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*Allison D. Bodaken*  
*Seton Hall University*  
*ORCID ID: 0009-0000-9937-5918*

## **Religion and the Russian - Ukraine War**

*Abstract.* This paper explores the religious dimensions of the ongoing war in Ukraine, emphasizing how faith has been used both as a tool of political influence and as a symbol of national identity. It analyzes the split between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill's theological justification for the invasion, and the rapid growth of religious life in Ukraine as a form of resistance.

Ukraine's religious history represents an intricate and complex tapestry, meticulously woven through centuries of geographical positioning, imperial influences, cultural developments, and historical conflicts. Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe, Ukraine has long served as a vibrant meeting ground and melting pot for diverse religious traditions, most notably Eastern Orthodox Christianity, various forms of Catholicism, and Judaism.

The Christian heritage of Ukraine extends deep into the medieval period, specifically to the prosperous state of Kyivan Rus' – a remarkable federation of East Slavic tribes that experienced its golden age from the 9<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Britannica/Petrizzello, 2019). The watershed moment came in 988 when Prince Volodymyr the Great made the momentous decision to adopt Byzantine Christianity as the official state religion. This historic event, known as the Baptism of Rus', represented far more than a mere religious conversion; it was a calculated spiritual and political maneuver that simultaneously aligned the state with the powerful Byzantine Empire while establishing the enduring foundation for Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition throughout Ukrainian territories.

The religious landscape underwent significant diversification as Ukraine experienced partition between various empires. The western regions of Ukraine, under the successive governance of Polish and later Austro-Hungarian authorities, witnessed the significant establishment of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. This unique religious institution maintains a distinctive character by following Eastern Orthodox liturgical rites while simultaneously maintaining formal communion with Rome, representing an innovative compromise that enabled Eastern Christians to unite with the Catholic Church while preserving their cherished traditional practices and cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's eastern and central regions remained firmly within the Orthodox sphere, predominantly under the influence of the Russian Empire. During this period, the Russian Orthodox Church increasingly became an instrument for consolidating imperial control and systematically suppressing local religious expressions and autonomy. This development created a profound and lasting divide between those Orthodox Christians who aligned with Moscow's spiritual authority and those who persistently sought religious independence and autonomy.

The Soviet period (1917 – 1991) brought unprecedented challenges to religious life in Ukraine through the implementation of aggressive state atheism, which resulted in widespread church destruction, systematic clergy persecution, and the comprehensive suppression of religious

practices throughout society. Nevertheless, religious faith demonstrated remarkable resilience, particularly in rural communities, where it continued to function as an essential component of Ukrainian national and cultural identity. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, despite being officially outlawed in 1946, maintained its presence through an extensive underground network until its eventual re-emergence in 1989 (Britannica, 2019). The Orthodox Church managed to survive this difficult period under intense state surveillance and control, though this experience further intensified the existing divisions between Moscow-aligned institutions and those seeking independent religious authority.

The achievement of Ukrainian independence in 1991 catalyzed an extraordinary religious renaissance throughout the nation. Long-shuttered churches reopened their doors, while numerous new religious communities established themselves across the country. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church underwent a significant transformation, splitting into multiple branches. A particularly momentous development occurred in 2018 with the granting of autocephaly (ecclesiastical independence) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (BBC, 2018) – a development that represented a crucial milestone in Ukraine’s journey toward both religious and political autonomy from Russian influence. The Russian Orthodox church has long held sway over the church in Ukraine, but breakaway churches were set up during Ukraine’s brief independence after the fall of the Russian Empire and again after communism collapsed in 1991 (BBC, 2018).

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which underwent a dramatic escalation following Russia’s comprehensive military invasion in February 2022, has drastically changed the religious dynamic in the region. Religious institutions, beliefs, and traditions have emerged as powerful forces in this conflict, serving multiple functions: shaping competing narratives, providing justification for military actions, molding public perception and support, and influencing decision-making processes, particularly within Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Rather than being peripheral to the conflict, these religious elements constitute fundamental components of the ideological and cultural struggle at the heart of this war.

The religious dimension of this conflict centers on a profound and historically significant division within Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Throughout many centuries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church existed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, a relationship that reflected not only ecclesiastical hierarchy but also the broader pattern of Russian political and cultural dominance over Ukrainian affairs. This long-standing arrangement experienced a seismic shift in 2018 when the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in a decision of historic significance, granted autocephaly (complete ecclesiastical independence) to the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). “Only 5.6 percent of Ukrainians identify with the Moscow Patriarchate, while 42.2 percent said they are part of the [independent] Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Jamestown Foundation, 2024). This momentous development received strong endorsement from the Ukrainian government but faced immediate and vigorous opposition from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

This ecclesiastical separation represents far more than a mere administrative reorganization within church structures – it embodies Ukraine’s broader aspirations for spiritual autonomy and national self-determination. The Russian Orthodox Church, maintaining close institutional and ideological ties with the Kremlin, interpreted this development as a direct challenge to Russia’s sphere of influence. Both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow have consistently presented the current conflict through the lens of protecting what they term “Holy Rus” – an idealized conception of the spiritual and cultural unity binding Russia, Ukraine, and

Belarus within the Orthodox Christian tradition. According to this narrative, Ukraine's increasing orientation toward Western institutions and its pursuit of religious independence constitute fundamental betrayals of this centuries-old shared spiritual heritage.

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Patriarch Kirill, serving as the supreme authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, has demonstrated unwavering support for Russia's military campaign, characterizing it as a fundamental struggle against what he perceives as Western moral deterioration and spiritual degradation. Through his carefully crafted sermons and public statements, he presents the conflict as a divinely sanctioned mission to safeguard traditional Orthodox Christian values from the perceived threats of Western liberal ideologies and secular influences. "Kirill has justified the war by portraying it as part of a wider struggle against the decadent values of the liberal West, which he sees as posing an existential threat to the spiritual unity of the 'Russian World'" (Atlantic Council 2023). This theological framing has provided crucial religious legitimacy to the Kremlin's strategic objectives, effectively dissolving the traditional boundaries between religious institution and state apparatus. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), formerly aligned with Moscow, declared its complete independence from the Russian Orthodox Church in May 2022, marking a historic break in response to Russian Patriarch Kirill's support of the war against Ukraine.

This unprecedented merging of ecclesiastical and political interests has provoked widespread condemnation from Orthodox religious leaders and Christian denominations across the global community. Many religious authorities and observers have denounced this approach as a dangerous instrumentalization of religious faith to validate military aggression and imperialistic ambitions. In contrast, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and other Ukrainian religious leaders have consistently opposed the invasion, positioning their religious institutions as fundamental pillars supporting peace, national resistance, and social cohesion.

Religious institutions have become indispensable sources of collective strength and communal resilience within Ukrainian society. "Religion provides a personal coping mechanism, [but] it has increasingly become an avenue for individuals to express national identities and allegiances" (Cultural Atlas, 2023). Religious organizations across denominations – including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches – have mobilized extensive networks to deliver crucial humanitarian assistance, provide emergency shelter, and offer spiritual guidance to countless individuals affected by the conflict. Religious leaders and clergy members serve multiple vital roles, functioning as military chaplains supporting front-line troops and passionate advocates for justice, peace, and national sovereignty.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), particularly influential in Western Ukraine, has consistently positioned itself as a stalwart supporter of Ukrainian independence and closer integration with European institutions. The church's leadership consistently emphasizes fundamental principles of human dignity, individual liberty, and the legitimate right to resist

external aggression, reinforcing a distinctive national identity that seamlessly integrates cultural heritage and spiritual values.

The ongoing conflict has significantly exacerbated pre-existing religious tensions within Ukrainian society. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which maintained its formal association with the Moscow Patriarchate until 2022, has undertaken efforts to distance itself from Patriarch Kirill's explicit support for the invasion by declaring its institutional independence from Moscow's authority. Nevertheless, considerable suspicion persists within Ukrainian society, leading government authorities to conduct investigations and implement sanctions against religious figures accused of maintaining collaborative relationships with Russian interests.

The religious dimension of the Ukraine conflict extends far beyond conventional matters of faith and spiritual practice – it is inextricably interwoven with fundamental questions of national identity, political loyalty, and the exercise of power. For the Russian state, Orthodox Christianity functions as a sophisticated instrument of ideological warfare and social control. For Ukraine, religious institutions simultaneously represent contested territory and an essential source of national strength and resilience. The religious aspects of this conflict illuminate the complex ways in which spiritual beliefs, historical narratives, and nationalist aspirations intersect to produce far-reaching consequences.

Contemporary Ukraine stands as a testament to religious pluralism and diversity. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) maintain their presence alongside an array of other faith communities, including the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Roman Catholic congregations, various Protestant denominations, Jewish communities, and an increasingly significant Muslim population, particularly concentrated in Crimea and among the Crimean Tatar people. In this context, religious affiliation extends beyond personal faith, serving as a powerful expression of national identity, regional allegiance, and political orientation in Ukrainian society.

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