Religion in Ukraine: political and historical entanglements

Introduction.

Ukraine usually becomes the focus of the international media and lively scholarly interest when it undergoes some tremendous political and societal changes. Suffice to mention the year 2004 when the Orange revolution was on front pages all over the world, or 2013-2014 when mass protests — now known as the Euromaidan Revolution — followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the continuing war in Donbas came into the spotlight worldwide.1 What happened in Ukraine in the years 2018 and 2019 drew considerably less attention both in international media and among scholars, although historically these years are no less remarkable than the years of mass unrests and regimes changes.

The year 2018 became a turning point not only in the church history of Ukraine but, more broadly, in the history of world Orthodoxy. In 2018 all official preparations were completed for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to become an independent church in communion with all other Orthodox churches in the world. On January 5, 2019, the official document that grants the church’s independence — called the Tomos — was given by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Thus, in 2019 the world witnessed the birth of one more Orthodox Church, a rare event in church history.

The whole discussion on religion in Ukraine, however, cannot be restricted simply to the questions of Orthodoxy. To grasp the scale of religious life of Ukraine we should broaden our perspective and look at the country from a bird’s eye view. In this introduction I want not only to introduce each article that comprises this special section but also to describe the religious situation in Ukraine, to give readers a better grasp of the context which will be tackled in the articles. On this note, I should add an important disclaimer: it is not spirituality and religious belief as such that are in the focus of this special section. The purpose of this discussion is to put the question of religion into the focus of the studies which approach different aspects of Ukrainian reality today and show how an analysis of an intricate interplay between religion, politics, and society can help us better understand this reality.

According to the sociological survey conducted in 2018, about 72% of respondents declared themselves as believers.2 Compared with the number of believers in previous years, the overall number decreased somewhat from 76% in 2014, but religious leaders continue to enjoy the highest level of trust within Ukrainian society.3 Among believers, the most numerous are Orthodox Christians (67.3%); 9.4% of respondents declared that they belong to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church; 2.2% said they are Protestants; and 0.8% attend the Roman Catholic Church; 0.4% belong to Judaism.4

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Religious affiliation in numbers

Special section: The role of religion in the Ukrainian political landscape
According to the Ukrainian census, 0.9% of the Ukrainian population follow Islam. Less than 1% said that they follow other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Paganism. In the previously mentioned sociological survey a further 11.0% declared themselves non-religious or unaffiliated to any religion.

From the information above we can see how religious affiliation is distributed among the population. We see that three main religions — Christianity, Islam, and Judaism — which were present in the territory of the present-day Ukraine throughout the centuries are not distributed evenly. Despite the differences in numbers of believers, however, all these religions and the religious organizations that represent them play an important role in the societal life of the country, with their leaders commenting on all political changes and discussing the country’s future perspective.

Judaism appeared in the lands which are now Ukraine when Jewish traders traveled to Greek colonies about 2,000 years ago. But it was in the 13th century that the Ashkenazi Jewish presence became significant here. Noteworthy is the fact that in the 18th century a new teaching of Judaism — Hasidism — originated in the Ukrainian lands. The significance of Ukraine as the place where Hasidism was established is difficult to overestimate, as hundreds of thousands of contemporary Hasidim come on pilgrimage to Ukraine to worship the memory of Rebbe Nachman, the founder of Breslov Hasidism, at his grave in Uman (a town in Central Ukraine). During the Second World War the Jewish population was exterminated in the Holocaust, leading to a total change of the cities’ demographical outlook: Before the war, a third of the biggest cities’ populations were of Jewish origin (15% of the population in the territory which is now Ukraine were of Jewish origin before the Second World War). Nowadays Jews comprise only 0.2% of the population of Ukraine (according to the census in 2001 or 0.4% according to the Razumkov survey in 2018). Although not numerous, the Jewish community is well-organized and is especially active in memory politics in relation to the Second World War and the remembrance of the Holocaust victims. Two big organizations represent the Jewish community in Ukraine: the VAAD of Ukraine (Association of Jewish Civic Organizations and Communities) headed by the Soviet era dissident Josef Zissels, and the United Jewish Society of Ukraine headed by the oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskyi. The latter organization has an impressive cultural center in the city of Dnipro — Meorah — located in a huge building with a museum and the Tkuma research center which serves as a platform for academic conferences and as a publishing house for studies on Judaism in Ukraine.

Looking at Islam, it was the Golden Horde (which at that time occupied a significant part of the territory of present-day Ukraine and adopted Islam as the state religion in 1313) and the Ottoman Empire (which conquered some of these territories in the 1470s) that brought Islam to these lands. Crimean Tatars accepted introduction...
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The many aspects of religion in Ukraine today

“THE CHURCH INDEPENDENCE WAS PRESENTED AS A TRIUMPH OF HISTORICAL JUSTICE AFTER CENTURIES OF REPRESSION AND PERSECUTION.”

references