Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine

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Published by Cornell University Press

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This book analyzes how religion connects people(s) and forges attachments to place, and how this creates motivations to act. The war over the political orientation and geopolitical fate of Ukraine, which, by extension, lays the groundwork for the orientation and fate of Russia, plays out on a parallel level involving religion. This gives the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, a significant religious dimension. The stakes for religious institutions are equally as high as they are for the states and political regimes involved. The ethnographic material presented here on informal religious practices reveals why and how religion has become something of a proxy war to the Russian aggression in Ukraine and why each side strives to capitalize on the use of religion as a political resource.

The power of Orthodoxy lies in its pervasive influence on social and political life through the affective atmosphere it creates in societies where it predominates. Its naturalized presence in Ukraine is a key factor that has allowed vernacular religious practices to flourish and to permeate public space and public institutions. These religious practices, as well as the sacred qualities of the spaces in which they take place, augment an atmosphere of religiosity. This has put in place an upward spiral that gives religious institutions growing influence. They are politically relevant because religious practices enact bonds of relatedness among the living and between the living and dead, which carry obligations of reciprocity. This is why history, and historical commemorations in particular, have become so politically fraught in both Ukraine and Russia, and why ecclesiastical and political leaders are so invested in defining and performing them. Both the Ukrainian and Russian states have weaponized religion and politicized historical events and figures to provoke certain geopolitical outcomes and to advance domestic political agendas. They mobilize religion to shape collective and self-perceptions to trigger action and reaction. Vernacular religious practices, be they oriented toward prior sacrifice and past glory or forthcoming empowerment and future glory, are anchored in particular places. These practices create attachments to those places, which even the harshest critics of religion wish to keep accessible. This gives religiosity unrivaled powers of persuasion, albeit ones that are often volatile and create unpredictable consequences.
In Ukraine, persuasive efforts to engender loyalty to a particular religious leader, a corresponding political vision, and a version of history to justify those choices center on the so-called Just Orthodox, or *prosto Pravoslavni*. The term refers to Ukrainians who decline to express allegiance to a particular patriarch and religious institution while still identifying as Orthodox. This book focuses on this rather large sector of Ukrainian society, including how they came into being and the dynamics influencing their choices of allegiance. The Just Orthodox are an amorphous group of sympathizers to Eastern Christianity. They do not form any kind of stable, identifiable community, nor do they have leaders. They maintain a commitment to a faith tradition along with a guarded distance from religious institutions. As swing voters in the competition for allegiance, they play a pivotal role in defining the Orthodox religious landscape in Ukraine, and by extension in Russia as well, given how embedded and entwined Orthodoxy is in both countries. They will play a key role in determining the balance of power between Kyiv and Moscow, between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Moscow Patriarch, and in terms of determining which city is the “Third Rome.”

The Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14 validated the cultural dexterity exhibited by the Just Orthodox when it married civic understandings of what it means to be Ukrainian and to belong in Ukraine with shared radical hope for a vision of a revitalized collective future. The project to realize that vision was soon compromised by the obligation to contend with challenges to Ukraine’s sovereignty as Russia annexed Crimea and fueled a separatist insurgency in Eastern Ukraine. The deaths of protesters and soldiers triggered grief and expressions of mourning—and eventually that grief morphed into rage.

The seismic changes to the religious landscape in Ukraine since then are in response to the challenges to Ukrainian state sovereignty. These changes are one of the many factors that accelerated the tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Seeking geopolitical and religious dominance over Ukraine and Ukrainians, the Putin regime launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The typesetting of this book was complete on February 24, 2022, the exact day Russian forces crossed the border into Ukraine and began expanding the damage that had been inflicted on the Donbas since 2014 to major urban centers, towns, and villages across Ukraine. I did not alter the original text.

The ethnographic descriptions in this book of religiosity and the rhythms of everyday life in Ukraine now serve comparative purposes. They depict the fluid, informal, vernacular religious practices and novel forms of identity, which are often found in borderland areas, that existed in Ukraine prior to the 2022 Russian invasion. I once heard it said that good ethnography follows the standards of a courtroom: it should present material that is beyond a reasonable doubt. When a final inventory is taken of all that has been destroyed in Ukraine as a
result of the Russian invasion, we will find that the religious and cultural landscape, like all else, has been transformed by the trauma of war. The Ukrainian ability to mesh historical legacies with elastic, adaptive cultural practices, epitomized by the Just Orthodox and their informal religious practices and the atmosphere of religiosity those practices created, will change once again. As we take stock of all that was lost and all that could have been, if not for massive displacement, destruction, and the senseless loss of human life due to war, I hope this book will serve as a testimony to the future that Ukrainians had once envisioned for themselves.
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