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An Introduction to Ukraine

Ironically, the sudden and unexpected opportunities for religious liberty and pluralism created by glasnost have brought into the open long-repressed controversies that were produced or exacerbated by past policies. Those controversies now impede freedom of worship and the growth of mutual respect and peace among believers, as well as obstruct the achievement of a more just and peaceful political environment for Ukraine.¹ No matter how open the future may seem, it is hard to restructure history.

The new opportunities, the new thinking, *are* breathtaking. Mykola Panasovych Kolesnyk, chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs and the man with major governmental responsibility for religious life in Ukraine, leaves no doubt that Gorbachev's candid condemnation of standard Soviet policies concerning church life, and his departures from those policies, are now official.² There is, he says, no excusing the "multitude of follies" perpetrated against the Ukrainian people after the October Revolution and especially during the Stalin and Khrushchev years. The closing of churches and monasteries, the widespread destruction of ecclesiastical buildings, the cruel suppression of religious exercise, and the "rude ideological attacks against religion" are all cause for shame.

Whatever the reasons propelling these policies, they amounted, on this account, to "an essential infringement of the freedom of conscience." Today, few defend the incompatibility of religion and communism. Rather, people would in general echo Gorbachev's sentiments about a "common history shared by atheists and believers alike," and "about the faithful being just Soviet people, workers, and patriots having every right to express their beliefs with dignity."

Official policy, as Kolesnyk describes it, is that these radically new attitudes toward religion lie "not only in accepting religious freedom, but also in affording practical support to such freedom." These changes have been particularly dramatic since June 1988, and the millennial celebration of the Christianization of the early eastern Slavic state Kievan Rus'. By now, three thousand religious communities, including Orthodox, Roman Catholics, numerous Protestant groups, Jews, Muslims, and a few others, have been legalized in Ukraine. Two thousand buildings formerly closed or put to secular purposes have been opened for religious use, and one thousand or so communities have been issued permits to build new houses of worship or to reconstruct old ones. Kolesnyk reports that, thanks to this new approach, there are in Ukraine some nine thousand active religious centers, including important historical sites and architectural masterpieces.

Experts generally agree, then, that religious believers in Ukraine, as throughout the Soviet Union, have benefited in varying degrees from glasnost and perestroika.³ The new opportunities for freedom of exercise have been accompanied by the release of nearly all prisoners of conscience in 1986-88, by the removal or serious reduction of political and legal sanctions against religious expression, and by the relaxation of restrictions on the religious participation and education of children.⁴ Nor is there extensive evidence of anti-Semitism in Ukraine these days.⁵

What is more, a new law on freedom of conscience in the Soviet Union has recently been adopted by the Soviet legislature, a law

that ratifies the new policies toward religion being undertaken in the Soviet Union.⁶ Even in its more liberal phase, Soviet religious policy had been applied by means of administrative decrees and regulations rather than by legislation. The thirty-one articles of the new law supersede long-standing Soviet policy and give juridical standing to registered religious bodies (article 13), together with the legal right to own property (article 18). They also permit the production and distribution of religious items and literature (articles 22 and 23), as well as the rights to maintain and use places of pilgrimage and to engage in charitable activities (article 24).⁷

The emphasis on the rights of religious freedom as sovereign guarantees conforms to Gorbachev's opinion, stated at the Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988, that basic rights are not a gift from the state but are "an inalienable characteristic of socialism."⁸

At the same time, these very liberating developments have exposed deep-seated and long-suppressed antagonisms of a most profound and complicated sort among religious groups in Ukraine. As the state has relaxed its oppressive policies toward religion and permitted the legalization of hitherto suppressed churches, members of these churches suddenly find themselves required to confront old antagonisms.

The antagonisms have of late erupted into hostile acts among some of the groups, along with mutual accusations of discrimination and violence. These manifestations of intolerance certainly impede the process of creating a just and peaceful order within Ukraine. But, just as important, they frustrate the process of redefining in more equitable and agreeable terms Ukraine's relation to the other republics in the Soviet Union and primarily to the Russian Republic.

Ukraine is home to adherents of various religious denominations, not all of whom are involved in the conflict. There are numerous Protestant groups such as Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses, along with Roman (Latin rite) Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and others. The present

hostilities primarily involve three churches of the Eastern Byzantine tradition: the Ukrainian Catholic church (also called Greek Catholic or Uniate), the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church, and the Russian Orthodox church (the Ukrainian branch of which has recently been renamed Ukrainian Orthodox). Each claims descent from and continuity with the church of Kievan Rus', which was founded by means of a general baptism that took place in Kiev in the tenth century.

The issues that divide the churches stem both from theological and ecclesiological differences and from conflicting historical interpretations of national identity. Thus have religion and nationalism become inextricably intertwined in the current confrontation.