

Ukraine: National and Religious Identity

There is a religious dimension to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is easy to spot but less easy to understand. In this short brief there are three important dates: 988, 1686 and 2018. The central question is whether the church and people of Ukraine are or are not part of the church and people of Russia.

The Baptism of Rus'

In the tenth century a pagan Slavic people known as the Kievan Rus' lived in present day Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. In c 988 St Vladimir, the ruler of the Rus', converted to Christianity, was baptised and brought the rest of the people to baptism also. This event is known as the 'Baptism of Rus' and occurred in or near Kyiv. This is seen to the present day as a watershed moment in Russian history and one which, in the minds of some, unites the people of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine as the successors of the Kievan Rus' and as a single, Orthodox Christian, Russian people. Such is the importance of Vladimir that he is given the epithet 'Equal to the Apostles'. Also, as Kyiv was the centre of the lands of the Rus', it has a special status in Russian self-identity (not wholly dissimilar to the importance of Kosovo in Serbian self-identity).

Over the next few hundred years empires came and went, peoples moved around and borders changed. In the sixteenth century a part of the church in modern-day western Ukraine came into communion with Rome. Nowadays the Ukrainian Catholic Church is one of the fourteen Eastern Catholic Churches *sui juris* in communion with the Catholic Church and easily the largest of these, with a membership of around 5 million. The seat of this church has moved from Lviv in the west to Kyiv.

The Rise of Moscow and of the Ottomans

The next important date is 1686. Disputes over what happened at this time formed the basis of the arguments in 2018 about the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. One side of the story is that, with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire the Ecumenical Patriarch was not able to get to Kyiv for the consecration of a new Metropolitan and so asked the Patriarch of Moscow (the Moscow Patriarchate had been granted autocephaly - that is self-government - in 1589) to do so, but without the assumption that the church in Ukraine would become dependent on Moscow. The other side of the story is that, for whatever reason, the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1689 transferred authority over the Ukrainian Church to Moscow. Practically speaking, Kyiv did begin to look ecclesiastically to Russia and the difficulty of communication with Constantinople in Ottoman times to some extent forced this.

Modern day Ukraine and the Tomos of Autocephaly

In more recent history the territory currently covered by Ukraine has, like much of central and eastern Europe, been controlled by different powers, not least the Soviet Union: under which the church was oppressed. There were moves in the early 1990s to set up an independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine (the Kyiv Patriarchate), which led to one split with Moscow. In 2019 the Kyiv Patriarchate and the existing Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine merged to form the

new Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This is separate from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), known as the 'Moscow Church'.

We remember, as well that in the West of Ukraine, from the Polish border through Lviv and beyond, the Catholic Church (mainly Eastern Catholic Church) is stronger and as one moves East the Orthodox becomes stronger.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 President Poroshenko of Ukraine was instrumental in pushing for a decisive break with Moscow and the establishment of a self-governing (autocephalous) Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This happened in 2018 when the Holy Synod of Constantinople decided that the Ecumenical Patriarch should grant a 'tomos' (decree) of autocephaly and erect the new church under the leadership of Metropolitan Epiphany of Kyiv. This move caused a new schism between Moscow and Constantinople.

Conclusion

We see in Ukraine and Russia a clash of two world views in which statehood, nation and church are united. In the Russian view as expressed (pretty much directly) by President Putin and Patriarch Kirill, these are one people in one church and, as essentially one nation, the descendants of Rus' naturally look to Moscow for civil and religious leadership. In the alternative view Ukraine is a sovereign state with territory, borders and a distinct national identity and view of history. For example, Moscow was not even founded until nearly two centuries after the Baptism of Rus'. The independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from Moscow is part of the evidence for this wider independence and natural, given that most (if not all) sovereign nations in the traditional orthodox territories have their autocephalous churches.

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