Review of Krawchuk and Bremer's "Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis"

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Separatist rebels have been fighting government troops and volunteer brigades in eastern Ukraine since April 2014 in clashes that have registered the loss of more than 9,700 lives. That year the Minsk Protocol, secured under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), stipulated a cease-fire, heavy weapon pull-backs from the front lines, and a political resolution of the conflict. The agreement has been observed only fitfully as outbreaks of skirmishes and artillery fire have persisted. As this work under review was being composed and in publication process, the far-from-frozen warring continued around the separatist-held eastern Ukrainian cities of Donetsk and Gorlovka, as well as the countryside east of the Azov port city of Mariupol. An International Committee of the Red Cross delegation to Ukraine informed that over a thousand people had gone missing as a result of the conflict in the Donbass, Ukraine’s embattled eastern region bordering Russia. A cyber-attack blackout and a stand-off at the frontier with occupied Crimea over imports compounded the deep-seated mistrust between Kiev and the Russian side. At that time responsible observers of the conflict were justifiably criticizing news outlets for under-reporting this local war of international implications. As recently as February 2017 Ukrainian troops were placed on high alert status along the 250 miles of front lines in the Donbas, yet the global eye continues to be relatively blind to ongoing hostile engagements that cyclically flare like a trick re-igniting birthday candle. The causes, course, and nature of the conflict need to be known in the widest and deepest perspectives possible. This reviewer of the baby boomer generation has known ideological wars both cold and hot, during which news items reporting decolonization bloodshed were common;
millennials have come to assume that conflicts of global impact come with a clearly ascribable religious component. In early March of this year an on-the-lines pastor asserted, “This is not a political war, but a spiritual war.” This historically-grounded study of the current hostilities in Ukraine involving issues of ecclesial and national identity, church governance, conflict hermeneutics, and ecumenical relations amply supplies the need to inform of the religious dimensions and stakes of this armed conflict.

Of course, much of learning is unlearning. In his overview of the historical background of religion in Ukraine, Thomas Bremer disabuses readers who have come to view Ukraine as neatly divided into western and eastern parts; rather, Bremer portrays the country as a unified state consisting of several distinct regions, each having its own particular traditions and historical trajectory. Also in this initial framework chapter Bremer describes with clarity and aplomb historical and socio-political factors that have impacted the following churches: Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Included is a table of statistics providing the number of parishes, monasteries, monks/nun, ministers, and periodicals of each, plus pertinent information on other religious bodies. Bremer concludes that the inner dynamism of each communion must be attended, with the issue of the canonicity of each church—or of any proposed communion of churches—being of prime importance.

Yury P. Avvakumov, under his rubric of Ukraine as “unexpected nation,” focuses on Ukrainian Greek Catholics of past and present as not only “unexpected” ones (being the faithful of a previously outlawed then resurrected underground Church), but also as undesired ones in international dialogue. This unfortunate status owes itself to an externally ascribed identity for
the UGCC as a bridge church between the Roman Catholic West and the Eastern Orthodox East. Having experienced its history as more of a doormat for the larger Churches than a bridge, this Church parlayed its unexpected grace of handicap-to-advantage liminality to awaken itself and sufficiently mature to now rightfully claim a place at the table of churches intent upon reconciliation. “Reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christianity is [henceforth] attainable not despite Greek Catholics and not through the, but together with them” (p.37): to understand and appreciate this affirmation is to understand and appreciate the gist of Avvakumov’s valuable contribution. [As an illuminating aside from this reviewer’s experience, the Right Rev. Dr. Andriy Chirovsky, Founding Director of the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, tells of traveling in Ukraine soon after the Soviet Union’s collapse and being approached by a believer seeking an Orthodox blessing. After Fr. Andriy informed that he was a Greek Catholic clergyman, the confounded supplicant responded, “Oh that is quite impossible because we are taught that you do not exist!”]

This first section on the historical evolution of Kyivan Christianity since the 10th century is followed by a section exploring the pivotal issue of autocephaly, or ecclesiastical independence. In his overview of the canonical dimension of autocephaly in church order—a model of lucidity in itself—Paul Brusanowski concludes to the disqualification of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Churches as viable dialogue partners with the Moscow Patriarchate regarding official recognition of self-ruling status among the canonical Orthodox churches (the former on the basis of its schismatic foundation, the latter for its canonically unlawful origin). The UOC-MP alone can seek compromise with the Moscow Patriarchate in an effort to achieve autocephaly (p.72). “Leave them wanting more” might be a
recommended performance aspiration in the entertainment world, but that ideal does not translate well into the realm of academia: this reviewer would have appreciated an added paragraph or two of speculation regarding possible rationales by which the Moscow Patriarchate would justify awarding autocephaly to its affiliate in Ukraine.

Alfons Brüning, after tracing the historical dimension of Orthodox Autocephaly in Ukraine, provides a worthy service to the academy, the ecumenical forum, and to those practicing their faith at the interface of ecclesial jurisdictions in prescribing respect for the complexity, close proximity, and the “entangled” relationships of the traditions involved. Brüning’s felicitous locution, “History and memory are like two sisters living in mutual jealousy” (p.96), prompts reflection on how memory is a sibling much wounded by self-interest. (More on this point below.)

Part III treats the heated identity debates generated within the transformation of Russia-Ukraine relations during the Ukrainian crisis. Natalia Kochan contributes as a perceptive commentator on (or midwife for?) an aborning Ukrainian identity in its coming to term, both socially and politically. Hers is an optimistic prognosis for a sufficiently matured nation able to take leave of former Soviet/Russian domination.

Lidiya Lozova’s contribution is an eight-page micro gem of how her parish, in faith, negotiates the vicissitudes of macro events while managing to avoid divisions within itself.

Part IV shifts the focus of attention to Russian Orthodox official and unofficial interpretations of the war. Mikhail Suslov tracks the transformation in the mind of the Moscow Patriarchate from the historical and Ukraine-enfolding “Holy Rus” ideal to a full-fledged buy-in of the nationalist/isolationist, anti-Western “Russia World” ideologeme, and in doing so shifts to border specifications that employ spatial rather than temporal terms.
Cyril Hovorun provided the genesis of the “Russian World” concept as a language-based strategy to overcome post-Soviet disintegration; the concept then evolved to inform an ominous religion-added, neo-imperialistic project. Hovorun advocates divorcing “Russian World” from notions of “civilization” to expose and dismantle the former as divisive and death-inducing ideology that it is.

The concluding section considers the ecumenical implications of the Euromaidan and the armed conflict with Russia. Andrii Krawchuk identified the desire for integration with Europe as the animating spirit of the Euromaidan. Citing Hovorun, it was a spirit born and nurtured in reaction to Church-implicated corruption, abuse, deceit, and manipulation that was bringing the country to the brink of collapse. Krawchuk also espied within the UOC-MP support for Ukrainian sovereignty and Orthodox unity, plus transparency and accountability in church and civic life. Upon such commitments active participants in Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity can fashion a new ecclesiological modeling of being church, even amidst the uncertainties of armed Russian military reaction that such commitments provoked.

Katrin Boeckh, treats of post-Euromaidan ecumenical blossoming in areas that had been imbued with the spirit of the Orange Revolution (2004-2005) as contrasted with religious suppression of non-Russian churches by militant rebels for whom religious diversity is a threat. The focused and harmonious relations of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO), established in 1996, is proposed as a salient example. Her exuberant conviction, “The formulation of a common political vision across denominational boundaries reflects nothing less than the essence of true ecumenism” (p.212), seems somewhat of a politicized reduction of the essential nature of the ecumenical mission which is to incarnate a
Spirit-guided full communion of churches--the Moscow Patriarchate included--rather than effect enthusiastic consensus in civic envisioning.

This reviewer (Ruthenian Catholic) read this book in light of the perspectives of the eminent Byzantine liturgical historian and veteran ecumenist, Robert Taft, S.J. Taft counsels that the healing of memories is a particularly difficult undertaking. As an introduction to a set of hermeneutical principles he considers essential for being accountable to the past, he offers—with just a very small metaphorical grain of salt, “A nation is a group of people who hold the same mistaken view of their common history,” and, “every nation is a community of shared remembering and [culpable] forgetting.” The healing of memories requires putting aside mythologizing in favor of confronting the common past with historical objectivity and truth, owning up to responsibilities, seeking forgiveness, and then moving on to a better future.¹ Again taking a page from Taft: “For ecumenism to advance, we must put aside our own limited, often hagiographical view of our past and seek to understand how others see us. Since criticism, like charity, should begin at home.”² The resonance among the minds of Taft and authors of this work is heartening and generative of hope.

The couple of criticisms registered above share the very minor level of faulting a triumphant symphonic performance by noting that an oboist fleetingly fumbled a reed change between movements. This book is an essential aid to researchers in the areas of East European, Religious, Political and Conflict Studies, plus to journalists, teachers and upper-level college students straining to clarify proper discernment of the form and significance of the traditional three-bar Eastern Christian Cross of Christ within the proverbial fog of war in Ukraine.

¹From Taft’s contribution to *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, (New York:Fordham University Press, 2013, p.30.)