

CRISIS IN SOCIETY AND RELIGION IN UKRAINE

by **Patricia Herlihy**

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Introduction

Few, if any, would advocate a return to the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Yet, one of the ironies of history is that those oppressive systems kept in check nationalistic and religious antagonisms or at least visible violent clashes such as we are witnessing in the former Soviet states and in the former Yugoslavia. This entire series of lectures being held here at Rosemont College testifies to that sad reality.

The Communist ideology, like Christianity, claimed to have the power to forge a universal brotherhood so that it was above nationalism. Now that nation states have emerged from the implosion of the Communist Soviet Union, religious as well as ethnic clashes have broken out nearly everywhere. In Ukraine, to date, the tensions have been principally sectarian and apocalyptic. And nowhere else has the religious situation for Eastern Christians changed more radically than in Ukraine.

Among the successor states of the former Soviet Union, after Russia, Ukraine has the largest population with approximately 52 million persons, that is, roughly the size of modern France or the state of Texas. It is the third largest in size after Russia and Kazakhstan. In addition to its significant size, it has the distinction of being a nation-state in its present contours for the very first time. The concept or idea of independent Ukraine has existed at least since the nineteenth century. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and during the chaos of the Civil War, Ukraine proclaimed itself to be an independent nation. But soon Soviet power overwhelmed this independent state.

Indeed, being part of a larger political entity has marked the entire history of Ukraine. A brief excursion into the past will help illuminate when and how it acquired the various religions it now professes. In the distant past, if we go back to the eighth and ninth century, we learn that the ancestors of present-day Ukrainians, Russians and Byelorussians lived together as East Slavs in an extended territory around Kiev. Kievan Rus, as that loose federation of Eastern Slav principalities was called, over a period of four hundred years, created a wealthy commercial urbanized state, with a high level of culture.

One of the reasons for its high culture is the fact that in 989 Grand Prince Vladimir (or Volodymyr as Ukrainians call him), the ruler of Kievan Rus, became a Christian and forced his people to accept his religion. The missionaries who succeeded in converting these pagan Slavs came from Greek Byzantium. This explains why the East Slavs became Greek Orthodox Christians instead of Western Latin Christians. From Byzantium they inherited not only the form of their Christianity, but also their alphabet, literature, arts and crafts, and their world view.

In the 13th century, however, because of internal dissention and external invasions by the Mongols out of the east, Kievan Rus disintegrated. Some East Slavs moved south and west, and eventually, in the middle ages, fell under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian State. Others moved to the northeast to find safety in thick forests. Over the ensuing centuries this diaspora resulted in the evolution of three distinct languages and cultures: those who fell under Polish-Lithuanian rule became Ukrainians and Byelorussians, and those who went north eventually created a new state, Muscovy, and they became Russians. The once unified East Slavs splintered into these three close, but distinct, ethnic groups.

To follow then briefly the fate of the people who began in the 19th century to be called Ukrainians, we can note that after being under Lithuanian rule for centuries, in 1569 Lithuania transferred territory inhabited by Ukrainians to Poland. Thereafter, much of Ukrainian history became commingled with the history of Poland; even their language came to reflect Polish influence. Just as the land had been fragmented, so too was their Christian religion. Under Polish influence, at Brest-Litovsk in 1596, a number of Orthodox Ukrainian bishops, including the metropolitan of Kiev, linked themselves with Rome rather than Moscow. Rome permitted the Uniates, as they were called, to retain the Eastern-rite Liturgy, the use of the Slavonic language in church, and the married clergy.

Such a compromise reflected both a partial assimilation with the Poles, and yet it also signified resistance to total assimilation. Just as the Roman Catholicism of the Poles appeared to be a badge of nationalism, so too did the Ukrainians retain their badge of national culture by being Uniates.

In the seventeenth century when much of Ukraine came under Russian rule (1686), many of the higher clergy returned to Orthodoxy so then they came under the patriarchate of Moscow. As a reward, Ukrainian clergy were co-opted into the hierarchy, so in effect there was a process of Russification and integration of the Ukrainian church into the Russian church. Only the western part of present-day Ukraine remained under Polish rule and remained Uniate.

When Russia, Prussia and Austria divided up Poland in the late 18th century, even more Ukrainians who had been in Poland came under the Russian flag.

But many of these Ukrainians were Uniates who could not be assimilated into the Russian Orthodox Church because of their allegiance to the Pope. It was this Uniate Church in Western Ukraine and, later in the twentieth century, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church which gave its support to the secular national movement.

To summarize: after the fall of Kiev, Ukrainians were never to become a single unified independent state until the present. Until now Ukrainians were divided--living either within Russia, the Soviet Union, or in Poland, in Austria, or in Czechoslovakia with even thinner scatterings elsewhere. And of course I am not even speaking of the large number of Ukrainians who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emigrated to the new world: North and South America.

Unlike the Russians who in the vast majority were Orthodox, Ukrainians were either Orthodox or Uniates, as we have seen as a result of whether they were under Polish or Russian rule. Indeed to be Orthodox was to be anti-Polish; and to be Uniate was to be anti-Russian.

Ukrainian Religious Experience under the Soviet Regime

As is well known, all religions suffered persecution in the 1920s and 30s in the Soviet Union. One of two main reasons for religious persecution was that religion served as an opposing ideology to Marxism. The Communist goal was the elimination of religious belief and the inculcation of atheism. So religion per se was undesirable. The other reasons were that religion also tended to reinforce national identities which were supposed to disappear under the universal brotherhood of the proletariat. The Communist goal was to eliminate both religion and national loyalties, including at first even Russian nationalism. Religion and nationalism were considered reactionary forces by Communists. The best way to attack a national culture was to destroy religion.

Russian Orthodox Ukrainians suffered along with the rest of the Orthodox Church members, but Uniates were persecuted even more relentlessly because there was also the fear that, by recognizing the Pope in the Vatican, Ukrainians might receive support from outside the Soviet Union. In 1919 after the declaration of an independent Ukraine, a third form of an Eastern Christian Church was established. This was the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church. It was supported by the lower clergy and the intelligentsia while the upper clergy remained loyal to the Russian patriarchal church.

The supporters of Autocephaly declared themselves free not only politically from the Russians, but also religiously. In retaliation, the Russian Orthodox church in 1921 defrocked all the autocephalous clergy. Nonetheless, the First All-Ukrainian Sobor or Council of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church ordained an archpriest as a bishop by some clerics and laity laying hands on him. This departure from Orthodox practice resulted in the refusal of other Orthodox churches to recognize the canonic validity of its episcopate. Even without universal recognition, however, in a few years the autocephalous church had thirty bishops, about 1,500 priests, and a following of three to six million faithful.

At first the young Soviet regime encouraged the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church because it regarded it as more 'progressive' than the old monarchist Russian Orthodox Church. But then as it was linked with growing Ukrainian nationalism, the secret police in 1929 began mass arrests of the leaders and clergy. In 1930 the Autocephalous Church was eliminated by Stalin, and their clergy was never to be seen again.

When the Nazis occupied Ukraine between 1941 and 1945, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church was born again, this time with canonically ordained bishops. But as the Germans retreated, the Autocephalist bishops retreated to the West as well, and the Church ceased to exist in the Soviet Union.

In 1944 the Soviet Union acquired parts of Western Ukraine including the city of Lviv (formerly Lvov or Lemberg) which was the center of the Uniates (the Greek Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite). Stalin rightly perceived that this church was hostile to the Soviet Union, so he had arrested the entire hierarchy who were sent to prison in Kiev and some of the faithful who did not join Orthodoxy. He transferred three thousand Uniate churches to the Russian Orthodox church.

He recognized that the Uniates might play the same role in promoting Ukrainian nationalism as did Roman Catholicism in Poland and Lithuania. As the Uniates were being arrested, Patriarch Alexii of Moscow addressed an appeal to the Uniates to break all ties with the Vatican. In March 1946, some of the Orthodox Church hierarchy and Soviet authorities arranged for a Synod in Lviv, the center of Ukrainian nationalism. At that Synod the Ukrainian Uniate church liquidated itself, Stalin announced. Supposedly the Uniate church reunited itself with the Russian Orthodox church. In effect, Stalin abolished the Uniate Church. Many Uniates and the Pope denounced this move as uncanonical and called the synod a pseudo-synod. None of the nine Ukrainian Uniate bishops attended the Lviv Synod as they were all already in labor camps where most of them died.

In all, under Communist rule, Uniates report that 10 bishops, 1400 priests, 800 nuns, and thousands of lay people perished, and many thousands more endured a nightmarish life in labor camps. The most famous prisoner was Archbishop Joseph Slipyj, head of the Lviv diocese, the only Uniate bishop who came out of the camps alive. In the Arctic circle he was seen by other prisoners wearing rags and foot bandages in the freezing cold. Limping from frostbite, the poor Bishop was received in 1963 by Pope John XXIII. Consecrated a cardinal by Pope Paul VI in 1965, he died in Rome in 1984. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to see the Uniate Church return to Ukraine.

After the banning of both the Uniate Church and the Autocephalous Ukrainian Church by Stalin, Russian Orthodoxy enjoyed a boom in Ukraine. In effect Stalin rewarded the Russian Orthodox Church for absorbing the two Ukrainian churches. There were more Russian Orthodox Churches in Ukraine than there were in Russia! Ukrainian priests who joined Orthodoxy rather than fight it or join the underground "catacomb" churches were promoted rapidly within the Orthodox church.

Under the Soviet regime, in Ukraine all religions were controlled and restricted, some more severely than others. Evangelical Christians and Baptists were among the more tolerated religions as they were not perceived to be agents of Ukrainian nationalism. Others were severely restricted. The first group were Roman Catholics. They were not suppressed altogether like the Uniates and the Ukrainian Autocephalous church as the numbers were so small and scattered with relatively few Polish and German Roman Catholics living in Ukraine. Jews were severely restricted as well. Not very long ago there was only one rabbi in all of Kiev. Islam was also persecuted. Pentecostals, the Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and a few other tiny Protestant sects which defied the secular power of the State were banned.

Ukraine in the Present

From the foregoing discussion one can see that religion and nationality raise difficult issues and problems. This is especially true in independent Ukraine today. At present, there are 63 different religious confessions in Ukraine. Adherents to religion have doubled over the past two years. The largest number of parishes still belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. Next come the Uniates and then the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Kiev Patriarchate.

However, if one puts together all forms of Protestants: Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists, then they form the second largest group after the Ukrainian Orthodox Church--Moscow Patriarchate. Roman Catholics are a small minority with only 517 registered parishes. Few of the Latin Catholics are Ukrainian. They are mostly Polish, Hungarian, and German. There are only 53 Jewish congregations, but even that number represents a doubling of the number two years ago.

How many believers are there in Ukraine? The estimate is that there are between 15 and 30 millions out of the total population of 52 million: 7-14 million Orthodox, 4-5 million Uniates, 3-6 million Protestants and smaller numbers of Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims.

Just a word of explanation about the various Orthodox groups. Beginning in 1989 some Russian Orthodox Church parishes declared themselves to be under the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church. These break-away parishes objected to being part of the Russian Orthodox Church with its sinister Soviet past. So the third incarnation of the Autocephalous Church began only four years ago.

The Russian Church responded in January 1990 when a synod of bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church granted the Ukrainian exarchate (or branch) of the Russian Orthodox Church the name Ukrainian Orthodox Church, headed by Metropolitan Filaret. Although the church was supposedly autonomous, it remained under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarch. The Russian Orthodox Church hoped, that by giving the Orthodox Church the title Ukrainian instead of Russian, they would prevent the faithful from leaving the church. But many Ukrainians rejected this concession. They joined the Autocephalous Church which went even further by electing Mstyslav its Patriarch

in June 1990. So then there was the Moscow Patriarch and now the Autocephalous Patriarch. The leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Filaret surprised everyone by supporting Mstyslav to form the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate. In other words, Filaret left the Moscow Patriarchate to help create the Kiev Patriarchate which absorbed the Autocephalous Church. Then Patriarch Mstyslav died in June of this year (1993). Some of his followers would not cooperate with Filaret in the Kiev Patriarchate, so they again brought back the Autocephalous Church. There are therefore just now three branches of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church--Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church--Kiev Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church.

It was said that one of the reasons for the tremendous success of the growth of Protestantism in Ukraine is the unifying sight of this tri-partite division of the Orthodox Church. And the huge following of extremist cults like the White Brotherhood of which we will speak in a minute can also be explained in part by the unusual circumstance of having a divided Orthodox Church which has no basis in theology.

Less than a month ago, on October 24, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate consecrated Vasyl Romanus as Patriarch. He has taken the name Volodymyr (the name of the Kievan Rus Prince who converted Rus to Orthodoxy in 988 or 989). Patriarch Volodymyr is immensely popular since he was a former dissident under the Soviet regime. He also has the approval of the Ukrainian government. The State even sent an envoy to the Patriarch of Constantinople with the request that the primate recognize the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church abroad in the United States and Canada also support Volodymyr who says he seeks unification with the Autocephalous Church and is willing to enter conversations with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church--Moscow Patriarchate. The smaller Ukrainian Autocephalous Church which is centered in Western Ukraine has already elected a Patriarch, Dimitri of Lviv. There are, therefore, three Patriarchs to whom Ukrainians give their loyalty depending on which branch they espouse.

Why don't all of these three Orthodox Churches in Ukraine unite? There are rumors that they will soon unite, but there are political problems. Both the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-KP and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church claim to be heir to the late Patriarch Mstyslav who had repudiated the 1992 council which had formed the Kiev Patriarchate and had united the two churches before his death. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church objects to the presence of Metropolitan Filaret in the UAC-KP since he had once been so anti-Ukrainian as well as probably having been a member of the KGB. But now that Filaret is outranked by Patriarch Volodymyr, the church might have more creditability for the faithful. If the other Patriarchs, especially the one of Constantinople, recognized the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, then the size would surely grow even more.

In addition to the internal rifts within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, there is a debate over the Ukrainianization of the liturgy. Supporters of Ukrainian in the liturgy are generally prompted by anti-Russian sentiment. However, Church Slavonic is not modern Russian, and many conservatives do not want to abandon their liturgical language which they have used for centuries. So while there are no doctrinal controversies, there are cultural and primarily political issues at stake.

Now to turn to the re-emergence of the Uniate Church in Western Ukraine. After Stalin eliminated the Church, some believers went underground; others attended Orthodox services but kept the Catholic Uniate faith at heart; others attended Roman Catholic services. In 1989 in Lviv, an important parish declared itself to be of the Uniate faith. Hundreds of other churches followed suit. When President Gorbachev met Pope John Paul II on December 1, 1989, he promised religious freedom for the Uniate Catholics. In 1991 Myroslav Ivan Cardinal Lubachivsky, Major Archbishop of Lviv and head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Uniate) returned to Lviv after being abroad for over 50 years. In May 1992 there a synod of bishops was held in Lviv. The Ukrainian government gave them official recognition. The Greek Catholic hierarchy asked the Holy See for confirmation of the decisions of the synod, but it took the Holy See over a year to respond. When it did, it approved only the eparchies in Western Ukraine and not Kiev. It seemed that the Vatican did not want the Uniate church to spread to Eastern Ukraine. Nor did the Holy See allow a Hungarian eparchy to come under the jurisdiction of Ukraine; it will be ruled directly from the Vatican. Uniate Catholics in Poland are also not under Ukrainian jurisdiction. They too come directly under Roman jurisdiction. Many Ukrainians object to having the Uniate Church being confined solely to the West and only to the Ukrainian ethnic community. In addition to limited Vatican support for the Uniate Church, there is also a major problem between the Uniates and the Orthodox Church. Many Uniates are bitter because they feel that some of the Orthodox hierarchy cooperated with Stalin in eliminating the Uniate Church. Such bitterness also spills over into the contest over ownership of churches. As I mentioned earlier, Stalin took all the Uniate Churches and handed them over to the Russian Orthodox Church. Recently, a site has been chosen for a new Uniate church in Kiev which is to be built on the ruins of a former Uniate church destroyed by Stalin in 1932. There are

about 30,000 Uniates in Kiev; this will be their first church since Ukrainian independence. There was trouble just this summer after the blessing of the new site when the Uniate church dignitaries and faithful attempted to attend a liturgy at St. Cyril's Church on the outskirts of the city. According to a newspaper account, "All the entrance gates to the church grounds had been chained and physically blocked by approximately 100 protesters--almost all elderly women of the Orthodox faith, led by a few young monks." Cardinal Lubachivsky, Papal Nuncio Antonio Franco and the other dignitaries left without a confrontation.

The protestors were allegedly members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church--Moscow Patriarchate, headed by Metropolitan Volodymyr Slobodan. Although the protestors had no permit to demonstrate, the young monks coached the elderly women how to chant their protests. They also encouraged patients from a nearby mental institution who were standing on the fringes to join in the demonstration.

The Church dignitaries wrote a letter to President Leonid Kravchuk asking him to respond to the consistent disrespect with which the Uniate Church is treated in Kiev. The head of the Secretariat of Rukh one of the large Ukrainian political groups, Mykhailo Boychyshyn, who was an eyewitness to the events commented angrily, "Whether in monks' robes or in the suits of bureaucrats, there nonetheless continue to exist in Ukraine forces that work consistently to undercut all legitimate attempts by Ukraine, whether spiritual, economic or political to form a happy and strong independent nation. It is shameful that ambassadors, the representative of the Vatican, and the head of the second largest confession in Ukraine had to once again walk away with his faithful, rather than have militia arrest elderly and mentally ill women. Either this government is impotent, and cannot carry out its promises, or cynical, and does not care that what it promises will not be done. Neither is necessary for Ukraine."

Until the new church is built, the Uniates hold services outdoors year round despite many petitions to the government to have just one church granted them. The Uniates feel that the Orthodox hierarchy is making it difficult for the government to make this grant.

There is also tension between the Uniates and the Roman Catholic church. I have already mentioned the belated and limited recognition of the Uniate Church by the Pope. Some Uniates believe that the Roman Catholic Church is proselytizing vigorously in Eastern Ukraine. To them that explains why the Holy See so far has not approved of an eparchial see in Kiev, why the Vatican favors the use of Ukrainian in the liturgical rite of the Uniate Church (that would facilitate conversion to Catholicism) Uniates also believe that the Vatican has published inflated statistics which exaggerate the number of Roman Catholics in Ukraine. They believe that this has been done in an effort to send more and more Roman Catholic priests to Eastern Ukraine and to keep the Uniate Catholics out.

Why would the Vatican want to eliminate the Uniate Church? One might reason be that it has witnessed the scandal caused by having three or more separate Orthodox Churches. It might reason it is better to have one Catholic (Roman) Church rather than two--the Eastern Uniates and the Western Catholics. There is also the problem that the Uniate clergy is married and that might lead to a demand in the West to end clerical celibacy in the Latin church as well. Also the elimination of the Uniate Church might make reconciliation with the Orthodox Church more likely. There is evidence that the Russian Orthodox Church during the Soviet period told the Vatican that it would enter into an ecumenical dialogue only on condition of the elimination of the Uniate Church. During the Cold War, the Uniate Church was supported by the Holy See as part of the general climate of anti-communism. There is no doubt that the Orthodox favor Roman Catholicism over the Uniates. There is no evidence, however, that the present Pope is attempting to eliminate the Uniate church, although it does not appear that he is not encouraging their growth either.

If we assume that both the Uniates and the Orthodox Church will remain in Ukraine, there are still questions to be answered: Will the Russian Orthodox hierarchy return places of worship that were formerly Ukrainian Uniate at least if the majority of the congregation requests the transfer? Will leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church express penitence for the ways in which the Orthodox church allowed itself to be used in Stalin's time to suppress Ukrainian Catholicism? And will Ukrainian Catholic bishops be ready to offer their forgiveness if it is sought, or will they continue to carry on a verbal war against Russian Orthodoxy?

In addition to the sectarian feuds, there is the problem of the relationship between Church and State. As we have seen, the Soviet Union persecuted all religion, but as a Russian nationalist, Stalin used the Russian Orthodox Church as a vehicle to Russify Ukrainians. Some of the old state apparatus is still intact. Religious bodies must register with the State through the Council on Religious Affairs which potentially could exert outside pressure on different religious groups by approving or not approving them. Many are advocating abolition of such a body and do away special laws which regulate religions. They argue that Churches should be treated like other civic associations.

The principle of separation of Church and State is implicit in the 1992 draft Constitution for Ukraine. It appears for the present at least that the goal is for a secular state which nevertheless recognized the importance of religious values and provides for their cultivation. Yet, the Orthodox Church has always worked closely with the State. Many of the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church under the Soviet regime were agents of the KGB. Can Ukraine resist the temptation to use the Orthodox church to bolster its nationalistic goals? As already noted, the present government in Ukraine favors the Kiev Patriarchate over the Moscow Patriarchate. If that happens, can the Ukrainian Orthodox Church resist politicization?

On the other hand, if the Orthodox Church attempts to influence social legislation on issues such as abortion, pornography and so on, it, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, has had little experience in opposing government policy. It will have to learn how to become a moral conscience and not just a rubber stamp.

The Orthodox Church under its long subservience to both the tsarist and Soviet state was not allowed to engage in social work. The modern westernized Protestant groups have been vigorously proselytizing and they have been successful in pursuing social programs such as substance abuse rehabilitation. They also know how to influence mass media. While the strength of the Orthodox and Uniate churches rests on tradition, patriotism and politics, they will have to adapt to the modern techniques of evangelization and social outreach, if they want to compete with Protestants. But the traditional churches both Orthodox and Uniate lack intellectual and material resources.

Despite the growth in the number of believers, there is a general moral decline in Ukrainian society. As we began this talk, I noted the collapse of the ideology which successfully kept violence and crime at bay.

Now in Ukraine there is increased drug trafficking and violent crime. There is the breakdown of the family, homelessness, the marginalization of the elderly. Abortion is commonplace. Bribery remains the means for obtaining education, medical care, or career advancement. As Chernobyl has shown, there is a desperate need for a comprehensive environmental ethic.

But there is a wide chasm between the intellectuals and the Church. Deep-seated prejudices among both clergy and intellectuals, nourished in the Soviet period, remain an obstacle to social harmony. The intelligentsia is filled with religious cynicism and modernist indifference. The clergy, on the other hand, view Western values with suspicion which might in the end lead them to fight liberalism and retreat to narrow nationalism.

There are definite signs of both religious and social tensions which have been manifested in Ukraine these past few days. This last summer I spent a month in Ukraine and Russia. Everywhere, I saw posters plastered on walls of subway stations, on lamp poles, etc, of a woman in a white robe, but I never could get close enough to see what they said. Now I know these were pictures of Maria Tsvygun who calls herself Maria Devi Khristos and claims to be the second coming of Christ. Her name in fact means Virgin Mary Christ. She, some claim, is the tool of her second husband Yuri Krivonogov, who formed an extremist cult with as many as 150,000 followers all over the former Soviet Union, but with over 2000 members in Kiev alone.

The cult, called The White Brotherhood, has attracted many teenagers from Russia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. Distraught parents have formed a group called "Salvation" (Poryatunok) which attempts to search for and seize their missing children and deprogram them. Radio stations warned parents to keep their teenagers locked in the house for fear of the proselytizing youth who distribute poetry written by Maria telling them to leave their families and join the cult. She herself left her first husband and young son two years ago after 14 years of marriage. Schools have been closing early to get the children home before dark. Maria predicted the end of the world for November 14, 1993. On that date there was to be a mass suicide after which Maria would be resurrected. But as people came pouring in since the first of November, security forces are rounding up cult devotees, and some 600 have been detained, put in jail or hospitals. Thirty youths have launched a hunger strike to demand the release of the jailed ones. The police say they will force feed the hunger strikers. Maria failed to appear on the public square where the mass suicides were to take place, and she and her second husband are reported to be in hiding. The president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk (who was supposed to be the Pontius Pilate in the crucifixion scenario), issued a decree empowering Kiev authorities to adopt measures necessary to maintain order, including summary expulsion of people without residence permits. Border guards have intensified check to try to contain the crowds trying to come to Kiev.

While it is not certain what this cult believes, I have read that despite the Christian symbolism, this is in fact more of an Eastern mystical cult with an emphasis on the imminent end of the world.

Why this bizarre phenomenon? There have always been strains of milleniarism and the apocalyptic in Eastern Orthodoxy. There too mysticism, the occult and faith healers, such as Rasputin, have had a large influence.

There is evidence even now during this episode of popular superstition. A rock music radio station called upon those in Kiev with extrasensory powers to help cultists regain society! Now with the rapid changes of the post-Soviet period, sudden independence, fear of nuclear weapons which might pollute the atmosphere, fear of the nuclear plant at Chernobyl which is to be reopened, the hyperinflation, the freedom which allows for all kinds of religious recruiting, all of these novel and threatening events led to disorientation.

As long as the Ukrainian state remains in economic and political crisis, church-state relations are not likely to be regularized. Yet Ukraine now faces this challenge and opportunity to become a secular State which supports all religions with tolerance and uses none to sanction its actions. If the various branches of the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and the two Catholic Churches decide to live in peace, if not entirely in harmony, then the world can be assured that the substance of democracy has truly emerged as well as the form in Ukraine.