

War is presented as non-accidental; ultimate control belongs to God, not to chaos. God may not be named directly as the cause, but the talk is about orderliness. Examples:

“So, my dear ones, do not be afraid. This is all foreseen by God.” – UOC priest, speaking precisely about the war and asserting that it is foreseen by God.

“And then the earthly homelands, which, as we saw even in the prophecy, in history have constantly lost their value, changed borders, shifted in this or that direction. That is something else. But no one has ever defeated Christianity and the Church and never will.” – UOC priest. The talk is about the war as an established order, that nothing new is happening; at the end the conversation is moved from the war to a different plane, namely the problems of the UOC and its conflict with the state and society.

1.4. The focus of explaining the war (internal / external)

This code captures where exactly the emphasis is placed in talk about the war and about evil: whether the war is interpreted primarily through the inner spiritual state of the community (sin, lack of love, the need for repentance and moral transformation), or through external spiritual factors—diabolical forces and the like.

1.4.1. Internal focus: fragments of sermons in which war and evil are discussed through internal causes—the sinfulness of the person, lack of love, spiritual blindness, the moral responsibility of the community. The emphasis is on self-examination, on repentance, on the need to “become better” in wartime, rather than on the actions of a specific enemy. Examples, said in the context of war:

“Every time we want peace, we have to understand that peace can exist only when in those who are next to us we see—more precisely, in those who are next to us—the image of God. And here lies an enormous problem.”

UOC priest; in fact, the speaker blends the term “peace” in the sense of peace in Ukraine with the sense of inner, spiritual, and moral peace.

“A person becomes ill when there is a reason for whom to be ill. If there is no one to be ill for, whether it hurts or not, you get up, you treat yourself and move on; there is no one to lie down for. This says what? Everything that happens around us is partly because of us.” – UOC priest.

1.4.2. External focus emphasises the aggressor, the enemy, or external spiritual causes of the war. This code was created in opposition to the internal-focus code. It marks parts of the text in which political causes of the war are clearly visible, or in which the war is associated with diabolical forces. The focus is explained by external causes; the enemy is named, and there is no room for internal interpretations.

“There must be no darkness, because from darkness this evil spirit began, which today reigns here on our land, specifically from the East.” – OCU priest, associating with external forces.

“But the devil remembers and wants to uproot us and to destroy us. And we see what the devil is doing today on our land.” – UGCC priest, directly associating with an evil force.

2. Religious methods of coping for the achievement of control

2.1. Control through prayer vs. prayer combined with action

2.1.1. Prayer is presented as the primary or the only means of influencing the situation. The code captures how the religious discourse restores a sense of control under conditions of war: whether control is delegated solely to God through prayer, or distributed between God and people through the combination of prayer and action. This is a classical control-focused coping in the sense of religious coping theory. In all sermons priests place a stronger emphasis on prayer; the key difference here is the presence, even cursory, of a call to action.

Control through prayer: this sub-code includes fragments of sermons in which prayer functions as the main or the only way of influencing the situation. Not only explicit calls to prayer but also the priest's wishes and blessings were counted. It should be kept in mind that all these sermons were delivered in the middle of the liturgy, which is itself essentially a service of prayer, where prayer and calls to prayer take place. Examples, said in the context of the war:

“May Jesus bless you, your relatives and your loved ones, those who are dear to your heart, your family, our whole parish. And may Jesus bring peace to our hearts and peace to our state, Ukraine.” – UGCC priest

“He asks and pleads for only one thing—that He preserve our homeland, that He give us victory, that He establish peace on our land. We ask that no one else perish, neither soldiers nor ordinary people who are innocent, and we Ukrainians are innocent in this war. And we ask and pray that our children not become orphans.” – OCU priest

2.1.2. Control through prayer and action. Prayer is combined with calls to volunteering, support, or active participation. This need not be a direct call to action—any mention of action can be enough. There is a limitation here: sermons in general say little about action. This sub-code includes fragments in which prayer is combined with a call to human participation—work, volunteering, support of soldiers, or civic activity. Examples, said in the context of the war:

“that we share the burdens, the hardships of this trouble that came to our city, and thus fulfil the law of Christ. Bear one another's burdens, and so

fulfil the law of Christ. The word of God. And may God grant that we help one another.” – UOC priest, amid calls to prayer

“Let us be brave, let us help our soldiers as much as we can, let us act in the volunteering movement, let us help, let us go where the Lord calls us, in support, in help. And indeed today we are united, and we have proved it. Let us be faithful, let us be united.” – OCU priest

“Do not simply wait for victory through the Internet... In prayer one must ask for victory, in work, in support...” – UGCC priest

3. Religious methods of coping for the achievement of consolation and closeness to God

3.1. Images of God in time of war

This code captures how the image of God is built by the priest in the sermon: whether he rather mobilises his parish for struggle using religious motifs, or concentrates more on suffering.

3.1.1. God as a source of strength for struggle: mobilisation, endurance, hope for victory. This sub-code includes fragments in which God appears as a source of strength, endurance, and victorious hope that sustains people in their struggle and mobilises them to remain firm. The emphasis is on active resistance.

“For the struggle continues, and we may already be somewhat exhausted, perhaps sometimes relaxed, and maybe even at times slightly indifferent, but we must hold on and go to the end. For when we are together, when we are united, then will be our strength and our victory.” – UGCC priest

“And we sing the majestic words: God is with us, understand, you peoples, and submit, for God is with us. And we know that we are indeed with God. And we are now fighting for the truth. And God loves the truth. For God is truth, God is love. And where there is love and God, there can be no defeat, only victory.” – OCU priest

“Christ is very often portrayed as a pacifist. That is not quite so, and to be more precise, not at all so. Christ is a warrior, only a warrior is not... This is very important for us to remember in times of war.” – OCU priest

3.1.2. God as co-present in suffering: compassion, shared pain, endurance. This sub-code includes fragments in which God appears as the one who is co-present in human suffering, who shares in pain, loss, and mourning. The emphasis falls not on overcoming through struggle but on enduring, patience, and compassion. Examples:

“The Saviour of the world comes today to each of us in order to share with us our suffering, our pain...” – OCU priest

“And even those sorrows that we carry today, they are passing and they are temporary. And this too is a kind of medicine for our soul, and lessons for us. After all, the same—did not our grandmothers and grandfathers, our fathers and mothers, endure the same, and even worse?” – said by a UOC priest in the context of the war.

If both images appear within a single fragment, double coding is applied.

3.2. Shift of religious focus

A reorientation of attention from the war to Christmas, to spiritual peace, and to joy. The code captures the presence or absence of a direct intention to shift attention from the stressor (war, losses, anxiety) toward the religious feast, spiritual peace, and inner joy. This mechanism corresponds to the type of religious coping described by Pargament in which the reduction of distress is achieved not by changing the situation but by reorienting attention toward religious practices. Examples:

“And yet, strangely enough, in any situation this peace of God on earth is present. This peace is not an abstract concept. It is peace in the soul of a particular person—a person who lives in a godly way and with God.” – UOC priest

“So in the same way we, in spite of everything, must keep joy and peace in our heart. May the born Christ renew our life.” – UGCC priest

“And this war has, as if, spoiled everything for us. And we no longer have that joy, we no longer have that inner comfort. But, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we should turn our attention not to this, but rather to the one who was born.” – OCU priest

4. Religious methods of coping for the achievement of closeness with others

4.1. Negative we/they

Negative “they” refers to the “wrong” or “mistaken” believers from another religious group. The text describes the other, “wrong” group of believers negatively, underlining one’s own rightness by stressing the wrongness of others. The code captures the discursive work with intra-religious group boundaries, not the line “Ukraine / aggressor.”

“They rather have: beat them, judge them, lock them up, take their churches from them. What is heard in the hearts of our opponents testifies that they have no God at all. They no longer need any religion.” – UOC priest, about other believers, adherents of the OCU and the Greek Catholic Church.

Fragments in which religious belonging is built through the criticism of, or distancing from, “others”–formal, “wrong” believers. “They” are presented as spiritually wrong or as a threat to true faith.

“...the devil seeks to destroy the holy Church, to persecute the followers of Christ, so that they would renounce and pass over to his side.” – UOC priest

“For them, celebration is just a tradition... the candle has to stand a certain way, must not crackle... and all the attention is not on Christ but on fears and formalities.” – OCU priest, about adherents of the UOC

4.2. Chosenness before God

Emphasis on a special status, on chosenness, or on the “rightness” of one’s own religious identity. A fragment was assigned to this code if a particular religious identity was presented as the chosen truth or as the one having special rights before God. Examples:

“The Lord will bless His people with peace... And the key word here is ‘His.’ We are not orphans. We are needed by God.” – UOC priest

“We are Ukrainians and we know how to glorify the Lord in our own special way.” – UGCC priest

Religious identity is here interwoven with collective pride and a sense of being special.