

Rival Orthodoxies in Ukraine

The war is revealing divisions among Christians in the region—and deepening them.

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue



People walk in the Monastery of the Caves, also known as Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, one of the holiest sites of Eastern Orthodox Christians, in Kyiv, Ukraine, on March 23. (AP Photo / Efrem Lukatsky)

Despite the threat of Russian bombardment, Orthodox believers in Ukraine gathered to celebrate Pascha, the high point of the church year. On April 16, a few minutes after midnight, they quietly left the darkened naves of their churches and made a procession, candles in hand, around the churches' outer walls.

Believers also gathered in Kyiv at Ukraine's oldest monastery, the Monastery of the Caves, designated as a *lavra*, a major monastery. Normally, the acting head of the lavra, Metropolitan Pavel, would have led the service, but this year he was under house arrest.

A few days earlier, Ukrainian officials had accused Pavel of violating Ukrainian law by justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine and stoking hatred against other religious groups in Ukraine. Metropolitan Onuphry, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the hierarch to whom Pavel reports, served in his place.

However, at the very same moment, a competing service and procession were taking place in a different part of the lavra—indeed, in its main cathedral. These were led by Archimandrite Avraamii. He had recently renounced Onuphry's authority and declared his allegiance to Metropolitan Epiphanius, head of a rival body, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Onuphry's paschal celebration was an act of defiance. The Ukrainian government had given him and his followers until March 29 to abandon the lavra grounds, which includes the church's administrative offices and a major theological seminary and academy.

Since autumn, Ukrainian security forces have raided numerous UOC churches and monasteries, including the Monastery of the Caves. Government officials have alleged that not only Pavel but also other UOC hierarchs and priests are loyal to Moscow and have harbored Russian spies. More than 60 priests have been charged with collaborating with Russian military forces.

Several of Onuphry's bishops issued public appeals to world religious leaders to intervene on their church's behalf. Some church members accused Zelensky of Soviet-style persecution, although Onuphry himself conspicuously refrained from such rhetoric. Nor did he publicly defend Pavel, who has long flaunted power, advertised his connections to prominent Russians, and clashed with Ukrainian officials.

In the days following the eviction deadline, supporters and opponents of the UOC confronted each other on the monastery grounds. The UOC appealed to the courts to delay the eviction, even as Onuphry and others packed up and left.

At stake in Ukraine today is not only territorial integrity and political control but also national identity. For centuries, what is now Ukraine has been defined as distinct regions, even as a distinct Ukrainian language and culture developed. Greeks and Ottoman Turks once established settlements along the Black Sea. Areas in the west were controlled by the medieval Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and, later, by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russia dominated the east, often with aggressive Russification programs. And Central Ukraine has historically combined Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian cultural elements.

Amid the diversity of Ukrainian society, the war has helped forge a common Ukrainian civil and cultural identity. Many Ukrainians, especially in the east and center, once spoke both Russian and Ukrainian with ease. Now, Ukrainian is displacing Russian, both by government decree and by personal choice. To be Ukrainian increasingly means to be anti-Russian. Monuments related to the Russian Empire have been dismantled—in Odesa to Catherine the Great, who built the city, and in Poltava to the great poet Pushkin.

These questions of national identity have a religious dimension. Many Ukrainians, even if they have no church affiliation or do not actively participate in religious life, trace their nation's founding to a religious event. In 988 in what is now Crimea, Volodymyr, the prince of the Eastern Slavs, converted to Byzantine Orthodoxy. Upon returning to his capital in Kyiv, he ordered his warriors and their families to be baptized en masse in the Dnipro River. Soon, monks began settling into caves in the hillside along the river.

Over the centuries, Ukrainians have absorbed and developed this heritage in different ways. Since the end of the 16th century, the dominant church in the west of the country has been the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which has Orthodox roots but is loyal to Rome. In the east, the Russian Orthodox Church has been especially prominent. In the center, movements for an independent Orthodox church began appearing in the 19th century, and these are the roots of today's OCU.

Protestants, though small in number, have also been active in Ukraine. Crimea has a historic Muslim presence. And although Ukraine's large Jewish population was decimated by the Holocaust, some Jews have remained or returned.

In recent decades, the UGCC has appealed to Catholic social teaching to promote a Ukraine that abides by international standards of human rights and the rule of law.

An autocephalous (self-ruling) church, the OCU emerged in 2018 with the support of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. It has long asserted that to be Ukrainian means to stand against Russia. Many of the minority religious groups have also taken this position.

The other large Orthodox church, the UOC, long associated with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, argues that it is still the only canonical Orthodox body in Ukraine. While supporting an independent Ukraine, it also affirms its nation's common Orthodox heritage with Russia.

Since 1991—and especially since the revolution ten years ago on the Maidan, Kyiv's central square—the UOC has increasingly emphasized that it is a Ukrainian church, not a Russian one. On February 24, 2022, the day of the Russian invasion, Onufry declared that if Russia and Ukraine are truly “brother nations,” as Putin and Kirill regularly assert, Russia was committing the sin of Cain against Abel. He demanded that Putin immediately cease hostilities. Like other Ukrainian churches, the UOC has provided extensive humanitarian aid both to refugees and to the Ukrainian military.

Russians often define themselves by the same legacy that Ukrainians claim. Russians tell, as their own, the story of Prince Vladimir, Kiev, and the Dnieper River. Like Ukrainians, they see Orthodox Christianity as having foundationally shaped their nation's art, architecture, music, literature, and everyday way of life. And like Ukrainians, they have long made pilgrimages to the Monastery of the Caves, walking reverently through its underground corridors and worshiping in its glorious churches. Going even further, the current Russian Orthodox patriarch, Kirill, appeals to this history to bless the war and to insist that Putin is protecting Ukrainians from a West that wants to substitute its secular and decadent values for Ukraine's (and Russia's) pure Orthodoxy.

During the communist era, the government brutally repressed the UGCC and the autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox churches. Some parishes went underground; others were forcibly incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these independent church bodies reemerged. Protracted battles over property rights erupted. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church based in Moscow gave its parishes in Ukraine autonomy, a status short of autocephaly that nevertheless allowed the UOC to manage its internal affairs independently.

The government of the newly independent Ukraine retained possession of major Orthodox sites—including St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, the Monastery of the Caves, and the Pochaev Lavra in western Ukraine—and designated them as national cultural-historical monuments. St. Sophia has functioned primarily as a museum. Parts of the two lavras were leased, rent-free, to the UOC, at that time the one major Orthodox church in the country.

The Euromaidan Revolution of 2013–2014 intensified the tension between Ukraine and Russia and between its rival Orthodox churches. The pro-Russian Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovych, had to flee the country. He had privileged the Moscow-affiliated UOC. In contrast, the new president, Petro Poroshenko, actively promoted formation of the new autocephalous OCU, even traveling to Istanbul to meet with the ecumenical patriarch.

Poroshenko's successor, Volodymyr Zelensky, long resisted favoring one group over the other. But as the war has continued, he has come under increasing pressure to act. He and the Ukrainian Rada are now considering measures to liquidate the UOC; several regional governments have already issued bans and confiscated properties.

The rival OCU has benefited from these actions. In January, Onuphry would normally have conducted Christmas services in the lavra's cathedral, but this year the government replaced him with Epiphanius. In late March, Epiphanius told UOC monks loyal to Onuphry that they would be allowed to remain in the Monastery of the Caves—if they switched their allegiance to him. Moreover, government officials are pressuring the two churches to unite, presumably to form an Orthodox church that will be reliably loyal to the Ukrainian state and nation.

Besides controlling most of the country's monasteries, the UOC has 12,000 parishes, compared to the OCU's 7,000. However, Ukrainian law allows individual parishes to choose their institutional affiliation, and a thousand or more have switched to the OCU. The UOC under Onuphry has accused Epiphanius's OCU of stealing numerous parishes by packing church council meetings with outside supporters. Public opinion surveys suggest that most Ukrainian Orthodox now identify with the OCU and Epiphanius, although some do not clearly distinguish the two churches and simply call themselves Orthodox.

In May 2022, Onuphry and his church's synod declared that the UOC was now fully independent of the Moscow Patriarchate. They refused, however, to call the church

autocephalous, suggesting that they did not want to repeat the ecumenical patriarch's ostensible mistake of arbitrarily granting autocephaly to the OCU without the formal agreement of other world Orthodox churches. UOC parishes (except those in the occupied territories) now commemorate Onuphry rather than Kirill as their head, although, in contrast to the OCU and Epiphanius, they do affirm eucharistic communion with the Russian Orthodox Church (but not with the rival OCU or with the ecumenical patriarch).

Onuphry and his church are in a tough spot. The UOC's unresolved jurisdictional status leaves it open to accusations that it is not yet fully loyal to Ukraine. The Ukrainian government and the OCU under Epiphanius consistently label it "the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate" or the "Moscow Church," designations that the UOC does not officially use for itself.

Further complicating public perception of the UOC within Ukraine is that Orthodox leaders in Russia also insist on calling it the UOC-MP, as though Onuphry and his church still report to Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. Even the question of collaboration is fraught, as when UOC priests with good intentions have helped the Russian occupiers distribute food and medicine to the local populace.

The UOC has acknowledged that individual priests have betrayed the Ukrainian nation, although it insists that the church as a whole has not. However, Onuphry and his Holy Synod have not clearly condemned hierarchs who did publicly support the Russian invasion when it began. Some of them have now found refuge in Russia.

In contrast to Pavel, who has openly taunted Zelensky, Onuphry presents himself as a national leader who loves to celebrate the liturgy and who strives to preserve the unity of the church he serves. He seems intent on keeping together different wings of his church.

Some in his church regard themselves as Ukrainians but retain friendly sentiments toward Russia and the Russian heritage in Ukraine (as in parts of the Donbas). A different, now larger, group is thoroughly hostile to Russia because of its acts of aggression. Other UOC members are somewhere in the middle.

Under conditions of war, Onuphry's strategy seems untenable. Nationalistic agendas on both sides, intensified by Russia's terrible war, have driven Ukrainians and Russians into opposing corners. Nevertheless, one can argue, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did many years ago, that Ukrainians and Russians, while separate and

distinct peoples, have too much in common to remain enemies.

A recent editorial in the theological quarterly of St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, the premier educational institution of the Orthodox Church in America, condemns Putin's military aggression and Kirill's justifications of it. But the authors also argue that the war exposes a theological distortion within Orthodoxy as a whole: a tendency to elevate "blood, language, and national history over Baptism and liturgical and ethical formation." Tragically, Orthodox churches "have allowed these elements to poison the life of Orthodoxy for decades and centuries, thus creating the ideological premises, and shaping the ethos of the actors involved in today's war."

One could quickly add that the question of how the Christian church rightly relates to the nation-state and other political actors is in no way limited to Orthodoxy. The tendency to submit to nationalistic and politically fraught agendas lies deep in Catholic and Protestant history as well. New forms of Christian nationalism raise their heads again today in the United States.

When Ukrainian believers went back inside their churches after their Easter procession, everything was suddenly transformed. Now the nave was blazing with light, the choir was singing joyous refrains louder and louder, and church bells were ringing out wildly. Again and again, the priest cried out triumphantly, "Christ is risen," and the people responded with a roar, "Truly, he is risen!"

That acclamation, "Christ is risen," challenges Christians of every stripe to repent and to love God above the principalities and powers of this world. To be sure, Christian repentance by itself will not establish a just peace in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the churches in the East and West can make an essential contribution to how the war ends, when it finally ends. They will work to bring the warring parties closer together, rather than driving them still farther apart.

As Ukraine fights for its survival, one hardly dares to speak of reconciliation. But reconciliation is ultimately the Christian hope, even if it would require that Russia first be defeated and that Ukrainians and Russians—and Americans and Russians—learn to live together again, surely a decades-long process. All of us have too much in common to remain at loggerheads.