Religious Dimensions of the Ukraine-Russian Conflict

When I asked the official in charge of religious affairs in the Ukrainian government why it and so many of its neighboring states turned to religion in their rejection of Soviet control, he explained that “it is due to a failure of ideology.” Marxist and other secular ideologies have “failed,” he explained, for they are not able to “touch the heart” the way ethnic and religious identities do.

Whether or not Marxist ideology “failed,” it is clear that it became unhappily tied to what was perceived as Russian imperialism. The liberalization of Soviet policies in the 1980s opened the floodgates for a lively expression of ethnic loyalties in Eastern Europe that only intensified after the end of the Soviet Union on New Year’s Day in 1992. In such diverse locations as Lithuania, Armenia, East Germany, Poland, and Ukraine, religious movements were at the forefront of opposition to Soviet control and the emergence of new nationalisms. In a sense, these were old nationalisms; they traced their identities at least to the nineteenth century and in most cases much earlier. In their post-socialist form, however, these national identities were new: their combination of democratic popularism and cultural nationalism was a distinctive feature of the modern age.

In many of these countries, Catholic Christianity was a rallying point for nationalists eager to separate themselves from the Russian cultural domination symbolized by the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the case in Ukraine, where the Catholic Church in the western part of the country continues to be at the forefront of nationalist causes. The religious culture of Ukraine is more complicated than simply a Catholic-Orthodox split, however, since there is a form of Ukrainian orthodoxy that is distinctively Ukrainian and stridently anti-Russian. The statement declaring Ukraine’s independence on August 24, 1991, claimed “a thousand-year-old tradition of building statehood,” which originated in the tenth century, when Vladimir the Great created a separate Ukrainian Church.

This link between Ukrainian nationalism and religion persisted in the post-Soviet period, especially in Western Ukraine. The eastern part of the country contained a large percentage of Russians, most of whom were nominally Russian Orthodox. The residents of Western Ukraine have traditionally been Catholics—members of the Uniate Church, a Ukrainian branch of Catholicism—or members of a distinctly Ukrainian form of Orthodoxy. In Western Ukraine, therefore, the religious competition was among three groups: Russian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, and Uniate Catholic.

During the harsh years of Soviet repression of Ukrainian nationalism, Ukrainians in the western part of the country resisted not only the secular state but also the Russian Orthodox Church, which was perceived by many Ukrainians to be an agent of Russian colonialism. An uprising against the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 1990 was regarded by the church hierarchy as motivated by “an underlying nationalist cause,” as one Russian Orthodox archbishop scornfully put it. The Russian Orthodox Church’s metropolitan of Kiev warned that “a handful of people” were trying to use Gorbachev’s “democratization process” in order to set up a “national church” in the Ukraine that would “estrange Ukrainians from Russians.” Many Western Ukrainians would agree. They feel, however, that their estrangement from Russians occurred decades—even centuries—ago and that the responsibility for the schism was as much Russian as it was Ukrainian.

The main opponents to the Russian Orthodox Church in Western Ukraine were those clergy and laity who identified with the “Uniate Church”—the Ukrainian Catholic Church. It was called the Uniate Church because it dates from the union of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church in 1596. Christianity had come to the region in 988, when Vladimir the Great became Christian, and in the great division between Rome and Constantinople, the Ukrainian region fell on the Orthodox side. For that reason the Uniate Church, which is dominant in the two western regions of Ukraine—Galicia and Transcarpathia—was very much Orthodox in its practices and beliefs. Its clergy are married, for instance, as Orthodox clergy are. Since the 1596 union, however, it has recognized the patriarchy of Rome and used this connection to assert its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church. Members of the Russian Orthodox Church in the eastern part of Ukraine also supported Ukrainian nationalism, but they recognized the primacy of the patriarch of Moscow.

When Ukraine was made a part of the Soviet Union in 1923, the role of the Uniate Church became uncertain. The Marxist government, especially under Stalin, had no use for any sort of religion, but in its efforts to undercut the Russian Orthodox Church it at first took a permissive position toward regional forms of the faith, such as the Uniate and the Ukrainian Orthodox churches. During the Second World War, however, Stalin felt that latent nationalist sentiments in Ukraine were being spurred on by the Uniate Church and were keeping Ukrainians from being as supportive of the war effort as they might have been. When the war ended, therefore, Stalin attempted to make Ukraine in every way a seamless part of Russia. In the Synod of Lvov in 1946 the Uniate Church was abolished. The property of some 3,000 churches was transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the former Uniate clergy were forced either to join the Orthodoxy or to leave the church altogether. Some who stayed remained true to the Uniate confession but practiced their faith in secret. Nuns who adopted civilian clothes and worked as teachers and nurses were often dressed in their identifying religious habits only after their deaths when they were laid to rest in their coffins.

In 1988, with the increase of religious freedom throughout the Soviet Union, formerly Russian Orthodox clergy proclaimed their true Uniate identities, and a new movement developed in Western Ukraine to reestablish the Uniate Church. It became fashionable in some urban intellectual circles to join the Uniate confession largely for nationalist reasons. By 1990 several hundred Orthodox churches had been converted back to Uniate congregations, in some cases by force, and in 1991 the seventy-six-year-old head of the Uniate Church, Cardinal Miroslav Lubachivsky, returned to the cathedral of Lvov in glory from an exile that had been imposed on him since 1938. Cardinal Lubachivsky had spent seventeen of his forty-five years abroad serving as a parish priest in Cleveland, Ohio. Between 1988 and 1991 over a thousand clergy professed to be Uniate rather than Russian Orthodox. The Orthodox patriarch in Moscow vigorously protested these conversions, claiming that the churches had functioned as Russian Orthodox congregations for half a century and that many, if not most, of the members were now truly Orthodox in belief rather than Catholic. Moreover, he argued, the prime motive of most of the Uniate leaders in reclaiming their churches was political, not spiritual: they wanted to reestablish the cultural base for an independent Ukrainian nation. The patriarch’s disdain of Ukrainian nationalism, however, did not prevent him from changing the name of the Orthodox Church in the Ukraine from the Russian Orthodox to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In 1989, yet another contender entered this Orthodox/Uniate controversy—a group of formerly Russian Orthodox clergy and laity who wanted to revert to the “true Ukrainian church.” They had in mind, however, not the Uniate Church but an earlier form of Ukrainian Orthodoxy that had existed before the union of 1596 and that paid homage to neither the pope nor the patriarch of Moscow nor the patriarch of Constantinople. It had its own head and was therefore known as the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. It had been established in 1921 as a nationalist movement, and Stalin allowed it to flourish briefly before crushing it in 1930. By 1991, the revived form of the Autocephalous Church had attracted only a relatively small number of clergy and had even fewer congregations, but it had created a great deal of public controversy. It was virulent in its attacks on the Russian-related Ukrainian Orthodox Church and was even more nationalist than the Uniates. It competed with them over which form of religion truly represented the Ukrainian nationalist cause. The Uniate Catholics claimed that because the Autocephalous were Orthodox, they were somehow identified with Russia, and the Autocephalous claimed that because the Uniates were Catholics, they were somehow linked with Poland. In December 1991 members of the Autocephalous Church staged a hunger strike in Saint Sophia’s Cathedral in Kiev to reclaim the Byzantine church they said was theirs.

In January 1992 Metropolitan Archbishop Mstislav Skrypnyk, who lived in the United States for more than forty of his ninety-three years, returned to Kiev in order to take up his post as patriarch of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Although he came to the United States in 1950, he never took out U.S. citizenship, and he was elected patriarch by a synod of bishops in Kiev in 1990. Patriarch Skrypnyk stated that he intended to live half of each year in Kiev and the other half in his headquarters in South Bound Brook, New Jersey.

The fact that the heads of both the Uniate and Autocephalous Ukrainian churches had lived in the United States was taken as a symbol of the nationalist spirit of the religious movements. A priest who supported the Autocephalous cause compared his leaders with “the founding fathers of America.” Like them, he said, the Autocephalous leaders have “embarked upon the difficult road leading to self-determination which sooner or later must be accepted and recognized.” He went on to say that the members of his church desire nothing more than “their inalienable, divinely given rights of life, dignity, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

It is something of an irony that the Russian Orthodox Church, which suffered greatly under Stalin and Khrushchev, came to be regarded as the persecutor in Ukraine. But, as the minister of religious affairs in Ukraine explained to me, the leaders of the new independent Ukrainian churches were young and remembered only the recent history of attempts to Russify Ukrainian culture through the imposition of the Russian Orthodox faith. These members of a new generation saw the Uniate Church and the Ukrainian Auto-cephalic Orthodox Church as pioneers in a renewed cultural nationalism aimed at establishing an independent Ukraine. The Ukrainian churches may have quarreled with one another, but they were united in their support for a Ukrainian nationalism free from any latent cultural ties to the old Soviet state with its secular socialist ideology and its Russian colonial rule.

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