

Opinion editorial

Volodymyr's Baptism of Kyivan Rus: Ukraine's European choice then and now

Volodymyr the Great's choice of Orthodox Christianity as the official religion of Kyivan Rus' cemented the region within European civilization.

This weekend Kyiv will celebrate the 1025th anniversary of Grand Prince Volodymyr's decision in 988 to accept Christianity for the Kyivan Rus' Empire from the Mother Church of Constantinople, the then- unchallenged capital of Christendom and the world. The celebration will take place against the backdrop of a modern-day political and ecclesiastical choice regarding Ukraine's future direction, not dissimilar to the choice faced by Volodymyr in his time. The Ukrainian state and the Patriarchate of Moscow have (separately) expended significant efforts to ensure that Orthodox prelates from around the world and their civic leaders come to Kyiv to join in the festivities. Oddly, Kyiv will, therefore, host two parallel, but ideologically competing events, with the state trying to focus on Volodymyr's Kyiv legacy, and the Moscow Patriarchate placing Moscow and Russia at the center of the celebrations.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich will likely underscore Ukraine's desire to integrate into modern-day Europe by highlighting that Volodymyr's choice in the 10th century determined the European spiritual and civilization orientation of the Ukrainian people. By joining the ranks of European Christian nations, Kyiv became the center of Christianity in the eastern lands. It produced a vibrant spiritual and material culture, including in the areas of architecture, iconography, music and song, literature and education. Kyiv later spread the light of Christianity to all of the lands of Kyivan Rus', including present-day Russia and Belarus. Indeed, at the time of the Baptism of Kyiv, Moscow did not exist and would not become a settlement for another 150 years, when it adopted Christianity from the Metropolitan the See of Kyiv, its Mother Church.

On the other hand, Patriarch Kirill will hail the 1025th celebration as a demonstration of the unity of the Moscow Patriarchate, of its success following the collapse of the USSR in holding its faithful together, especially in Ukraine. The present celebration is an attempt to cement the Moscow Patriarchate as the Mother Church of Ukraine and, through propagation of its recently-minted ideology of "Russkiy Mir," (Russian World), to legitimize its claim over the historical lands of the ancient Rus' empire – Ukraine, western Russia and Belarus – the jurisdiction it seized from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1689, an annexation that has never been recognized by the latter.

Russkiy Mir is more of a political than an ecclesiastical ideology: it emphasizes the leading role of the Moscow Patriarchate in the region, collective responsibility over individual human rights, the guiding role of political institutions loyal to Moscow, rejection of "Western" values, and is ripe with anti-Muslim and anti-Catholic rhetoric. In general, it represents a chauvinistic, xenophobic, intolerant, and anti-modern expression of Russian Orthodox messianic exceptionalism. The ultimate purpose of Russkiy Mir is to exert hegemony over the Orthodox world, especially to split Ukraine from European influence and, once and for all, from the Mother Church of Constantinople. However, Russkiy Mir has little to offer the Orthodox world in terms of moral values or leadership, except continuous conflict with confessions of different views, coupled with myths about Russian "moral superiority" and promotion of the Kremlin's geopolitical policies to re-establish Russian control over neighboring post-Soviet states.

Unfortunately, in this tempest of competing agendas, the important spiritual dimension at

the heart of the choices Ukrainians face is lost. Ruled by foreigners for much of its history, at independence in 1991 Ukraine had no indigenous institutions of government upon which to rely to build a modern society. Indeed, up to the annexation of the Ukrainian lands by Russia in the 17th century, it was the Church that provided a direct institutional link to Kyivan Rus' and maintained an institutional structure that extended across thousands of settlements, preserving and protecting the unique spiritual and cultural identity of the Ukrainian people.

This Kyivan church tradition was characterized by the absorption of European influences; a conciliar tradition of government with an enhanced role of the laity that governed the villages and towns as well; an institutional structure that informed the national identity; uniquely, use of the vernacular in the liturgy; and the emergence of a religious, literary and artistic culture that was specifically Ukrainian. Kyiv became the center of Orthodox learning and the Kyiv Theological School, founded by Kyiv Metropolitan Petro Mohyla (the precursor to today's Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) had contact with all of the major centres of higher learning in Europe. Importantly, since the Church was unified and undivided during the first 1,000 years of Christianity in Ukraine, this uniquely Ukrainian tradition formed both the Orthodox and the so-called Uniate Greek Catholics.

By contrast, during this period, the Russian Church had evolved into a highly absolutist structure, with a rigid hierarchy largely beholden to the state and was governed on the synodal model. At the time of Ukraine's annexation, Peter the Great absorbed the institutional infrastructure of the Kyivan Church into the Russian Church, hence, the Moscow Patriarchate's appropriation of the Kyivan Rus tradition as its own. This was followed by centuries of Russification, imperial Russian policies to eradicate the Kyivan Church Tradition and the Ukrainian language, and the denigration of Ukrainians as "Little Russians" (Malorosy), destroying their identity.

Yet, the Kyivan Church Tradition survived and went on to shape and inform the revival of a movement for an independent (autocephalous) church in Ukraine in the 20th century. Today, the Kyivan Church Tradition is reflected in the ideology of the non-Moscow-oriented parts of the Ukrainian Church, especially the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. The Kyivan Church Tradition also underlies the rising tensions within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. At the very least, many hierarchs are unhappy with Patriarch Kirill's recent attempts to take direct control of this self-governing church, or, at most, desire spiritual union with their as yet non-recognized Orthodox brethren in a unified autocephalous Ukrainian Church. The failure of Russkiy Mir to take root in Ukraine is a testament to the depth of the Kyivan Church Tradition as part of the Ukrainian identity.

As among the largest Byzantine rite countries in the world, Ukraine is not only a geopolitical, but also an ecclesiastical fault line. Official statistics show that more people regularly attend church in Ukraine than in Russia, or anywhere else in Europe for that matter. Ultimately, religion in Ukraine informs people's choice of identity and political orientation, including whether to follow a European or a Eurasian future.

In this context, Ukrainians can still look to the Mother Church of Constantinople and "Europe's Orthodox Patriarch," Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, on how to adapt the principles of the Kyivan Church Tradition to a modern European future. Under Patriarch Bartholomew, Orthodoxy is evolving in concert with the concerns of the modern world. He promotes a 21st century vision for the Church, concomitant with the values of the democratic and free world - a vision based on the inalienable freedom and dignity of the individual, firmly

grounded in universal human rights, and each person's responsibilities for their behaviour before God and their fellow beings, including responsibility for the stewardship of the earth.

This message can provide a spiritual and political beacon for all Ukrainians who still struggle to overcome the legacy of communist oppression: corruption, political cynicism, mercantilist excess, the suppression of human rights, and, above all, economic and spiritual poverty. With 75% of Ukrainians claiming to be "Orthodox," by assisting to heal the divisions in the Orthodox Church in Ukraine under the moral guidance of the Mother Church of Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew can potentially help unify the various Orthodox formations and facilitate Ukraine's integration into the wider European community of democratic nations.

Ultimately, the Orthodox confessions in Ukraine will themselves decide on the course and timing of unification and Ukrainians will decide the direction of their political future. However, divisions in the Church and society can be reconciled without imposing alien ideologies, by drawing on a genuine native ecclesiastical tradition created by the baptism of Kyiv, one that can become firmly grounded in the principles of freedom and democracy.

-Daniel Bilak

*Daniel Bilak is a Kyiv-based international lawyer
and adviser to various ecclesiastical entities*

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