

4-2020

## Guest Editor's Foreword: Religiosity in Contemporary Ukraine

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### Recommended Citation

Ishchuk, Nataliia (2020) "Guest Editor's Foreword: Religiosity in Contemporary Ukraine," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss3/3>

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## Foreword

# RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE SINCE INDEPENDENCE

By Nataliia Ishchuk

Nataliia Ishchuk is a professor in the Department of Philosophy, Bioethics and History of Medicine at the Bogomolets National Medical University in Kyiv, Ukraine. She obtained a master's degree in philosophy and a PhD degree at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and a Doctor of Philosophical Sciences degree at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University. Previously she has published articles in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* and other journals. The present issue of OPREE, of which she is the Guest Editor, is dedicated to the religious situation in contemporary Ukraine.

The current stage of the development of religions in Ukraine has a short history and a long past. *Its history is short* because it is less than three decades since its independence. It will be three decades in 2021. *The past of religions in the territory of Ukraine is very long*, because its origin goes back centuries, from pagan, and then Christian Kievan Rus to the atheistic Soviet Union.

The dividing line that marked the transition from the past to the present history appears to be *the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s*—the periods of so-called *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The USSR, from its very beginning and up to its restructuring remained a state with an atheist ideology. As a result, on the eve of *perestroika*, only nine religious movements and more than four thousand of their communities were officially active in the USSR. Among them, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, which at one time was severely oppressed by the Soviet regime, was more privileged than the others. But over time, thanks to Stalin's firm yet cunning policy, the Russian Orthodox Church began to cooperate with the state authorities. That secured its support by the authorities and provided the opportunity to carry out its cultic activities.

The irreversible social changes caused by *perestroika* led to rapid shifts in religious life back then in the USSR. Those changes corresponded well with a fitting expression of the French political scientist, Gilles Kepel, who coined the well-known phrase “revenge of God.” The fateful year was 1990. The legalization of Ukrainian Greek Catholicism was proclaimed that year. The year 1990 was also the year when the Kyiv Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church declared itself as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. However, part of the priesthood of that church decisively refused to obey the Moscow Patriarchate, deciding to restore the authentic, ancient metropolitanate of Kyiv.

This metropolitanate has existed in unity with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople since the baptism of Kievan Rus was accepted by Prince Volodymyr in 988. Unfortunately, this ecclesial structure was destroyed as a result of a number of historical events, not the least due to the efforts of the Moscow princes. In 1990 the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church resumed its activities. Those events set the stage for a series of epoch-making changes that led to the formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019.

*The Declaration of Independence in 1991* initiated the heyday of religious life in Ukraine. The rise of religiosity at that time could be well explained by the effect of a compressed spring. Religion had been squeezed too tightly for a long time, but when the repressive force suddenly disappeared, the spring immediately broke out, taking on its natural course. The belief in God and a high degree of religiosity proved to be a natural spiritual expression for most Ukrainians. People thirsted for faith and came to it as a vital source. In this thirst, great things became manifest: the personal need to be in communication with God, the effort to avoid social strife, and the search for a friendly community.

But perhaps the most distinctive spiritual motives of the religious renaissance of that time were the resuscitation of family traditions and the memory of past generations. The generation long memory in multiethnic Ukraine could not be homogenous. On the contrary, its awakening was reflected in the renewal and growth of religious organizations with different roots: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, as well as religious communities of various ethnic groups. It is important that in the first decade of its independence, Ukraine began to emerge as a multi-confessional state. What were the consequences for ordinary people? They recognized their right to believe and pray to God as their soul, ethnic origin, and tradition asked for. What did this mean for the religious organizations? Their uniqueness, but not exclusivity, was recognized; a wide field was created not only for cooperation, but also for competition. What did this mean for the Ukrainian society? It would provide pluralism of thought, freedom of choice, and the guarantee that any attempt to monopolize the spiritual space of society by any religious organization would be fruitless and futile.

Significant events in the religious life of the first decade of Independence were as follows: the adoption of the “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” by the *Verkhovna Rada* (the Supreme Council) of Ukraine in 1991; the association of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the formation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate in 1992; the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1992; and authorizing the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations in 1996. The

facts speak for themselves: while in 1991 there were 42 religious organizations registered, in 2000 there were more than 90. While in 1991 there were 12,962 religious communities of various churches and denominations registered with the authorities, by the beginning of 2000 there were 22,718.

The establishment of religions in modern Ukraine during *the second decade (2000-2010)* should have been more peaceful as the gradual strengthening of the faith in God in the hearts of people and the development of religious communities, the gradual entry of religions into the public space of society continued. However, the Orange Revolution of 2004 dramatically accelerated those processes. The revolution appeared to be a protest of Ukrainians against the fraud in the presidential elections, with pro-European Viktor Yushchenko and pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich as the main rival candidates. In fact, that revolution testified to the Ukrainians' efforts to defend their pro-European choice. They waited for it with bated breath, and their attempt was successful. Unfortunately, six years later, Viktor Yanukovich nevertheless became president and that fact had fatal consequences for Ukraine.

What were the problems for the religious organizations that had to be confronted during this period? No doubt, they were the following: human dignity, freedom, and the means by which a person can protect these gifts of God, as well as the attitude of believers toward their earthly homeland. In the Ukrainian reality, these issues are inseparable from the problem of civilizational identity.

During the Orange Revolution, most religious organizations that connected their future with Ukraine became aware of these difficulties. Within the religious environment, pro-European (in fact, pro-Ukrainian) and pro-Russian coalitions began to form. The first one included the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and part of the Muslim and Protestant organizations of Ukraine. The pro-Russian coalition was headed at that time by the extremely powerful Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Why was the pro-European position striving to be pro-Ukrainian? The reason is that the recognition of Ukraine as a European country by European partners did not mean the denial of Ukrainian identity. The position of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, however, was always based on the claim that the Ukrainian identity was only a component of the Russian identity, which later transformed itself into a militaristic-imperial doctrine of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*).

The Orange Revolution has changed the social strategies of religious organizations in the country. It has become clear that from now on they will not stay "out of politics." And to

be “in politics” meant either “to be an ally of the state” or “to be an ally of the civil society.” Moreover, in critical situations these seem to be mutually exclusive. The notable example of this was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which discredited itself by openly campaigning for Yanukovich as an “Orthodox president.” This angered most people and they expressed their indignation. It was then that the very possibility of establishing a state church in Ukraine was discredited. It became clear that there would never be a church in Ukraine that would selflessly serve the government without neglecting or betraying the civil society.

The issues of civilizational identity became paramount to the social existence of the church in *the decade of revolution and war (2010-2020)*. This decade has become the most heroic and, at the same time, the most tragic one in the history of modern Ukraine, for its people and its churches. The Maidan and the Revolution of Dignity (late 2013 to early 2014) gave the people of Ukraine great hopes and expectations for the choice of a European future. The annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the ongoing war in the east of Ukraine, as planned by the Kremlin’s current leaders, should have destroyed those hopes, but instead they gave rise to resistance and defence of their choice. The heroism of Ukrainians helped to hold back the military pressure of Russia in 2014 and has been holding up to the present day. However, the gradual loss by Ukraine of what is most valuable, namely its people and citizenry, as well as the territories and economic potential, in addition to hardships and woes of war, created complex problems. All citizens of Ukraine, regardless of their religious affiliation and preferences, have been affected by these problems.

It is quite difficult to describe all the events and rethinking of this period. Events are not finished yet and history continues in the “here and now.”

*What was rethought during these events?*

We took a fresh look at the sacred (holy) places. Of course, they themselves have not changed. What is given by God cannot be taken away by humans, but they can be used. The Kremlin authorities did attempt to do so by justifying their aggression against Ukraine as their need to rebuild Holy Rus and unify all the lands that were once baptized in the Kyiv baptismal font. In fact, they have been building the “*Russkiy Mir*” on the sufferings of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples ever since they originated this ideology.

We understand that Christian charity must be based on truth and a living relationship. There is nothing so convincing as illustrative examples: the priests of St. Michael’s Golden-domed Cathedral, who had hidden the wounded people from the Maidan Square, were persecuted by the Yanukovich regime. Military chaplains along with their congregation are at

the front for all the years of the war under bullets, in times of sadness and despair. Priests and faithful of different denominations who work together as volunteers and care for people have been affected by the war in eastern Ukraine.

The events of recent years have also led us to believe in miracles. Oleksandr Sagan, professor of Institute of Philosophy of the NAS of Ukraine, is right in saying that such a miracle created by God for Ukraine was the birth of the suffering but native Orthodox Church of Ukraine. OCU is listed as the fifteenth Church in the diptych of canonical Orthodox churches. However, God's miracles on earth are done by human hands. The formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was made possible by the hard work of many generations of the Ukrainians, the goodwill of the Mother Church of Constantinople, and personally by Patriarch Bartholomew, the facilitation of this process by all branches of the government in Ukraine, and above all by the then President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko.

*What trends in religious life are observed today and will most likely persist in the near future?*

Ukraine will remain a multi-denominational country and the Ukrainians will be one of the most religious nations in Europe. Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Eastern-Rite Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, pagan religious organizations, New Age religious organizations, all of them live and interact in Ukraine. As of 2019, there are 35,162 active congregations of different churches and denominations.

Traditionally, the level of religiosity of the western regions of Ukraine is likely to remain much higher than the level of religiosity of the south and east of the country. The central regions will probably retain an intermediate position in terms of religiosity. The civilizational factor of confrontation between the religious denominations will not disappear once and forever, but we hope, it will ease over the time. In the long run, reconciliation between them is inevitable. Among the possible options are forgiveness and reconciliation, or reconciliation without forgiveness, or forgiveness without reconciliation, or situational reconciliation. The latter could be more properly called as reconciliation in the name of one's neighbor.

In the short term, situational reconciliation is most likely to happen as a forced cooperation in critical conditions. The vivid example is the pandemic of COVID-19, which is raging now. This event prompted the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (with the representation of religious communities of different civilizational priorities) to consolidate their appeal to the communities, thereby acknowledging the seriousness of the threat. In the long term, reconciliation is most likely to occur under the model of "reconciliation without forgiveness" when, due to the natural change in the priesthood and

lay people, and the natural spiritual need of humans in each other, the past will give way to the future.

The religiosity of Ukrainians will increasingly shift towards traditional religiosity, namely the religions that have existed in Ukraine for a long time: Orthodoxy, Greek Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, some Protestant denominations (Baptism, Adventism, Pentecostalism, etc.), Islam, Judaism, paganism, etc. Although the New Age religions are not persecuted here, still since the late 1980s and early 1990s, their spiritual activities have decreased significantly. This may be due to the conservatism of Ukrainians. It is possible that these religions have lost the novelty for people without gaining the significance of traditional religions in people's eyes.

Most likely, the model under which church-state relations will develop in Ukraine is not analogous to the model that currently exists in Poland, Romania, and, especially, Russia. Due to high competitiveness, the dynamics of communications in the religious environment, and many complex social problems that religious denominations are involved in, most likely a kind of the American model of state-church relations will be formed here. This was noticed by Professor Jose Casanova at Georgetown University, noting that "Ukraine has formed the most colorful and transparent competitive religious system in Europe, making it the only European country that is coming close to the American model of religious denominationalism." In this vein, we have the courage to foresee that Ukraine is moving towards the creation of a civil religion viewed positively as an aggregate of common meanings, symbols, ideas, and shared visions of the future that should unite society regardless of religious preferences. Most religious organizations in Ukraine will remain socially active, because this is the only way to carry out their mission in society, which is characterized by many events and changes.

Due to the active penetration of religious organizations into the public space of Ukrainian society, the barriers are being broken down not only between religion and politics, but also between religion and education. At present, 204 religious educational institutions of different denominations operate in Ukraine. This process was facilitated by state licensing and accreditation of the specialty of theology. However, the overwhelming number of schools and higher educational institutions in the country will remain secular and the secular schools in which the disciplines of theological content and methodology will be taught as electives. This is due to the fact that according to Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine secondary and high schools are separated from the Church.

A positive and specific feature of religious life in Ukraine is the large number of dialogue venues or sites created by the churches themselves for dialogue with each other and

with society: interconfessional-collegial, denominational-interconfessional, civic-interconfessional, etc. Among them, the dialogues of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations and the All-Ukrainian Council of Religious Associations play a major role.

The peculiarity of these dialogues is that high-level scientists and scholars are involved in their work on a voluntary basis. In fact, the academic environment is integrated into the religious life of the country, and its representatives act as moderators and sometimes facilitators in interfaith communications. The flagship in these issues is the Department of Religious Studies, Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, headed by Professors Anatolii Kolodny and Lyudmila Fylypovych. There are grounds to believe that dialogue venues will continue to function, creating a space for mutual understanding.

We are currently looking forward to a bright future and hope that there are solid grounds for it. In many ways, the war and misery have reconciled the citizens of Ukraine, who have become more tolerant of their outlooks and of each other. Due to the war, illusions about joining in brotherhood with Russia have disappeared. Millions of Ukrainian citizens who previously had this illusion, after coming to know the “Russian World” closely, have moved to the Ukrainian controlled territories. Thus, they made their final choice. Most significantly, according to sociological surveys, an overwhelming majority of the young generation of Ukrainians shares European values and European geopolitical choices. The ideologies and life strategies offered by Russia for young people are alien and absurd. These trends are quite telling and they give hope that the difficult tragic times that the country is experiencing now will recede in time. The coming decade for Ukrainian people will be filled with love, prayers, peaceful activities, and care not only for their nearest and dearest, but also for their distant neighbors.