Russia is Waging a Religious War on Ukraine, and Israel is Involved

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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and Metropolitan Epiphanus, head of the Independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, sanctify the Ukrainian church's split with the Russian church after 335 years of ties (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

A renewed schism in Christianity: Ukraine is fighting for its independence from Russia in the churches as well as in the streets. And Kyiv has a surprising model for its struggle for sovereignty and religious identity.

If Ukraine is ground zero in the tensions between Russia and the West, religion is ground zero in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Grappling with the conflict with Russia made Israel a model for Eastern Christian churches in Ukraine. Now that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been launched by Russian forces and Ukrainians find themselves surrounded by hostile countries, they will look to Israel even more.

One of the casualties of the invasion of Ukraine on February 24 might well be the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is how the Russian Orthodox Church refers to its "flock" and to the over 12,000 parish buildings and monasteries under its jurisdiction in Ukraine.

As tensions mounted toward the end of 2021, a telephone poll by the Razmukov Center in Kyiv found support for this Russia-tied church fell to only 22 percent among self-proclaimed Orthodox believers. Even though this is by far the largest church in terms of clergy and parishes in Ukraine, it had only half the support of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is independent of Moscow.

The Russian invasion left its head, Metropolitan Onufriy of Chernivtsi, Western Ukraine, in an unenviable position: He would effectively have to broker Orthodox-on-Orthodox violence in the name of converting Russian President Vladimir Putin's imperial visions into reality.

He refused: Within hours of the start of the war, Onufriy, in sharp distinction to Moscow's Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, expressed his commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, his solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and encouraged the defense of Ukraine. He condemned Putin's aggression as the equivalent of the sin of Cain.

In contrast, Patriarch Kirill in an address Sunday denounced the "evil forces" in "brotherly Ukraine" that have "always fought against the unity of Russia and the Russian church."

Serious challenges to Ukraine's sovereignty, which began with the first Russian incursion into eastern Ukraine in 2014, spurred then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to turn to religion to further embed that sovereignty and autonomy from Russian influence, be securing an independent Ukrainian Orthodox church to end nearly 350 years of Russian control over religious life in Ukraine.

When such a church was formally recognized in January 2019, it became a weapon for a weak state, Ukraine, mired in a hybrid war with Russia. Religious independence was a way to retaliate for the annexation of Ukrainian territory by dealing a blow to the influence of Russian Orthodoxy in Ukraine, and even globally, and by extension to Putin's own standing.

Now with an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine and vanishing allegiance to an Orthodox church in unity with Moscow, is Ukraine headed towards the consolidation of Eastern Christian religious institutions into a single dominant church, as is typical for majority Orthodox Eastern European countries?

During the wars following the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church backed nationalist leaders and advanced pan-Orthodox unity, a religio-political project that targeted fellow Catholic and Muslim citizens.

In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two provinces Georgia lost after Russia invaded in 2008 (supposedly to "protect" Russian-speakers there from "oppression"), the Georgian Orthodox Church has allied with the Russian Orthodox Church, to strengthen the social policies it advocates at the expense of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

Could this consolidation be a potentially perilous omen for religious pluralism, compromising the standing and security of religious minorities there? Especially under conditions of active warfare, this is a distinct possibility.

State-backed efforts to promote allegiance to a particular religious institution foster religious homogeneity. In Ukraine this will surely strengthen the ties its religious institutions have to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople and to the European Orthodox churches under its jurisdiction, especially the Greek Orthodox Church.

It will shift the religious balance of power in Eastern Europe away from Moscow and weaken the promotion of its geopolitical agenda and its gender-conservative social policies. In other words, religion is becoming a vehicle for Ukraine to move toward secular Europe and away from co-religionists in Russia.

If Jews were the Other of yesteryear, it is clearly the members of the Russian Orthodox Church who are now considered alien in Ukraine.

Indeed, Jews have never been so integrated into Ukraine's politics. That is why Putin's declared intention to "denazify" the Ukrainian government following the invasion amounts to doublespeak. The current Ukrainian president's Jewish identity, and his appointment of a Jewish prime minister after he was elected, which made Ukraine the only country, after Israel, where Jews held such high office simultaneously, was unremarkable at the time, in spite of the region's history of antisemitism.

Prior to the invasion, Ukrainian political and religious leaders had increasingly turned to Israel to identify strategies and mechanisms to consolidate a diverse population into a nation, as a means to strengthen Ukrainian sovereignty. From a Ukrainian ecclesiastical perspective, Israel has not only managed to sufficiently integrate a linguistically and culturally diverse population, including members of an overseas diaspora, they have done it on the basis of a religious identity.

Taking a lead from Israeli domestic policies oriented toward youth that fuse religious and national identities through humanitarian and military service, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), which is located predominantly in Western Ukraine, introduced a more modest version of the Israeli Birthright program.

Their goal is to inspire young people from the Ukrainian diaspora, most of who families had been displaced during World War II, to return to Ukraine and contribute to its developing civil society. The UGCC integrated such efforts into a program of one-year public service, modeled on the *Shnat Sherut* year of volunteer work prior to military service.

If Zionism aimed to develop a Jewish national state, the Kyivan Tradition is a national idea that posits that as a borderland, a crossroads of Eastern and Western forms of Christianity, Ukraine could become an ecumenical bridge linking Orthodox and Catholic communities of a Byzantine tradition.

Sofia, or the concept of wisdom, much like the idea of a "chosen people,' becomes the defining essence of this new national concept of individual, national and citizenship-based identity that fundamentally incorporates religion, and specifically ecumenicism, as a shared attribute.

The Kyivan Tradition is an answer to the political concept of the Russian World to which the Russian state, in concert with the Russian Orthodox Church, is wedded. That Russian World concept posits that Orthodoxy constitutes a single spiritual-historic space that mirrors an imperial configuration of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians, and excludes all others. In Putin's historic mythology, the common origins of Slavic unity can be found in Kyuvan Rus', a tenth-century proto-state, and the advent of Byzantine Christianity.

One of the contributing factors to the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is Kyiv's intention to mover ever closer into a European orbit. And Ukraine's leaders are doing it by forging a wedge into the religious tradition they share with Russians, guided by assimilatory domestic policies they have seen and admired in Israel.

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