

## Churches in Contact and Collision

# East West Ecumenism – Ost West Ökumene

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Heta Hurskainen, Teuvo Laitila (Eds.)

# Churches in Contact and Collision

*Multiple Ways of Ukrainian and Russian Churches*



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# Introduction

*Heta Hurskainen, Teuvo Laitila*

Russia has inspired a multitude of studies on history, politics and religion, not to mention many other areas of research. Interest in Ukrainian affairs has, until recently, been less intensive, excluding of course scholars with links to, or a background in, Ukraine. When Russia and Ukraine have been studied together, more attention has usually been paid to the former, and the Russian perspective prevails. From this point of view, Kievan Rus' was the undisputed cradle of Russian culture and a mediator of Byzantine culture on its way north to Moscow, where a genuine Russian culture emerged. The same also happened for Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy. Russia has traditionally regarded Kyiv as the traditional home of the modern Russian Orthodox Church, while those religious traditions lived in, and native to, Ukraine separate from Moscow's rule have been regarded as spurious or exceptional. It also has been 'forgotten' that Ukraine is a multireligious region and, today, an independent country where the fastest growing types of Christianity are different forms of Protestantism, not Orthodoxy.

In Ukraine, since the nineteenth century, the Russian view on history has been challenged, resulting in political and ecclesiastical clashes, particularly in times of rapid political and military changes. Nevertheless, the simplified Russian view on the history of the Ukrainian territory still prevails. The 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, which under international law is considered a territory of Ukraine, did not alert scholars to rethink the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Russia was still seen as a successor of the Soviet Union, and Ukraine was considered to belong somehow to its sphere of interest. The establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018/2019, and its position as a partly canonically recognised Orthodox Church among world Orthodoxy, changed the perspective by drawing attention to the multi-layered nature of Orthodoxy.

Today's multiple manifestations of Orthodoxy and, on a larger scale, 'secular' and 'church historical' events are analysed from the Ukrainian, and not only or predominantly Russian, view, and they have made scholars more attentive to the multi-faceted history of the Byzantine tradition in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Changes in views of Ukrainian sacred and secular history have, likewise, affected world Orthodoxy. The three camps of world Orthodoxy, namely the

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1 See, for example, Clark & Vovk (eds.) 2020; Krawchuk & Bremer (eds.) 2016.

Moscow Patriarchate and its supporters, the Ecumenical patriarchate and its supporters and those who for one reason or another take a middle ground, have become more conscious of Orthodox plurality. The Russian war on Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, has brought to the forefront questions about Ukraine's originality and Russia's post-Soviet colonial and imperialistic endeavours, alongside the reasons for, and consequences of, different roles of religion in society in both countries; this has also been true for secular international scholarly discussions. The war's onset also intensified research on the role and motives of Russia and its Orthodox Church concerning the war and highlighted the special ability of Ukraine and its religious landscape to deny the imperialist Russian nationalism backed by the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the new approach to decolonialisation in Ukraine and Russia, their relations are understudied. There is a lack of research that focus seriously on the multi-layered and entangled encounters and interactions between things 'Russian' and 'Ukrainian'. This is a theme that deserves scholarly interest from wider and deeper historical and church–political perspectives, not just focussed on the last decade or two. This was also our aim when we organised the first 'East Meets West' online conference with the theme 'Ukraine and Russia – Always Together, Always in Separation' in October 2021. This volume is not a conference proceeding, but rather is inspired by the conference we organised. We had hoped our colleagues from Ukraine who presented their papers at the conference would be able to contribute to this volume too, but the start of the war and time for writing the contributions overlapped, so this volume, while a scholarly contribution on Ukrainian–Russian ecclesiastical relations, is an example of how the onset of war as damaged Ukrainian scholars' work.

Illuminating and understanding encounters, entanglements and interactions, especially religious–societal aspects in Ukraine and in its relations with Russia, is the main subject and theme of this volume. With this in mind, we present articles from three perspectives: 'varieties of narrating history', 'secular uses of various interpretations of "common history" and "colliding narratives and the churches' new ways' to highlight that today's events and positions should be understood both in terms of the historical perspective and in relation to the two types of (church) political endeavours of the last 100 years or more.

We emphasise that, in Ukraine–Russia relations, there is not only one church or politically important religion, Orthodoxy (or even Christianity). The mere existence of several Orthodox churches in Ukraine and the various statements by their representatives, as well as those of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Orthodox churches, indicate that one

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Baar et al. 2022; Harned 2022.



should talk about Orthodoxy in plural. The multiplicity of Orthodoxy is not just an 'external' or 'political' matter – it is also central for the theology and faith of the Orthodox churches.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the manifold Ukrainian religious landscape challenges Orthodoxy to evaluate its own essence and relations with others. Religious diversity and how the state and churches representing different Christian traditions in one country react to it make this claim more convincing. There has not been, is not and evidently will not be, a single religious policy in Ukraine or Russia, even though the war has heightened the differences between the countries and made it seem as though there should be two opposite policies.

The first part of the volume, 'Varieties of Narrating History', discusses the fact that not only the Ukrainian and Russian states, but also their churches, have narratives and interpretations of Ukrainian history, just as other states and churches have views of and aims regarding Ukraine or Russia. Differences in views about Ukraine concern, for example, the understanding of historical events and questions such as whose belief or faith is genuine and whose is not. Common backgrounds and different interpretations create entanglements and disputes between the different narratives as the 'same' events are remembered or forgotten in different ways. These varying narratives also influence other churches' counternarratives, both in Ukraine and Russia and abroad.<sup>4</sup>

*Sebastian Riemestad* challenges Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilisations, according to which Ukraine is situated on the fault line between two civilisations, the 'Eastern Orthodox' and 'Western'. Riemestad claims that the clash does not necessarily divide Ukraine itself, but is due to external perceptions that are projected onto Ukrainian identities. One of these perceptions is the ecclesiastical, which is very differently constructed from various points of view. Riemestad presents three narratives, the 'Roman-Catholic', 'Russian' and 'Greek', and explains their roles in Ukrainian Byzantine ecclesiastical identity based on both historical and contemporary points of view. His focus is on developments since 2016 and how these have fuelled the rhetoric of war and shaped the responses to the Russian invasion of February 2022.

*Evgeny Ageev* gleans from the minutes of the 1917–1918 All-Russian Church Council in Moscow the council's views on failed initiatives for autocephaly in Ukraine, particularly those proposed by local parish clergy and laypeople. He shows that the council's attempt to restore a centralised patriarchal administration after 200 years of state vigilance regarding church affairs,

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3 Bremer, Brüning & Kizenko 2022, 13.

4 Cf. Harned 2022.

ostensibly to protect the 'unity' of the church, combined with the hierarchy of the Russophile view, was the main reason why the power block of the council – its bishops – strongly resisted anything but restricted autonomy for the Ukrainian dioceses. Thus, the All-Ukrainian Church Council held in Kiev in January 1918 could not help but fail, particularly as Kiev at that time was a battlefield between Ukrainian-minded troops and the Bolsheviks. Theological and political reasons combined to prevent the formation of a fully independent Ukrainian Church.

*Regina Elsner* focuses on socio-ethical aspects of the rival Russian and Ukrainian ecclesiastical narratives. Since the escalation of the political conflict between Ukraine and Russia in 2014, the ecclesial disputes have also reached a new level. The relationship between different churches had been uneasy since Ukraine gained its independence; however, the increasing insistence of the Moscow Patriarchate on defining the Ukrainian ecclesial identity and its constant call for unity amidst violent conflict challenged all churches in Ukraine. As a way of defining their Ukrainian identity in contrast to the Russian claim, Ukrainian churches began elaborating on the concept of the 'Kyivan tradition' as a counter-identity to the idea of the 'Holy Rus'. In her chapter, Elsner analyses these two concurrent concepts from a socio-ethical perspective: What ideas of social coherence, social justice and conflict-transformation do they contain, and how do they impact the churches' attitudes towards social and political processes? She concludes that an emerging, separate 'Kyivan tradition' has been used to defend a democratic view on Ukraine, one that is open to the Western world and distinguishes Ukraine from the Russian version of the Byzantine tradition and the past they share. In other words, the Kyivan tradition is a part of the Ukrainian identity policy, which the war's onset in 2022 has only intensified.

The second part of the volume, 'Secular Uses of Various Interpretations of "Common History"', focuses on the use of history and narratives. Attempts to gain autocephaly in Ukraine in the first half of the 20th century, or from the 1990s onwards, were unsuccessful in the eyes of global Orthodoxy, although the Ecumenical Patriarchate managed partly to change the situation by granting autocephaly to the OCU in January 2019. Opposing this, the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate have strengthened their imperialistic view of one unified Russian territory and one Orthodox church based on claims regarding the historical evolution of Kievan Rus'. These meandering paths of Ukrainian and Russian interpretations of the past indicate that differences in interpreting and narrating history have political consequences that necessitate further new narratives. Differences in narratives and politics cannot be solved solely by means of historical analysis and narrating, but must be tackled from

other perspectives, too. Ukrainian microhistories and case studies on how ‘common history’ may be questioned exemplify the power that an individual may have when referring to policies outside of Ukraine for the support of his/her efforts.<sup>5</sup> On the macro level, the war in Ukraine, while intensified in early 2022, has accelerated this kind of challenging of ‘common history’ by making Ukraine a matter for the public, too, as evidenced by mass media coverage and social media discussions. States and Orthodox churches outside of Ukraine and Russia have also started to think about the global consequences of Russian–Ukrainian ecclesiastical and political wars and to demand, if not directly involve themselves in, global action.<sup>6</sup>

In this part, *Teuvo Laitila* uses an orthodox priest, Father Vasyl Romanyuk, later bishop of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and Patriarch Volodymyr, of the Kyiv Patriarchate, as examples of how questions of human and religious rights were ‘internationalised’ in the Soviet Ukraine in the 1970s. Laitila points out that, as several church and secular historians have shown, even nominally powerless people can fight back, in this case with words. Fr. Romanyuk’s appeals to various political and ecclesiastical bodies in the West, even though they were unheard in the late Soviet period, laid the groundwork for changes in the 1980s and later.

In *Pekka Metso’s* and *Petteri Lalu’s* chapter, the focus is on the immediate effects of the Russian war against Ukraine since February 2022, addressing the ecclesial, ecumenical and security realities in Finland, a Northern country that borders Russia and which has a multi-layered and complex history and contacts with it.

The chapter studies the growing negative reactions of the Finnish Lutheran and Orthodox bishops concerning the Russian invasion and, particularly, the position and views of Moscow Patriarch Kirill, who claimed that the war in Ukraine is about the defence of authentic morality against the ‘sinful’ West, with its pride parades and liberal views. Metso and Lalu also point out how ecclesiastical policies and statements, when coupled with secular politics, have consequences in security policy. For the first time in the country’s history, a majority of Finnish citizens expressed a willingness to join NATO. Likewise, in international public discussions, the ecclesial, ecumenical and security effects of the war in Ukraine have been present since the beginning of the war. By contextualising the Finnish bishops’ views, Metso and Lalu show how church and secular politics are interwoven and what kinds of results, even unexpected ones, they may have.

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5 For example, Wanner 2022.

6 Cf. Plokhly 2023.

The third part of the volume focuses on ‘Colliding Narratives and Churches’ New Ways’. Tracing ecclesiastical and societal connections and differences between Ukraine and Russia is also, in part, a tracing of globalisation and today’s deglobalisation processes. What happens within Ukrainian or Russian Christianity, or between them, is not only a local or Eastern European concern, but rather a process affecting the worldwide understanding of religious freedom and ecumenical work and interactions. This transnational dimension of human contacts, religious or otherwise, seems partly to have been lost by a majority of the clergy, politicians and laypeople who instead are focusing on national or individual issues. If analyses of the past and the present can teach us anything, perhaps it is the lesson that competing parties and narratives have existed for a long time, that they collide in times of crises and imperial expansions and that narratives are one way both to create social solidarity and to try to find ways to justify living in a changing and plural world. To achieve this, one must accept the fact that narratives are multi-faceted and there is no master narrative that should be allowed to have a monopoly.

*Mikko Ketola* focuses on the intra-Ukrainian situation by examining how the Greek Catholic Church portrays itself as a strong supporter of Ukrainian independence and its Western political orientation. The church was repressed by Stalin after the Second World War, survived underground and reappeared in the late 1980s. During the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan demonstrations of 2013–2014, it emerged as one of the pillars of the fight against the corruption of Russian-backed politicians. Analysing the views and actions of the Greek Catholic Church’s leadership during the war in 2022, Ketola shows how the church is not solely a national player, but also has an international role, both in Ukraine and outside of it. Thus, although often dismissed as unimportant and neither genuinely Catholic nor Orthodox, the Greek Catholic Church has proven to be a major actor in the transformation of Ukraine, both internally and internationally.

*Maija Penttilä* focuses on the current situation of Russian and Ukrainian Protestants. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 turned the page in relations between Russian and Ukrainian Protestants, or more specifically, Evangelicals. Before the war, their contact had been friendly, but after the Russian attack, they parted. One could say that their theologies became politicised when the churches disputed how to behave in the new situation. Evangelical unions in Ukraine asked for more ‘Bonhoeffers’ in Russia, while officially the Russian Evangelicals stayed relatively quiet and concentrated on praying for peace. Penttilä’s chapter is based on various speeches and other documents published on the churches’ official websites. She addresses the entanglement of theology and politics by analysing how various positions

towards the war have been legitimised. In particular, Russian views seem to reflect secular political propaganda and appeal to rhetoric reminiscent of that of Patriarch Kirill. Interestingly, there were also attempts for mutual agreement after the war broke out, suggesting that prospects for peace are not entirely lost.

In her chapter, *Heta Hurskainen* examines the Ukrainian Byzantine churches and their potential for participating in the international ecumenical movement following the collapse of the Soviet Union. She presents the World Council of Churches as an example of multilateral ecumenism and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland as an example of a bilateral dialogue partner with the Russian Orthodox Church. In both cases, the changed status of Ukrainian churches has been visible. Hurskainen shows that, in the 1990s, it was common for ecumenical bodies not to interfere with the Ukrainian situation because they were perceived as 'intra-Orthodox' issues. The status of the Greek Catholic Church was an exception. Only the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine has changed international ecumenical actors' attitudes. Simultaneously, since the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church's claims that religious freedom in Ukraine was violated has no longer been heeded, and international ecumenical actors have begun to support the manifoldness of the Ukrainian Byzantine churches in a new way.

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