

TOWARD RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN UKRAINE: INDIGENOUS CHURCHES AND FOREIGN MISSIONARIES

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1. Introduction: The Emergence of New Sets of Questions

The notion of religious freedom seemed at first to be very simple and clear for citizens of the former Soviet Union, including those who lived in Ukraine. This freedom meant no persecution for practising the religion of their choice, no teachers standing near churches at Easter and checking for children of their schools who dared to join the worship, no obligation for practically all the priests to be "voluntary informants" of the KGB. It was this freedom our people claimed, and it was this freedom that they received after perestroika (at the beginning of the 1990s) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, freedom did not come without difficulties. The religious situation in Ukraine cannot be understood without recognizing one key fact - Stalinist terror froze the relations between religions and between different Christian denominations at a time when they were very far from being in balance. Therefore even the smallest improvement of the political situation inevitably brought a regrouping of the forces and radical changes in the scale of influence of different actors. The process is not yet finished.

The general spectrum of religious organizations may be divided into several blocks:

Orthodox Churches:

- the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate (6,500 parishes);
- two autocephalous, jurisdictionally independent Churches:
 - the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Kyivan Patriarchate (1,300 parishes)
 - and
 - the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (1,200 parishes);
- small historical fragments of different Orthodox Churches.

Catholic Churches:

- the Greek Catholic [Uniate) Church (3,033 parishes);¹
- the Roman Catholic Church (663 parishes).

Protestant Churches:

- the Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (1,400 communities);
- the Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith [Pentecostals] (700 com.);
- the Church of Seventh Day Adventists (400 com.);
- the Jehovah's Witnesses (200 com.).

Judaic communities (70).

Muslim communities (120).

Religious communities of Eastern Cults:

- the Society of Krishna's consciousness (23);
- Buddhist communities (22).

The transfer from totalitarianism to religious freedom was too rapid. The resultant religious pattern was far from that expected by people. First, they soon realized that they were no longer a religiously homogeneous society - they were neither only Orthodox in the East of Ukraine nor only Greek Catholic (Uniate) in the West.² It proved impossible to return to an idealized classical Ukraine that had later been suppressed by the tsarist and Communist regimes.³ One could hardly recognize an ethnographic Ukraine in the new plurality of denominations and religions, as well as the groups of non-believers and of believers with no church or even no religious affiliation. Religious freedom revealed the loss of a clear traditional religious identity of Ukraine. Thus, the first set of questions raised by religious freedom was:

(1) is Ukraine still an Orthodox country? (or, in another modification, is Western Ukraine still Greek Catholic?)

¹A distinguishing feature of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is that having the Orthodox rite and ecclesiological structure she is an Eastern church and belongs to the traditional Orthodox world. At the same time, being subordinated to the Holy See she belongs to the family of Catholic churches. My article speaks to both aspects. In general, as far as a rite is concerned, Ukraine is mostly an Orthodox country.

²Till 1939 both parts of the Ukrainian population lived in different states - the Eastern part lived within the Russian Empire/Soviet Union while the Western part lived within the Austro-Hungarian Empire/Polish State till 1939. So each part was to some extent homogeneous, the Eastern part seeming to be Orthodox and the Western part seeming to be Greek-Catholic, with not many Protestants present in both.

³For a general overview of the movement for the independence of Ukrainian (Kyivan) Orthodoxy from Moscow, see Serhij Plokyh, "Kyiv vs. Moscow: The Autocephalous Movement in Independent Ukraine." *The Harriman Review*, Vol.9, No. 1-2, Spring 1996, p.32-37.

(2) are Ukrainian Protestants (or Roman Catholics) to be included in the formula of a future Ukrainian religious identity?

(3) who are the non-believers really: victims of communism and, therefore, subjects for decommunization or are they independent partners to share the same freedom of belief?

Secondly, Ukrainians also soon realized that religious freedom provided different Churches with the same freedom to exist. It was painful sometimes for particular religious groups to see rival "false" churches enjoying the same freedom as their "true" church did. This jealousy did not necessarily mean that people questioned the very principle of equality of opportunity. Often, it was exactly this equality which people claimed. The essence of the problem was that the inter-denominational pattern in Ukraine had been maintained in an unbalanced state by the Communist regime. Some Churches had been favored by the Soviet authorities. One of the last illustrations of this in fact took place at the end of Communist power when many former Ukrainian Uniate churches in Western Ukraine, which had been used as storehouses, were given by the authorities only to the Russian Orthodox Church. Some of churches had been completely outlawed, for example, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, some branches of Soviet Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

At the beginning of perestroika, the competitive abilities of churches were therefore quite different. That is why imposing religious freedom without paying attention to this historical inequality seemed to be a violation of the main democratic principle - a principle of equality of starting opportunities. The seeming "equality" was, in fact, a status of preference for one church traditionally favored in the Communist state. No wonder that people immediately opposed that sort of freedom and democracy. Thus, the second set of questions raised by religious freedom in Ukraine included:

(1) is the State, which had forcibly diminished competitive abilities of indigenous churches in the past, now obliged to introduce some protectionistic measures in the present?

(2) *what kind of "odds" should be given to some churches to equalize their starting opportunities with other churches?*

(3) *what criteria are to be applied to more fairly recognize those churches in need?*

(4) *should churches which are in opposition to Ukrainian independence and actively advocate a reunion with Russia be tolerated equally with those which are loyal to Ukrainian independence?*

The third problem to solve was an incursion of foreign religious missionaries. Dr. Philip Walters, Keston College general editor, published some surprising statistics: "In 1979 there were 80 [Western Christian organizations with an interest in Central and Eastern Europe]; by 1989 there were 311; and the estimate for 1996 is 942, of which about 515 are concerned with the former USSR. Although a few of these organizations are Catholic or Orthodox, the majority are evangelical Protestant".⁴ In addition, there were numerous non-Christian missions.

The shift from total isolation to an inundation of foreign religious missions was too hard for Ukrainians to bear patiently. While welcome at the beginning, later on foreign missionaries began to face opposition from various groups in Ukrainian society. Many Ukrainian Churches accused them of "sheep-stealing" and tried to introduce restrictive national legislation of foreign religious organizations. Some restrictive Amendments to the Ukrainian Freedom of Conscience Law were adopted by the Ukrainian Supreme Rada (Parliament) in 1993. For instance, preachers of foreign religious organizations

"may preach religious dogmas, perform religious rites and practice other canonical activities only in those religious organizations on whose invitations they came, and upon an official agreement with the state body which has registered the statute of the corresponding religious organization".⁵

⁴ Interview with Dr. Philip Walters. *The Right to Believe*, Keston College, Oct.-Dec., 1996.

⁵Howard L. Biddulph. "Religious Liberty and the Ukrainian State: Nationalism Versus Equal Protection." *Brigham Young University Law Review*, Vol. 1995, No. 2, p.339.

The lack of competitive experience and resources of indigenous Churches in Ukraine in the face of foreign religious missions became obvious. No wonder, therefore, that religious freedom was often seen as acting in favor of foreign churches, thereby leaving the indigenous traditions unprotected. Thus, a new set of questions was raised by the experience of religious freedom:

(1) are foreign missions the only reason for "losing the battle"?

(2) are limitations, imposed on religious freedom of foreign missionaries, the only way of balancing the competitive abilities of all the religious actors in Ukraine?

This report cannot answer all these difficult questions. What it can do at least, is to clarify some of them (mostly the last set of questions) and to trace possible ways toward their solution.

2. Why Do They Seem to be Losing the Battle?

2.1. Historical Background - Tradition of Being a State Church

During its long history, the Eastern Church in Eastern Slavonic lands always leaned upon a governmental arm - either that of the King, the Tsar, or the Communist party. As a result, its internal immunity to the influence of foreign churches was sufficiently diminished. State authorities had always protected the Church against religious rivals, or, as in communist times, had largely banned them. The fall of communism and the removal of these protections against competition caught the Church unprepared for the competitive rivalry with foreign missionaries.

A millennium-long tradition of a single established (state) Church has formed a stereotype about the responsibility of the state to protect the Church. That is why all the Churches of Byzantine rite in the Ukraine blamed (in different ways and with different arguments) the Ukrainian state for neglecting its duties. This position was generally supported by the faithful. The historical background, therefore, seems to have a cultural dimension which cannot be voluntarily changed within a historically short period of time.

The situation in Ukraine differs from that in, for instance, Russia with its dominant church strongly subordinated to the state. According to José Casanova, Ukraine faces

"an incipient religious denominationalism which is closer to the American model than to the European one. Under such conditions [...] no particular denomination could possibly become the official established religion of the new Ukrainian state or, for that matter, the disestablished but official national religion".⁶

On the one hand, this, in fact, "may be conducive to the formation of a culturally pluralistic, religiously tolerant, and democratic Ukraine".⁷ On the other hand, this causes speculation about an artificial Americanization of the religious life in Ukraine which contradicts Ukrainian religious identity and the Eastern nature of the Ukrainian Church.

What these two competitive trends will result in cannot be foreseen. In any case, the plurality of religions and denominations, that has emerged after Ukrainian independence, does preclude a creation of the Kyivan replica of the Russian Church strongly subordinated to the state. At the same time, one can hardly imagine drawing a classical American "wall of separation" between church and state in future Ukraine. What is most likely is some sort of cooperation between church and state, the latter being neutral with respect to different denominations and, at the same time, recognizing the particular contribution of the Churches of Byzantine rite into forming Ukrainian religious and cultural identity. For example, the state may contribute to the renovation of the church buildings damaged during the communist period or the restoration of those which had been destroyed completely. Indeed, most of such buildings are national monuments of great cultural value.

⁶Jose Casanova, "Incipient Religious Denominationalism in Ukraine and its Effects on Ukrainian-Russian Relations." *The Harriman Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1-2, Spring 1996, p.40.

⁷See *ibid.* p.41.

Similarly to the tsarist regime, the Communist one kept out foreign missionaries during the period of its rule. But Communists isolated the Church in order to suffocate it rather than to protect it. The institutional network of the Church was strongly diminished. Its charitable activity -the essence of the social importance of the Church - was absolutely forbidden. The very notion of "charity" was treated as a "dirty" word by Communist doctrine. It is clear, therefore, that after the fall of Communism, the Church had to start, in some sense, from the very beginning. Thus, the role of the State in artificial weakening the Church is evident.

2.2 Theological Lag

Orthodoxy was also not ready for competition theologically. Protestant theology, with its key idea of freedom of choice, was the first to sacrifice its feeling of being the sole repository of truth in favor of religious freedom and, later, of religious tolerance.⁸ Roman Catholic theology, with its core idea of legal and institutional order, was the second to sacrifice the same feeling in favor of human rights and democracy as an indispensable condition of human dignity and social order.⁹ Orthodox theology, with its central task to preserve religious tradition, is in a more difficult theological position. Orthodoxy faces two strong modernized forms of Christianity, yet it is now incapable of making changes (or, at least, of making them easily) in its ultimate value - tradition. This creates a considerable "developmental gap" between them, placing strong pressure on Orthodoxy, which is rather archaic, to modernize. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries, therefore, appear to have more competitive capacity in comparison with indigenous Orthodoxy. No wonder that isolationist tendencies prevail in Orthodoxy.

2.3. Problems of the Clergy

⁸John Witte, Jr., "Introduction." in John Witte, Jr. ed. *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* . Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993, p. 5.

⁹Charles E. Curran. "Religious-Freedom and Human Rights in the World and the Church: a Christian Perspective." in Leonard Swidler, ed. *Religious Liberty and Human Rights in Nations and in Religions*. Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 1986, p.150-151

The 72 years of the communist experiment caused a major devastation among the clergy in Ukraine. Priests at all hierarchical levels had been carefully selected according to their loyalty to the communist regime and their readiness to obey the commands of the authorities. Communist authorities used to tolerate neither warning bishops nor even truthful "king's fools". The fall of Communism found the clergy too weakened to represent a valuable spiritual alternative to the communist ideologists or even to restore the suppressed functions of the Church adequately. The old clergy, were sometimes unable and unwilling to adapt to new situations and challenges. The newly appointed clergy of the 1990s could not change the situation immediately. Moreover, a considerable part of the new clergy bears the same "birth-marks" of communism with its moral relativity and intolerance: as the famous Soviet proverb said, "all of us were born in October" -- meaning the October revolution. Sometimes, the clergy were ruled by what was "good for one's church" rather than by absolute moral imperatives.

Both the faithful within the churches and their religious rivals have been aware of this weakened state of the clergy. The low intellectual and spiritual level of the Orthodox/Greek Catholic clergy is often unattractive for modern Ukrainian intellectuals, especially young ones, who sometimes find the Roman Catholic or Protestant clergy more responsive to their needs. The compromised attitude of the Orthodox clergy towards the communist regime in the past is sometimes used by Protestant missionaries as an argument for the inherent defect of Orthodoxy in general. Some of the sins of the priests became arguments for Jehovah's Witnesses to question the necessity of the clergy at all. No wonder, therefore, that the clergy, either consciously or subconsciously, are afraid of the "open market" of religions and seek temporary protection to restore their competitive abilities.

In light of such a clergy reluctance, it is important to distinguish between genuine concerns about objective losses, caused by the communist regime, and the natural human aspiration to create around themselves an unchallenged and non-competitive environment. The first needs to be respected and, perhaps supported by some sort of affirmative action. The second should be disputed or even ignored, first of all, in favor of the genuine interests of the Church herself. What Ukrainian

society should be concerned about is restoring the competitive abilities of indigenous Churches, not creating a protective "hothouse" which would only diminish their inherent immunity from outside influence.

There is a further cause for worry. Over the long history of its statelessness,¹⁰ Ukrainian society always had an incomplete social stratification. The noble and intellectual elite, primarily of Ukrainian origin, often had assumed other ethnic and cultural identities. As a result, it was the clergy alone who stayed with ordinary people in their joys and troubles. In the 19th century Polish state, for instance, Ukrainian society had been described as a society of "peasants and priests".¹¹ A Ukrainian priest used to be the highest authority not only in religious matters but also in political, cultural or even economic questions. This high status of a priest is still alive in the memory of some clergy and elderly parishioners, and according to them is valued as a model relationship which should be restored (at least, as much as possible) in post-communist Ukraine. Needless to say, neither this social stratification remains the same any longer nor are the clergy professionally ready for the role of universal authority. Attempts to play an inadequate role in modern Ukrainian society may therefore cause new problems for the clergy, especially in their relations with the youth attracted by other and more up-to-date religious leaders, and because of the new reluctance towards religion in general.

2. 4. Financial Difficulties

Practically all the indigenous Churches in Ukraine are in a critical financial position. The social demand for new church buildings is still high, many existing churches are overcrowded, and interdenominational tensions left some religious communities without buildings for worship at all. The Church needs money for its charitable tasks, which cannot be sufficiently raised from local Ukrainian parishioners who are suffering the grave consequences of a serious economic crisis in Ukraine. Restoring all the functions of the Church has often meant to literally rebuild the

¹⁰Kyivan Rus and its fragments finally lost independence in the 14th century. Independence was recovered by the Ukrainians for short periods of time in 1654 and 1918.

¹¹Rev. George Fedoriv. *Istoriya Tserkvy v Ukraini (The history of the Church in Ukraine)*. London: Ukrainian Publisher, Inc.1967.

Church: new monasteries, seminaries, parish houses are being erected now. Church media and publishing houses need money too. The list of requirements can certainly be continued, to say nothing about the Church's patronage of art and culture, now absolutely forgotten. I can only mention some residual intolerance of the State towards religion when it equates the Church with other profitable organizations, that results in very high taxation.

This is the background against which foreign missionary activity takes place. As a rule, foreign religious missions are rich enough to buy the prime time on TV, to rent the best halls or even stadiums for collective prayer, to organize tours to the Western countries for Ukrainian artistic bodies, etc. Of course, many of these are being done for the good purpose of spreading Christian values in the land devastated by communism. But a distinctive feature of Protestant theology itself is not to forget about the sinful nature of people (including missionaries, of course). Sometimes the task of converting becomes more important than that of evangelizing. The competition between different Western missionaries for "spheres of influence" becomes more relevant than the interests of indigenous people. Sometimes charitable and educational activity reveals a certain proselytizing dimension. Ukrainian society does know many examples of pure evangelism by foreign missionaries. Unfortunately, it has experienced some negative sides of missionary activity as well. I am not ready to propose action by legal means to avoid these negative impacts in the future, but what I am sure of is that the protests of indigenous Churches cannot be absolutely neglected in favor of the "free market" model expounded blindly and theoretically.

2.5. Developmental Gap

The model of a free market of religions envisages that those who lose simply accept defeat. It is a normal evolutionary principle when we speak about disputes between progressive and conservative parts of the same Church. It is not a less acceptable principle when different religious actors of more or less equal competitive abilities are considered. Application of this principle, however, is more difficult when either churches of considerably unequal competitive capacities or inherently non-competitive religions are under concern. It is not the competition of religious ideas

only which we face in the free market of religions. Some developmental issues, such as modern information technologies, computerization, and the Internet, are implicitly present in this market as well. It is sometimes very difficult to determine which impact is more effective! So, a free market of religions cannot be considered as an absolute value, nor is it a synonym to religious freedom which is to be protected unconditionally.

To be honest, we have to make up our minds on one more question. Are the indigenous Churches in Ukraine completely loosing the battle? Are foreign missionaries so strong (and the indigenous Churches so weak) that a complete transformation of Ukrainian Christianity is possible? The answer is - definitely not. Culture, history, national traditions and family and community habits which are imprinted in childhood - all these stand in favor of indigenous Churches. So we may speak about a battle for non-believers, for people beyond any Church affiliation, for "prodigal sons" coming back from their godless roads. Of course, there are a lot of them after the darkness of Soviet "militant atheism". The loss of these potential parishioners is very painful to the indigenous Churches, especially when taking into account that their starting opportunities were unfairly diminished in comparison with foreign Churches. That is, however, not equal to a loss to the church in general.

In summary, we can list at least the following reasons for the indigenous Churches to "lose the battle" partially:

- (1) superfluous dependence of the Church on protective walls drawn up by the State;
- (2) considerable damage caused by the communist regime, including those in the charitable, ecclesiastic, and theological fields;
- 3) lack of an Orthodox theological response to the challenge of democracy and human rights;
- (4) a problem of modernizing a Church which values Tradition;
- (5) the low level of theological, spiritual, cultural, and psychological education of the clergy;
- (6) financial difficulties of the Church and the high level of taxation;
- (7) the "developmental gap" between the Western countries and the post-Soviet states in technology and social welfare.

3. Are Limitations, Imposed on the Religious Freedom of Foreign Missionaries, the Only Way of Balancing the Competitive Abilities of All the Religious Actors in Ukraine?

Let us begin by analyzing the reasons I have just listed. The Amendments by the Ukrainian Parliament to the Freedom of Conscience Law, mentioned in the Introduction, relate directly to only the first reason on the list, namely a superfluous dependence of the Church on the protective walls drawn up by the State. There are no official statistics about the results of these Amendments, nor could I find in the American mass media any cases of serious obstacles for foreign missionaries to enter Ukraine. My personal observations confirm that those extravagant religious preachers in the streets which had shocked the Ukrainian public in provincial cities so much at the beginning of the 1990s were there no more.

Those Amendments were criticized by Western analysts who stated that "the 1993 Amendments effectively reduce the religious liberties originally provided under the Ukrainian Freedom of Conscience Law".¹² The lack of concrete cases of human rights violations under those Amendments, of course, does not mean that the latter are not fraught with serious risk of violations in the future. Whatever the original logic, the Amendments exemplify attempts to balance interdenominational and interreligious relations at the expense of religious freedom.

The arguments listed above show that to impose limitations on the religious freedom of foreign missionaries is not the only way of balancing the competitive abilities of all the religious actors in Ukraine. To draw up barriers is always easier than to render positive support. In other words, to meet the challenges mentioned in points 2 and 6 above - that is, to compensate for damages caused by the communist regime and to recognize the charitable nature of the Church by more flexible taxation, at least - the State needs money, a lot of money. It is clear that the State cannot afford this during its current severe economic crisis. At the same time, there is no clear

¹²Biddulph, p. 339.

official statement that the State recognizes its moral and financial obligations and is ready to discharge them at the first opportunity.

The support of the State may be invaluable for the educational programs of the indigenous Churches (point 5). The Churches can benefit from the state educational network to the extent permissible by the secular nature of the State and by the canonical rules of the Church. What is absolutely indispensable here is a denominational neutrality of the State. Every church (or religion), persecuted in Soviet times, should take advantage of such support. The manner and amount of such support, by compiling a list of recipients, might be estimated by a specially established advisory Council consisting of representatives of both the state and the different churches.

Cooperation between the State and the Church in restoring the potential of the latter should not be understood in terms of **limitation** of the religious freedoms of foreign missionaries. All religious actors in Ukraine have to obtain the same freedom of speech, press and assembly. The temporary protectionism of the State could be allowed only in supporting indigenous churches through compensation for the damaging interference of the State into the Church affairs in the past.

It is clear, that the “developmental gap” (point 7) cannot be closed by the efforts of the Ukrainian government and churches alone. Much depends on the position of the world missions. Let the ambivalent experience of the new direct contact between the West and the post-communist East be a lesson not only to the Eastern Churches of the region but to the Western missions as well. If it is *the good news* that is to be brought to Eastern Europe, let it be free of denominational chauvinism and of taking advantage of temporary crisis in this part of the world. The ancient Christian tradition of Eastern Slavonic lands is worthy of recognition and should be respected by Christian missions at least. If proselytizing is a main goal of missionaries then they are considerably pre-desposed to be antagonized. On the contrary, the good-will partnership in mutual witness of the Christian faith would make the relations stable and trustful.

Finally, the theological and educational animation of the Church, the problem of modernizing it (points 3, 4 and 5) are directly within the competence of the indigenous Churches. It is a rather dangerous illusion that the isolation of the Church may contribute to the restoration of her suppressed abilities. There is a very creative point of view from which the absence of religious unity and the "invasion" of foreign missions may be considered as a blessing of God. The missionary activity has to be considered by the Churches in Ukraine as stimulating a strong drive to find and to develop their own inherent potential to survive and compete. The only productive way of protecting the Church is to help her meet the challenges of the modern world, above all, by theological and ecclesiastical means. Religious freedom (either outside or inside the Church) can serve this aim fruitfully by widening the field of alternatives in theological pursuits. Once the potential is recovered, religious freedom will no longer seem dangerous.