Little's "Ukraine: The Legacy of Intolerance" - Book Review

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This publication is the first report of a six-part study sponsored by the independent, non-partisan, congressionally created and funded U.S. Institute of Peace. The Institute's special Working Group on Religion, Ideology, and Peace was established to (1) consider how religious and similar beliefs sometimes contribute to conflict, and (2) investigate methods for managing such conflict with the goal of encouraging peaceful pluralism. The Working Group applied itself first to a study of the current "strife of the churches" in Ukraine.

Little begins his summary report of the Group's work by noting that although the socio-political transformation experienced by the peoples of the former Soviet Union resulted in substantially greater freedoms for all, the riptide of change also removed the constraints that held in check suppressed national and religious antipathies that exist among these same peoples. On one level, the Ukrainian case presents itself as a ringing endorsement of the cause of religious pluralism and liberty in belief; on another level, Ukraine is deeply conflicted in that the churches in this republic propound irreconcilable narratives of historical grievances against each other. The gravity and potential explosiveness of the situation is compounded by a traditional predilection to account religion and national loyalty as two inextricably intertwined elements of cultural life.

Throughout the first four chapters—"An Introduction to Ukraine," "Religion and Nationalism: The Historical Setting," "Belief in Conflict," and "The Strife of the Churches"—Little with deft but firm hand outlines for the reader the history, agenda, and claims of each of the litigating churches. A compendium of those churches reads as follows: the Russian Orthodox Church—declared itself independent of the patriarch of Constantinople in the mid-fifteenth century, elevated to a patriarchate in the sixteenth century; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—transferred from the jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Moscow in 1686, subjected to state-sponsored Russification through the twentieth century, recently allowed by Moscow to identify with its particular Ukrainian cultural heritage to a limited degree; the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church—the part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that proclaimed itself independent of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1921, liquidated by the Soviet Government in 1930, reconstituted in 1942, established itself as a patriarchate in 1990; The Ukrainian Catholic
Church--established when a group of Ukrainian Orthodox bishops professed allegiance to the Pope of Rome in 1596, proclaimed illegal and non-existent within the boarders of the Soviet Union by the Council of Lviv in 1946.

Identified as key to the understanding of the difficulties between the churches is the continued Russian Orthodox self-identity as an official, imperial-style church:

The pervasive and deliberate interweaving of churchly and civil-political concerns inspired by Byzantine Christianity, nurtured by Russian nationalism, and adapted by Stalinist imperialism disposed the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to welcome an arrangement in which ecclesiastical determinations directly entail civil-political consequences....in the case of Russian Orthodoxy, it appears that unorthodox belief is in itself extremely damaging and constitutes sufficient basis for 'nullification' or 'impairment' of the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis" (pp.24-25).

Thus, when in 1988 Catholics and Autocephalous Orthodox began demanding a return of properties confiscated during the time of their illegality, the Russian Orthodox hierarchy was not inclined to comply due to the residual conviction that these were more national-political fronts than legitimate religious bodies and as such had no rightful claim to ecclesiastical properties.

In the fifth chapter, "The Continuing Sources of Conflict," the conviction is voiced that in analyzing the sources of intolerance in Ukraine, and to better to ameliorate them, it is important to consider whether the conflict is essentially one of national or religious identity. Controlling questions that give highlight to this issue include the following: Is the hostility basically the result of a belief in Ukrainian national independence and cultural autonomy that opposes Russia's own nationalistic designs on Ukraine? Is it, moreover, a conflict among Ukrainians as to who is truest to ethnic traditions? Or is the hostility better understood as fundamentally inspired by conflicting religious loyalties and beliefs among Ukrainian national churches on the one hand, and between them and Russian Orthodoxy on the other? Although the report grants primacy to an overbearing sense of national identity as the root cause of intolerance, Little is careful to review factors that make the separation of religious and national identity a most difficult proposition: the interdependence of beliefs about religion and national origin (each church claims to be the natural and proper extension of the normative tenth-century Kievan Rus' Christian community); the varying degrees of priority accorded national identity over religious identity in the spectrum of Ukrainian society ranging from the intelligentsia to the peasants; the politicization and nationalization of religion by the Soviet state; disagreement over whether geographical and ethnic division between Western and Eastern Christianity in the eleventh century--after the formation of the Kievan religion--was aberrant and unnatural (as Catholics believe) or required and justified (as Orthodox believe); the lack of sophisticated theological reflection on self-understanding due to state-sponsored restrictions on religious education and publication; and
finally, religious interests being reflected in voting behavior that cannot be understood apart from the political-historical context. With regard to the issue of restitution based on concessions made in the interest of peace and justice, it is acknowledged that the necessary revision of collective memories is something that cannot be externally imposed, only urged and invited. The report concludes with a call for a restructuring of attitudes and behavior patterns. Recommended as a guideline is the United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Beliefs, adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1981. This document calls for the treatment of national and religious issues as separate questions. Also recommended are Ukrainian adaptations of effective legal and political systems based on western models of religious tolerance and religious pluralism.

Written before August, 1991, these recommendations were addressed to a central Soviet government that no longer exists. Besides this innocent limitation, a single spelling error and a minor editorial quibble (Rukh should have been identified as the "Ukrainian People's Movement for Perestroika" the first time it was mentioned in the body of the text), this work has much to recommend itself in general. The coefficient of friction remains distressingly high among the groups treated in this study and official "dialogues" tend to quickly degenerate into rapid and pointed exchanges of charge and countercharge; Little's perceptive, dispassionate and balanced summary of the situation therefore comes as a welcome and needed intervention.

Given the intractable nature of the nationalism/religion meld in Ukraine, it seems to this reviewer that perhaps the most effective first step towards a resolution of the difficulties is a religious move that was mentioned in the report but not sufficiently underscored due to the report's desire to maintain the greatest possible degree of objectivity in its understandings. Specifically, each church should examine its own conscience in a way that leads to humble and sincere repentance for the way it has contributed to the rise of attitudes of intolerance and acts of injustice. The Churches possess a deep, rich and common spiritual legacy from which to draw upon for guidance and inspiration in this matter. Healing repentance is particularly warranted in light of the fact that--as a keen and respected American observer recently noted--no one comes to the controversy with hands clean.

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