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Book Review: The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation

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BOOK REVIEW

Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018. 298 pp. Paperback. \$39.00. ISBN 978-0-87580-789-8

Reviewed by Joseph Loya, O.S.A, Villanova University

“Fog of war” commonly names the complete lack of situational awareness amidst a singular lethal engagement, but it may also describe the absence of clarity regarding the foundational reasons, societal dimensions, and collateral impact of years of continuous armed combat. Denysenko’s book provides the necessary bearings for navigating within a mist of ecclesial conflict pitting opposing sides of an effort to establish an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church apart from the Moscow Patriarchate, a fray that also extends to impact global Orthodox interchurch relations. Indeed, the fallout from this seemingly intractable clashing looks to roil global Orthodoxy through the foreseeable future. The author, an ordained deacon of the Orthodox Church in America and Valparaiso University’s Emil and Elfriede Jochum Professor and Chair (Theology), dedicated himself to the project of making semblance of the neuralgic historical factors and dynamics of the Ukrainian Church’s modern autocephaly movement. The study’s time frame reaches back a tick over one hundred years to the runup to the 1918 Sobor that secured autonomous status for the forming and self-standing Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The impressively substantial bibliography comprises names of eminent scholars, researchers, and commentators, from Antoine Arjakovsky and Bohdan Bociurkiw through to Aleksandr Verkhovsky and Met. Kallistos Ware, and more. Beyond these, Denysenko venturesomely plumbs the heretofore unpublished archival materials such as those of Tymofii Minenko and Yaroslav Lozowchuck.

During the course of the movement’s ever resilient struggle for autocephaly, proponents imprinted their church with the following points of advocacy: liberation from enslavement--be it to tsars, the Moscow Patriarchate, or commanding state actors--sought through subversive external patronage; modernization, first and foremost the use of vernacular Ukrainian in the Liturgy; use of local cultural customs in worship and church life; conceptual melding of church autocephaly with national sovereignty (this after the initial impetus to simply restore the Kyivan Metropolia in recovering eradicated native traditions); legitimization through the blood of

martyrs; opportune appeals to western ideals and rhetoric regarding freedom of action and self-identity, especially during the Cold War era; *sobornopravnist'*, or the robust and audacious ecclesial experiment of conciliar church order in which laity and lower clergy exercise significant power and responsibility. (The 1921 establishment of hierarchs for the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) by the laying on hands other than those of presiding bishops stigmatized the quest for an independent church through succeeding generations.) The Moscow Patriarchate reacted and continues to react in various ways: insistence on the rule of canonicity and its particular narrative of history enforced by anathematization, suspensions, depositions, delegitimization strategies and charges of fomenting schism; pressing its own particular construal of a unified Ancient Holy Rus within *Russkii mir* ideology and all its underpinnings. The overall contest is described through historical vicissitudes in national borderlines (the situation of Ukrainians under Nazi occupation was particularly problematic), regime change, backings from diaspora communities, and patron practicability. In the end, proffered conclusions reveal the author to be a keen observer and sensitive churchman rather than a dictator of solutions. Indeed, exchanges of fusillades of hostile epithets between the extremists on both sides of the ecclesial divide must cease. Towards that end, this Eastern Catholic reviewer was heartened by Denysenko's raising of the Ukrainian Catholic University in L'viv as an edifying model of how the Orthodox might develop an educated elite of clergy and laity that can respond to contemporary challenges while remaining faithful to a Tradition embraceable by the faithful.

On 5 January 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople signed the *tomos* of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine; the century-long journey to recognized autocephaly has been completed. This book, having garnered honorable mention with the Omeljjan Pritsak Book Prize in Ukrainian Studies from the prestigious academic Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, establishes Denysenko's *bona fides* as an authoritative docent helping interested observers and involved parties navigate and understand the significance and ensuing consequences of Patriarch Bartholomew's action. In an interview published by Dr. Adam Deville on his estimable blogsite, Denysenko shared the following about his post-book plans: "I am in the slow process of developing a sequel. The sequel will discuss the *tomos* and the birth of the OCU, but there is a desperate need for a sophisticated look at the intersection of religion and politics in Ukraine, to cut through the unfortunate post-truth

propaganda and regurgitation of Soviet-era narratives popularized by confessional media sites. To that end, the study will address the problem of political religion in Ukraine, and will also discuss the role of the media, both in Ukraine and elsewhere.”¹ In the meantime, through his publications and internet videos, he is subjecting the *tomos* to lucid scrutiny. (For example, he drew attention to the fact that the *tomos* limits the metropolitanate’s actions—the *tomos* did not grant patriarchal status to the territory of Ukraine itself, making it impossible for the OCU to found parishes beyond the country’s border). He raises apposite and stimulating questions that will maintain relevancy beyond our present period in which allegiance clarification, property settlements, and other practicalities are being resolved: Will the Ukrainian Church ever shed its sense of victimization? Has the OCU exchanged one master (Moscow) for another (Constantinople)? To what extent will it become a state church, or not? What are the chances it will garner a critical mass of global Orthodox recognition? It will be well to pay attention to the evolving process of the OCU’s arrival and recognition among autocephalous Orthodox Churches, while concurrently remaining attuned to Denysenko’s perspectives and analysis for signal ways to elevate discourse and engage in enlightened dialogue.

¹ <http://easternchristianbooks.blogspot.com/2019/05/>