Similar Origins, Different Outcomes: Religion in Ukraine and Belarus

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Borderlands

Ukraine means 'Borderland': Ukraine and and Belarus lie along the basic fault line in Europe between the Catholic/Protestant West and the Orthodox/Muslim East. The question 'What is Ukraine?' is still a lively one in that country: is it part of 'Europe'; part of Russia; or a state in its own right, seeking its 'special path'?

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the largest country in Europe after Russia, and at its greatest extent, in the mid-seventeenth century, it included the whole of modern Belarus; western, northern and north-eastern Ukraine; and Russian territory to beyond Smolensk. Roman Catholicism was the traditionally dominant religion of the Belarusian nobility and of a large part of the population of western Belarus. Most of the population of eastern Belarus and Ukraine, however, were Orthodox.

Meanwhile the south-western part of today's Ukraine, including Odessa, was part of the Ottoman Empire; and the more than three centuries' independent flourishing of the Crimean Khanate (1441-1783) shows that Muslims are indigenous and historically rooted in this area, in contrast to the later arrivals in Western Europe: the first recorded mosque in Crimea was built in 1262.

The Moscow Patriarchate (Orthodox) was founded in 1589, and the reaction in Poland was the Union of Brest 1595-96 and the creation of the Greek Catholic Church: within this church the Orthodox population of Belarus and Ukraine retained their Byzantine liturgy in the Church Slavonic language but entered into communion with Rome and recognised the supremacy of the Pope. They are popularly known as 'Uniates'.

Poland disappeared in the eighteenth century, partitioned between Russia, Prussia and the Habsburgs.

In the area under Russian rule, which corresponded more or less to today's Belarus, pressure on the Uniates led to their decline, and the Greek Catholic Church was abolished in 1839; but even at that point it has been estimated that three quarters of the Belarusian population belonged to the Uniate Church.

By contrast, in the area under Habsburg rule, which corresponded roughly to today's north-western Ukraine, the Uniates flourished and increased in number. But eastern Ukraine, under independent Cossack rule, became and remained staunchly Orthodox, until it was industrialised and secularised in the twentieth century. Still today there is a prevailing general difference in Ukraine between the west and the east of the country as far as religiosity, frequency of church attendance and parish membership are concerned: in the western regions these are at Central European levels (or even somewhat higher), while in the eastern regions they are some four times lower.

Ukraine as a whole has traditionally known a high level of religious observance (see Wanner, 2003), and research is now showing that levels of religious activity in Ukraine even during the Soviet period were much higher than previously thought (Yelensky, 2010; Mitrokhin, 2010).

Popular Religiosity: Orthodox?

The Orthodox heritage in Ukraine is obvious, and some researchers include Ukraine when arguing that today a new Orthodox culture is developing in the east of Europe (see Naletova, 2009).

However, Ukraine stands out amongst Orthodox countries as having an unusually high degree of intra-Orthodox pluralism. In the postcommunist period three main Orthodox churches have been in competition: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC).

Claims by these churches themselves about the strength of their following and also declarations of affiliation to one or other of these churches on the part of the population need to be interpreted with great caution. There are parishes which register under one jurisdiction, declare their allegiance to another, and in fact ignore both (see Mitrokhin, 2010). The UOC-MP comes out on top statistically because it has the largest number of parishes, monasteries, clergy and other measurables. Nevertheless most actual and potential Orthodox in Ukraine, who together make up the majority of religious believers, identify with an Orthodoxy which looks to Kiev as its centre; some are in autocephalous jurisdictions already (the UOC-KP and the UAOC), but there are many others who may formally belong to parishes of the Moscow jurisdiction but nevertheless aspire after autocephalous status (Yurash, 2005b; Yelensky, 2010).

Greek Catholicism in Ukraine and Belarus'

Meanwhile in western Ukraine the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) has strong claims to representing Ukrainian identity.

In Belarus it even had potential as a new national church in the early 1990s. The 1990 law making Belarusian the official language of the republic and the 1991 declaration of Belarusian independence generated a new attitude toward the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Some religiously uncommitted young people turned to the Uniate Church in reaction to the resistance of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic hierarchies to accepting the Belarusian language as a medium of communication with their flock. Its adherents advertised it as a 'national' church. Modest growth of the Uniate Church was accompanied by heated public debates of both a theological and a political character. Overall, however, national activists have had little success in trying to generate new interest in the Uniate Church, because the original allegiance of the Uniate Church was clearly to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the reestablished church is viewed by some in the Orthodox Church in Belarus with suspicion, as being a vehicle of both Warsaw and the Vatican, but also because of the policies of the Lukashenko regime.

Lukashenko and a Belarusian Ideology

The ideology favoured by Lukashenko has been called 'archaic and patriarchal', with a stress on old peasant values and village life.

One element in this has been, in the words of one observer, that Lukashenko has so to speak,
exported the national pride of his people to Russia, where Russian leaders nostalgic for empire were eager to believe that the two nations might one day reunite. In exchange for indulging Russian ideas of Belarusian nationlessness and attempting to spread them among the Belarusians themselves, Lukashenko received very cheap supplies of Russian natural gas.

However, Lukashenko has in fact resisted any Russian overtures at actual reunification of the two countries, and since 2008 has been making overtures to the EU, partly because of the worsening economic situation in Belarus.

Lukashenko has called himself an 'Orthodox atheist', and it is not clear how far the regime endorses even Orthodoxy as a favoured religion.

A National Church for Ukraine?

A lively question during the entire period of postcommunist Ukrainian independence has been whether Ukraine can, or should, recognise a 'national church'. The question has been raised as to what role the Greek Catholic Church would or should play in the formation of such a church. In Ukraine,
Greek Catholics see themselves as an independent autocephalous church. On the one hand Rome acts as a protective shield; on the other hand Eastern-rite Catholics feel like outsiders in the huge Latin world. They also harbour some long-held grievances against the Vatican. (Fagan and Shchipkov, 2001a, p.203)

In an interview in June 2001 Lubomyr Husar, Archbishop Major of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics, gave the impression that the UGCC was more interested in becoming part of a future united Ukrainian church than in asserting its own distinctive Catholic identity.[(1)]

[(1)] Defending the Pope's visit to Ukraine, Husar explained that the future of Christian unity did not mean the 'reunion' of all Orthodox under Rome, but the full realisation of 'true Orthodoxy'. The latter implied cultural integrity, which must preserve the Byzantine legacy of the areas once known as Kievan Rus'. Union with Rome should not do away with the traditions of Orthodoxy, but should exalt it, as the Greek Catholics did. 'If there were to be only one Church of Christ in Ukraine, founded by St Prince Vladimir, and in relation with the Roman pontiff, we would like to be part of that church' (Walters, 2001, p.150).

Ukraine: its Multiconfessional Nature

In fact Ukraine has its own distinctive character in Eastern Europe as a multiconfessional country where no exclusive 'religio-national mythology' has

developed or, arguably, is likely to develop in the future; it has religious pluralism (see Wanner, 2003; for a comprehensive survey of the religious makeup of Ukraine, with tables and maps, see Krindatch, 2003). As well as Orthodoxy and Greek Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, Judaism and New Religious Movements are present there.

Protestantism in Ukraine

Early Protestantism was present in Ukraine from the sixteenth century, originally in the form of ethno-confessional groups (German, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian), primarily in the west of the country. In the 1920s the first Ukrainian Lutheran and Reformed communities appeared in western Ukraine, supported by this time not only by the churches of Europe but also by the Ukrainian diaspora in the USA and Canada.

Late Protestantism (Evangelicals and Pentecostals) appeared in Ukraine from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ukrainian Baptists were prominent in dissent in Soviet times. In Soviet and post-Soviet times the factors which have led individuals in Ukraine to convert to various forms of Evangelical Protestantism include the fact that converts tend to build mutually supportive communities which not only affirm members' faith and offer moral support but also provide an economic and material safety-net (Wanner, 2003).

The most recent Protestant wave has been that of the Charismatics, growing mostly in the east and south-east. Charismatics actively publicise themselves, with missionary work and types of church service which are untypical for traditional Ukrainian Protestantism: public events, mass healing sessions, rock concerts. They are big stars in the mass media, scaring people with the prospect of radical confessional changes in Ukraine. We should remember, however, that neo-Protestant organisations tend to exaggerate their own statistics, and that their communities are located mainly in the big cities of east and south-east Ukraine, where there was a very low level of religiosity before the disintegration of the USSR. The Charismatics tend to be regarded in a negative light by the traditional Protestant communities, which are less active than the Charismatics in missionary work, less receptive to religious innovation, and less open to society (Lyubashchenko, 2010).

Protestatism in Ukraine is still growing, but at a decreasing rate: arguably the post-Soviet Protestant 'boom' is over. The number of registered Protestant communities in Ukraine is high and growing; but we need to remember that this multiplication is often the result of splits and reaffiliations and of the emergence of smaller 'daughter churches', and that the membership of the average Protestant community is much smaller than that of an Orthodox or Catholic parish (Lyubashchenko, 2010).

Some aspects of the orientation of Protestants are affecting prospects for their growth in Ukraine. One issue is the Western origin of their faith and the nature of their continuing or renewed ties with Western organisations (see Lyubashkhenko, 2010). With this issue are tied the question of how far they can develop their own independent contextual theology and the continuing lure of emigration. Ukrainian Baptists show a multifaceted and ambiguous reaction to the West (Long, 2007). For them the West is 'an object both of admiration and of distaste', a source both of assistance and of problems.

Protestants still working out their attitude to social and political realities in Ukraine (Lyubashchenko, 2010). the positions of the Protestant churches in the political, social and religious life of the country are gradually strengthening, but the various denominations have ambiguous attitudes towards politics and public processes. There is some tension between early and later Protestantism in this respect: Charismatics are involved in social and political life, the media, and wealth creation; Old Protestants tend to be inward-looking and identified with their ethnic groups; Pentecostals and Evangelicals tend to be world-renouncing, as they were in Soviet times.

Muslims in Ukraine

As noted above, Islam in Ukraine today has medieval roots; the majority of Muslims in Ukraine are Crimean Tatars. Muslims in Ukraine are being influenced by foreign religious organisations, who are often seen as reformist and fundamentalist; there is a process of politicisation of Islamic activism and an ideological clash between traditional institutions and newly founded Islamic communities; there are those who espouse 'Euroislam' (see Yakubovych, 2010; Czerwonnaja, 2007; Muratova, 2009). Hizb ut-Tahrir is the most active of the political Islamic groups operating in Ukraine. During the last few years it has organised a number of conferences on the question establishing the Caliphate. Moreover, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir declare that their activities are peaceful.

Religious Pluralism: Contrasting Belarus and Ukraine

As noted earlier, Belarus is the scene of historical conflict between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. The postcommunist revival of religion has also brought about a revival of this old historical conflict, which is compounded by the two denominations' links to institutions outside the republic. The Belarusian Orthodox Church is headed by an ethnic Russian, Metropolitan Filaret, and is part of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Roman Catholic archdiocese of Belarus is headed by an ethnic Pole, Archbishop Kazimir Sviontak, who has close ties to the church in Poland. Fledgling Belarusian religious movements are having difficulties asserting themselves within these two major religious institutions because of the historical practice of preaching in Russian in the Orthodox churches and in Polish in the Catholic churches. Attempts to introduce the Belarusian language into religious life, including the liturgy, also have had limited success because of the low usage of the Belarusian language in everyday life.

At the same time, however, there is evidence (noted by, amongst others, the Forum 18 News Sevice) of grassroots interdenominational solidarity: as state pressure steadily mounts, religious believers are increasingly putting aside their confessional differences in organising resistance to persecution of particular denominations. (I shall say more about the nature of this persecution later; it is monitored by Forum 18). Recently the Protestant New Life Church organised a hunger strike in defence of its property. Catholics also prayed for New Life, and drew on that community's example by declaring their own hunger strike for permission to build a new church. Belarusians typically do not regard their religious differences as divisions. Several have suggested to Forum 18 that any insistence upon affiliation to a particular confession (or none) is characteristic of successive historical attempts by external

powers to manipulate the Belarusian people.

Meanwhile in Ukraine religious pluralism has led to real religious freedom, where ecumenical contacts and cooperative activity have become 'almost the norm' in interconfessional relations since 1996 (Yurash, 2005a, p.199).

Legal Position of Religion

Ukraine has never revised its Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations (*Zakon pro svobodu sovisti ta relihiini orhanizatsii*) adopted in 1991 on the early wave of democratic enthusiasm. This is in contrast to what has happened in some other former Soviet republics where new laws on freedom of conscience have been introduced which have limited the legal scope for Protestants, and particularly for Evangelical communities (including Lithuania (1995), Russia (1997), Belarus (2002) and Moldova (2007)).

By contrast with Ukraine, the 2002 Belarusian religion law is described by Forum 18 as 'the most repressive in Europe'. Compulsory state registration breaks the international human rights standards Belarus has agreed to abide by. Other legal restrictions include the following. Some religions, including the Greek Catholic Church, are prevented from registering as a nationwide association, with consequent restrictions. All religious activity by groups must have official permission, and be limited to one geographical area. Religious activities, including worship, that are either regular or large-scale are banned in private homes. All places of worship must be state-approved. Foreign religious workers, especially Protestant and Catholic, have been routinely expelled from the country. Belarus' National Security Concept, signed by President Lukashenko on 17 July 2001, includes among fundamental factors posing a threat to national security in the humanitarian sphere 'the activity of foreign religious organisations and missionaries to monopolise the spiritual life of society', and it also calls for the counteraction of their 'negative influence'.

The authorities in Belarus have crushed independent political, business and social organisations inside the country, and fear the potential of the largest remaining internal group of independent organisations: the religious organisations. Protestants have complained that the authorities attempt to stop them speaking publicly on general social issues. This fear is reinforced by the fact that a number of key figures in the opposition are also committed Christians, who manifest the grassroots interdenominational solidarity I noted earlier.

To date Belarusian religious policies remain unchanged, despite Belarus' attempts to seek a new relationship with the European Union (EU) as an alternative to Russia. Incremental growth in restrictions under Lukashenko - particularly in the wake of the 2002 Religion Law - has in many respects brought Belarusian believers back to the late Soviet period. One Belarusian Protestant describes the state's religious policy as 'Killing a frog by warming up the water very gradually'.

Ukraine: Social Approval of Religion is Very High

In the 2000s in Ukraine churches and other religious organisations have remained the social institutions enjoying the highest level of trust in society: about two-thirds of

those polled trust them, as opposed to about one-third trusting public organisations (courts, the police, parliament, local councils) (Yelensky, 2010).

A notable feature of the new cultural climate in Ukraine is that religion has met with strong social approval and has become a sort of legitimising behaviour, the mark of a respectable citizen. Not only officials, politicians and public figures but also stars from the worlds of pop music and sport who are very popular among young people will emphasise that they belong to a church. (Yelensky, 2010, p.213)

And denominational identity does not seem to matter: the religion in question

is a faintly articulated set of symbols, signs, holidays, customs, practices and fragments of historical memory rather than a well-composed system of confessional belief (Yelensky, 2010, p.213).
The situation is harder to read in Belarus, but one interesting phenomenon there is the great popularity of faith-based popular music.
Christian bands often appear on state television's pop music programmes and several Hare Krishna groups - among them rap artists - have also performed at a prestigious music festival. Asked by Forum 18 *whether the prevalence of religious themes in Belarusian popular music might be the consequence of extensive state restrictions on organised church activity, one lead singer of a Christian band remarked 'if they try to stop God one way, we'll try another'.* (Geraldine Fagan, 'Belarus: Religious Freedom Survey', December 2006, *Forum 18 News Service,* (http://www.forum18.org)

Compare this with what I said earlier about grassroots interdenominational solidarity in Belarus and the authorities' fear of the political potential of the churches.

Religion and Politics in Ukraine

In Ukraine, as opposed to Belarus, religious affiliation is no disadvantage for political ambition; rather the reverse. Orthodox and Protestants alike are prominent in politics. The evangelical 'Embassy of God' has successfully promoted a theology of prosperity and success in Ukraine. The politician Leonid Chernovetsky joined the church on the condition that it would support his campaign for the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) both financially and in prayer. He was duly elected. Chernovetsky's career took off and he was subsequently elected mayor of Kiev. Meanwhile in Crimea Muslims are prominent in political life.

In postcommunist Ukraine politicians regularly appeal to religious organisations for support and endorsement, and the plural religious nature of Ukraine continues to present politicians with choices and dilemmas: 'the regional nature of Ukraine obliges the authorities to take all political and religious interests into consideration' (Mitrokhin, 2010).

In the 2004 presidential election the campaign by Viktor Yanukovych failed partly because he and his supporters misinterpreted the evidence about the religious affiliation of the electorate. His opponent, Viktor Yuschenko, 'pursued the hitherto unusual policy of completely refusing to give electoral or moral preference to any of

the churches' (Yurash, 2005b, p. 368). Meanwhile Yanukovych forged an alliance with the UOC-MP as part of the explicitly pro-Moscow orientation of his programme. But the UOC-MP proved unable to provide Yanukovych with enough support, while all the other major religious organisations managed to cooperate successfully to back Yuschenko (Mitrokhin, 2010).

Relations with the World-Wide Church Community The three main Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) have continued to reposition themselves mutually throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, and they also need to position themselves with regard to the the three external ecclesiastical authorities with an interest in Ukraine: the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Vatican (see Mitrokhin, 2010; Tonoyan and Payne, 2010). As I noted earlier, Protestants also have problems with orientating themselves in world-wide Protestant community, and Muslims are engaged in the confrontation between indigenous traditions and 'fundamentalism' from abroad.

In Belarus in early 1990 Fr Alexander Nadson (since 1986 Apostolic Visitator for Greek Catholics in Belarus) brought humanitarian aid from Belarusians abroad to their compatriots at home still suffering as a result of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. He was surprised to meet young Belarusians who said they were Greek Catholics. On 11 March 1990 he celebrated Minsk's first liturgy in the national language.

Recent Developments In the early postcommunist years the Russian Orthodox Church and the UOC-MP engaged in loud 'anti-Uniate' rhetoric, and in 2008 the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole was still exploiting the image of the 'aggressive Uniates' as justification for its unwillingness to engage in real dialogue with the Vatican. However, this discourse has now abated, as a result of several factors: the absence for a decade now of any real evidence of conflicts between Greek Catholics and Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox in the region; the death in April 2005 of Pope John Paul II, whom the Moscow Patriarchate saw as responsible for the activities of the 'Uniates' in 1990; the death in December 2008 of Patriarch Aleksi of the Russian Orthodox Church, for whom the loss of the western Ukrainian dioceses was the birth trauma of his period as Patriarch; and the accession of the new Patriarch, Kirill, for whom this event is not traumatic in the same way and who is in any case more sympathetic towards Catholicism than Aleksi was (Mitrokhin 2010).

Patriarch Kirill seems unlikely, however, to want to allow the formation of an independent and unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church; the schism in Orthodoxy in Ukraine is therefore likely to continue. This may cause further complications in inter-Orthodox relations, especially with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which wants a resolution of the non-canonical situation in Ukraine (Tonoyan and Payne, 2010).

Meanwhile there has been a shift in the attitude of the leadership of the UOC-MP towards dialogue with other churches in Ukraine. In 2005 the expert Andrij Yurash saw some hard choices ahead for the UOC-MP, with which Yanukovych maintained his ill-fated electoral alliance:
The UOC-MP could seek to obtain autocephaly, or at least autonomy; it could give up its categorical claims to exclusivity; it could initiate dialogue with the other Orthodox jurisdictions; it could develop its own spiritual values and stop endorsing current

salient characteristics of the Moscow Patriarchate such as extreme conservatism bordering on fundamentalism, antiecumenism and radical mysticism. If it decides not to pursue any of these possibilities, however, the UOC-MP leadership will in effect be renouncing the goal of integrating itself into Ukrainian society. (Yurash, 2005b, p.383)

Over the last four years the UOC-MP has started slowly drifting towards greater autonomy with less regard for Moscow-based church politics, and towards a greater readiness to negotiate with its rival Orthodox Churches. There also seems to be a growing emphasis within the UOC-MP on the fact that it aspires to be a specifically Ukrainian Church, including autocephaly (Mitrokhin, 2010).

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Statistics

Belarus

Before 1917 Belorussia had 2466 religious communities, including 1650 Orthodox, 127 Roman Catholic, 657 Jewish, 32 Protestant and several Muslim.

In the early 1990s the statistics for Belorussia were as follows. Orthodox: betwen 60 and 80 per cent. Catholics: between 8 and 20 per cent; one estimate identified 25 per cent of the Catholics as ethnic Poles.

In 1993 one Belarusian publication reported the numbers of religious communities as follows: Orthodox, 787; Roman Catholic, 305; Pentecostal, 170; Baptist, 141; Old Believer, 26; Seventh-Day Adventist, 17; Apostolic Christian, 9; Uniate, 8; New Apostolic, 8; Muslim, 8; Jewish, 7; and other, 15.

in January 2007 figures from the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) showed that approximately 50 per cent of Belarusians considered themselves religious. These comprised: approximately 80 per cent belonging to the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC); 14 per cent Catholics; 4 per cent members of eastern religious groups (including Muslims, Hare Krishnas, and Baha'i); and 2 per cent Protestant (including Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, and Lutherans). Of those who identified themselves as Belarusian Orthodox or Roman Catholic, only 18 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, regularly attended religious services. There were also

members of the Greek Catholic Church and of Orthodox groups other than the BOC. Jewish groups claimed that between 50,000 and 70,000 persons identified themselves as Jewish. Most Jews were not religiously active.

The same source in January 2007 reported 3103 religious organisations of 25 religious confessions and denominations in the country, including 2953 registered religious communities and 150 national and confessional organisations (monasteries, brotherhoods, missionaries etc.). These included 1399 Belarusian Orthodox, 493 Evangelical Christian, 440 Roman Catholic, 267 Evangelical Christian Baptist, 74 Seventh-day Adventist, 54 Full Gospel Christian, 33 Old Believer, 29 Jewish, 27 Lutheran, 26 Jehovah's Witness, 24 Muslim, 21 New Apostolic Church, 17 Progressive Judaism, 13 Greek Catholic, 9 Apostolic Christians, 6 Hare Krishna, 5 Baha'i, 5 Christ's Church, 4 Mormon, 2 Messianic, 1 Reform Church, 1 Presbyterian, 1 Armenian Apostolic, 1 Latin Catholic, and 1 St Jogan Church communities.

Ukraine

Recent figures for Ukraine show the following. The figures are denominational self-identification (percentage) and number of congregations respectively.

- Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC-MP): 29.4; 11,539.
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate) (UOC-KP): 39.8; 4128.
- Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC): 2.8; 1184.
- Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC): 14.1; 3570.
- Protestants and Evangelicals: 2.4; 8500.
- Roman Catholics: 1.7; 907.
- Muslims: 0.6; 1135.
- Jews: 0.2; 268.
- Others: 2.0; 1584.

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