Tangle of church and state splits Ukrainian Orthodox

Across Ukraine congregations are debating whether to join the recently created, independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine—or remain affiliated with the Moscow patriarch.

by Fred Weir in the June 5, 2019 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Boris Kovalchuk arrived 19 years ago in the small agricultural village of Pylypovychi. Since then, he has ministered to the needs of Orthodox believers as the local priest, maintaining a spiritual tradition that has held sway in this land for centuries.

In recent months, a debate has divided the village's 1,500 people: Should its little onion-domed church—its first since the Bolsheviks destroyed the previous one in 1932—retain its traditional affiliation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which owes spiritual allegiance to the patriarch in Moscow? Or should it shift to the recently created Orthodox Church of Ukraine?

Communities across Ukraine often discuss such questions in the language of geopolitics and national aspirations, exacerbated over the past five years by Ukraine's conflict with Russia.

Kovalchuk rejects calls to join the new church.

"We are all citizens of the same country, Ukraine," he said. "We want to see our country prosperous, democratic, and successful. But Christian believers do not see living in this land as their final purpose. It's just a step on our journey to God."

Advocates of Ukrainian independence have long dreamed of an autocephalous church, with its own spiritual head. After Ukraine became an independent state in 1991, the archbishop of Kiev, Metropolitan Filaret, declared an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church with a Kiev patriarch—himself—and began to gather parishes into it.

The struggle became more intense following the Maidan revolution in 2014, when protesters overthrew the Ukrainian president. Later that year Russia illegally annexed Crimea, a peninsula extending into the Black Sea south of Ukraine, and supported rebels in a separatist war in eastern Ukraine. Since then passions have surged, with Filaret and others arguing that it is unacceptable for any Ukrainians to belong to a church whose center is located in the "aggressor state."

Filaret said he now feels vindicated. His church, long unrecognized in the Orthodox world, has been made legal by the charter issued late last year by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who is considered "first among equals" in the global Orthodox community. There are 14 Orthodox church bodies in the world, in countries such as Greece, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Poland, most of which are autocephalous.

"It is not clear that the Constantinople patriarch has the power to do this," said Alexander Bakhov, head of the legal department for the church aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate, who sees the new Ukrainian church as originating in "two groups of schismatics."

In December, Filaret agreed to fold his Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kiev Patriarchate, which had about 5,000 parishes, into the new entity, along with another, much smaller independent Orthodox Church. The edict from Constantinople does not allow for the new Ukrainian church to have its own patriarch, and the new church is headed by a younger leader, Metropolitan Epiphanius. But the elder leader remains active.

"We have entered a new period, where the task is to unite all the Ukrainian Orthodox faithful into one church," Filaret said. "If God blessed Ukraine to become an independent state, we are sure he also gave his blessing to an independent church. Without an independent church, the state can't survive."

Unlike many church people on both sides of the conflict, Filaret doesn't mince words when it comes to the geopolitical implications of his struggle.

"Russia is the aggressor country," he said. "We don't want to return to union with Russia. We have chosen the path joining Europe, the EU, and NATO."

John Sydor, spokesman for the new Ukrainian Orthodox church, headquartered in St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kiev, said the new church will have a pro-Ukrainian ideology and the language of church services will be Ukrainian. But he

admitted that temporary exceptions might have to be made in a country where almost half the population uses Russian as its first language.

This discussion may sound odd to members of other faith traditions, who usually don't connect their religious affiliation with any particular government.

"In the Orthodox world, there is no pope," said Yevgeny Kharkovchenko, a professor of religious studies at Kiev's Taras Shevchenko National University. "Church leaders are under the leaders of the state."

The administrative center of the church aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate is in Kiev, not Moscow. It includes about 13,000 parishes across Ukraine and is headed by Metropolitan Onufriy, a Ukrainian, who resides at the thousand-year-old Kiev Monastery of the Caves, one of the most sacred sites in Orthodoxy. Unlike local churches, the monastery and other major religious sites are state property. There have been rumblings in Ukraine's parliament about evicting the church from its prestigious perch.

A law recently passed will force it to change its name to something like "the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine," thus yielding "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" to the new entity. And Ukrainian legislators may soon clear up the ambiguity in Ukrainian law over whether the affiliation of a local church is to be decided by its core parishioners or the entire population of a community.

In the village of Pylypovychi, some have raised the question of sympathy with Russia in connection with Kovalchuk's decision not to leave the established church.

"People are accusing us of buying bullets for separatists, taking orders from Moscow, and other absurd things," he said. "We have nothing to do with Moscow, and we don't go in for politics. We have always tried to be a unifying influence in this community."

On the other side are those who believe that since Ukraine has now been granted the right to have its own independent church, their local church ought to affiliate with it. They held a meeting earlier this year, attended by about 200 people who voted to do just that. They also took up a petition that garnered some 250 signatures.

A group of 27 people, made up of Kovalchuk’s most active parishioners, launched a rival petition that got 210 signatures. In his view, local people who hardly ever go to church are trying to determine spiritual life for those who have made the church the center of their lives.

Olena Korotka, the elected head of Pylypovychi’s town council, said she is baffled by the struggle that has erupted in her formerly quiet and peaceful community.

“I am supposed to represent the state here, but I have no idea what to do,” she said. “There are so many aggressive-minded people getting involved. It even causes families to quarrel. We like our priest. He’s invested so much here, and we don’t want him to leave. Maybe if some people want a new church, they should go and build one? There should be peace. When people start fighting like this, nothing good comes of it.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Tangle of church and state splits Ukrainian Orthodox.”