The Millennium
A Ukrainian Perspective

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The year 1988 marks the thousandth anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of Kievan Rus', a powerful realm which arose in the 9th century, reached its zenith in the 11th, declined in the 12th and fell in the 13th. Three peoples — the Belorussians, the Russians, and the Ukrainians — claim descent from the people and culture of Kievan Rus'. Both Orthodox and Catholic churches of these three nations trace their origins to the church of Kiev.

In the Soviet Union, the millennium will be perceived and celebrated exclusively as the anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church. While no-one can reasonably deny any group or church the right to celebrate whatever it wishes, the Russian Orthodox claim to a monopoly of this event is being challenged. It is being challenged — primarily by Ukrainians[1] — as a politically motivated falsification of both ecclesiastical and national history.

The Russian Orthodox claim to the millennium is based on what has become the conventional view of Eastern Slavic history in both the Soviet Union and the West. According to this view, the central development in the history of the Eastern Slavic peoples has been the rise of Muscovy and its successor state, Russia (*Rossiya*). "Russia" is understood to include the Ukraine and Belorussia. Yet this Russia is Muscovite ("Great Russian") in culture and history. The cultures and histories of the Ukraine and of Belorussia are presented as subsidiary, or are ignored altogether. Furthermore, a single line of progression is drawn from Kievan Rus' through Vladimir-Suzdal' and Muscovy to modern Russia.

[1]It is not claimed that what is presented here as the "Ukrainian view" is shared by all Ukrainians. Both in the USSR and abroad, there are Ukrainians who consider themselves Russians. There are also Ukrainians who consider themselves both Russian and Ukrainian, the Russian being a kind of super-nationality of which the Ukrainian is a regional sub-group. (The fact that some of the greatest apologists of imperial Russia have been ethnic Ukrainians is a phenomenon hardly unique in the annals of imperialism and deserves a historico-psychological study.) Here, however, we are concerned with the views of those Ukrainians both in the USSR and abroad who regard their nation as separate from, and equal to, the Russian nation.

Similarly, in this conventional view, the ecclesiastical history and culture of the Eastern Slavic peoples are centred on the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church, with at most only subsidiary roles for the Belorussian and Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The present-day Russian Orthodox Church is seen as the culmination of a direct, logical and inevitable progression from the church of Kievan Rus' through the Muscovite church to the restored Moscow Patriarchate of the 20th century.

Ukrainians view this historical scheme as a product of 19th century Russian nationalist thinking. The fact that it has been adopted by Western historians, they argue, merely testifies to the influence of Russian nationalist historiography in the West, bolstered by the emigration of the bulk of the Russian intelligentsia after 1917. It is an interpretation of history influenced by imperial political ideology and one which serves to justify Russian dominance of the Eastern Slavs.

The use of history to legitimise or glorify a given political order is nothing new. In 16th century Muscovy the theory that Moscow was the "Third Rome" — a successor to imperial Rome and Constantinople as the centre of Christendom — served to legitimise the Tsar's authority and enhance his prestige. The very notion of "Russia", a product of the 18th century, provided a name and a concept for the newly-enlarged empire which had gathered the old Rus' territories under Muscovite domination. Scholarly challenges to the official view of Eastern Slavic history were dealt with in short order: when Gerhard Friedrich Müller proposed in 1749 that Normans rather than Slavs had founded the Rus' state, he was forbidden to continue his research, and his publications were confiscated and destroyed; the hapless scholar turned instead to the history of Siberia.[2] In 1839 the Marquis de Custine remarked that in Russia, history is the property of the Tsar, who "alters the annals of the country according to his good pleasure and dispenses each day to his people the historic truths which accord with the fiction of the moment."[3]

The Soviet government draws on the accumulated capital of Russian nationalist historical concepts in propagating the idea of a new "Soviet nation". True, a "separatist" Russian nationalism which might seek to preserve a pure Muscovite culture insulated from the Soviet melting-pot would run counter to this attempt. But inasmuch as traditional Russian nationalism has served to assimilate Belorussians

[2]See Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'* (inaugural lecture) (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975), p. 5.

[3]Quoted in William Pfaff, "Gorbachev Should Let History Out of the Storeroom", *International Herald Tribune*, 10 April 1987, p. 4. Pfaff finds the Marquis de Custine's observations applicable to today's Soviet Union, and suggests that *glasnost'* requires a more honest approach to history.

and Ukrainians into a single "Russian" nation, it tends to bring nearer the goal of a single Soviet nation. It is therefore not surprising that Russian nationalist and Soviet concepts of history, which provide the ideological underpinning for assimilationist goals, coincide to a significant degree.

This is evident in the interpretation of church history. For all the anti-religious bias of the Soviet regime, it has found not only Russian Orthodox history, but the church itself, to be useful vehicles of its ideological offensives.

The external political role of the church hierarchy would be reason enough for the Soviet regime to support its historical pretensions. But the church also plays an important internal role as an integrating factor in Soviet society. It serves to russify the predominantly Orthodox Belorussians and Ukrainians. Since the national Orthodox (as well as Catholic) churches of these peoples have been liquidated, there remains no obstacle to the national assimilation of believers by the Russian Church. For this among other reasons, the Soviet regime has an interest in enhancing the church's prestige and in legitimising its authority over the two non-Russian but Slavic and traditionally Orthodox nations.[4] The millennium is an excellent opportunity to do so.

It is thus logical that the Soviet authorities should use the millennium to reassert an interpretation of Eastern Slavic ecclesiastical history which, while observing certain Marxist-Leninist anti-religious taboos, favours the Russian Orthodox over other churches.

In many of its features, this interpretation of history will not strike most Western observers as unusual. It is based in great part on concepts which Western scholarship has come to accept. But is this view of history — apart from its obviously Marxist elements — in fact biased? If so, what would constitute a balanced view?

While the Ukrainian answer to the first question is an emphatic "yes", there is no unanimous Ukrainian answer to the second. Political as well as denominational differences have bred a variety of opinions. Many Ukrainians take the view that the Kievan Rus' heritage belongs exclusively to the Ukrainian nation, and that neither the Russian people nor the Russian Orthodox Church has any "right" to the millennium. They hold that the Russian nation can be traced back no further than to Muscovy, which developed in the 13th century, or at best to Vladimir-Suzdal', which arose in the 12th. Moscow itself, they point out, was founded in 1147; the Russian

[4]The Georgians in the USSR have their own Orthodox Church which was granted autocephaly by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1943. There is no valid canonical reason why the Belorussians and Ukrainians should not be treated likewise.

Orthodox Church arose in the 1300s, declaring autocephaly in 1448 and a patriarchate only in 1589. The Baptism of Rus' took place centuries before the existence of a Russian people or church and on a different territory. Since it took place on Ukrainian land and involved the direct ancestors of the present-day Ukrainians, it must be regarded as a purely Ukrainian event.

Other Ukrainians do not deny the Russian people and church a claim to the cultural and religious heritage of Kievan Rus', but assert the primacy of the Ukrainian claim. Recognising that to call Kievan Rus' and its church "Ukrainian" is as unhistorical as calling them "Russian", the proponents of this view emphasise instead the continuity from Kievan Rus' to modern Ukraine, and point out the discontinuities in the Russian nationalist scheme of history. They regard the Muscovite (Russian) lands as peripheral and only tenuously related to the Rus' heartland, which developed in the Ukraine. In their view, the relationship between Rus' and the Ukraine can be compared to that between ancient Rome and modern Italy. Russia is comparable to France or Spain, which arose from Roman provinces and absorbed some Roman culture but had a distinct ethnic character. Just as Italy is a true and direct descendant of Rome — whereas France and Spain are at best indirect heirs — so the Ukraine is the true heir of Kievan Rus' while Russia is at best a distant nephew.

Accordingly, proponents of this view of Eastern Slavic church history point to the fact that after the fall of Kiev in 1240, a new Rus' Metropolitanate was established in Halych (Galicia) (now Western Ukraine) in the 14th century, and the Kievan Metropolitanate itself was revived in the 15th. Ukrainian Catholics will assert that the Union of Brest of 1596, by which the Kievan Metropolitanate joined with the Roman Catholic Church while retaining its Byzantine rite, canon law and spirituality, served to preserve the Kievan tradition from encroachments by the Polish Catholics on the one hand and the Muscovite Orthodox on the other. Ukrainian Orthodox will underscore the re-establishment of an Orthodox hierarchy in Kiev in 1620 and the flourishing of Ukrainian Orthodoxy in 17th century Kiev as direct continuations of the Rus' ecclesiastical tradition. Turning to modern times, Ukrainians can point to the conscious cultivation of Kievan traditions by the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church of the 1920s, and the revival of Eastern ritual, discipline and spirituality in the Ukrainian Catholic Church in recent times. These trends continue today.[5]

[5]For a Ukrainian view of Eastern Slavic history, see Mykhailo Hrushevsky, "The Traditional Scheme of 'Russian' History and the Problem of a Rational Organization of the History of Eastern Slavs", *The Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the U.S.* II (1952), No. 2, and Omeljan Pritsak and John S. Reshetar, Jr., "Ukraine and the Dialectics of Nation-Building", *Slavic Review* XXII (1963), No. 2,

Of course, there are problems with both the Russian and Ukrainian interpretations of the millennium. For example, it takes some stretch of the imagination to believe that the migration of a Kievan Metropolitan to the north in 1299 established a substantial link between the culture of the Kievan church founded in 988 and that of the Muscovite church which declared its autocephaly in 1448. On the other hand, the Mongol devastation of the 13th century and the Lithuanian, Polish and eventually Austrian domination of later centuries cast some doubt on the continuity from the Kievan Metropolitanate of the 1200s to the subsequently-established Metropolitanates of Halych (1303, 1807) and Kiev (1458, 1620, 1921). Furthermore, canonical difficulties plague both the Russian and Ukrainian positions. Ultimately, historians and an informed public will have to decide on the relative merits of these claims.

One may ask, of course, whether it really matters whether the millennium "belongs" to the Russians or the Ukrainians or, for that matter, the Belorussians. Is this nationalist squabble not irrelevant to a celebration of Christianity? Is it not, in fact, rather un-Christian?

This might well be so, were it not for the principle of Christian justice. For the fact is that the Soviet Union will direct the millennial observances in a Russian nationalist spirit, and will involve foreign participants in its political manipulation of religious history. Such abuse of a Christian anniversary must not go unchallenged.

At the same time, the rights of national churches — and the right to a national church — must not be confused with nationalism. A corollary of religious freedom is the right of each people to worship in accordance with its traditions, in its own language and in its own church. These are deep psychological and spiritual needs, which have been expressed by the creation of national churches by the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and other peoples. Their denial, by the imposition of an alien church structure, is psychologically and spiritually wounding. Ukrainians, both Orthodox and Catholic, were deprived of their churches in the 1930s and 1940s. Today, the Soviet

both reprinted in *From Kievan Rus' to Modern Ukraine: Formation of the Ukrainian Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984). For the recent history of the Ukrainian Churches, see Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, 1920-1930: A Study in Religious Modernization", in Dennis Dunn (ed.), *Religion and Modernization in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, Colorado, 1977), and *idem*, "The Uniate Church in the Soviet Ukraine: a Case Study in Soviet Church Policy", *Canadian Slavonic Papers* VII (1965), both reprinted in Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, *Ukrainian Churches under Soviet Rule: Two Case Studies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984); Vasyl Markus, "Religion and Nationalism in Ukraine", in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (Durham, North Carolina, 1984), pp. 59-81; Ivan Hvat', "The Ukrainian Catholic Church, the Vatican and the Soviet Union during the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II", *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 264-80; Frank E. Sysyn, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Question in the USSR", *ibid.*, pp. 251-63.

regime seeks to prevent any resurgence of these churches by obliterating them from the past. It will use the millennium observances to secure international acquiescence in such a rewriting of history.

To what extent does the Russian Orthodox hierarchy in the USSR share the government's attitudes towards the Ukrainian churches? Historically, the Russian Orthodox Church has been hostile both to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox movement, which it has correctly seen as a threat to its hegemony, and to the Ukrainian Catholics, who, as Uniates, are seen by most Orthodox outside as well as within the Soviet Union as schismatics. However, liberal Russian Orthodox dissidents such as Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov and Yelena Sannikova have expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian Catholic Church. The conviction among some Russians that the imperial tradition is more of a burden than a benefit to the Russian nation may lead to the realisation that in church affairs, too, it might actually benefit the Russians to let the Ukrainians (whether Catholic or Orthodox) develop their own church life. Just as jettisoning the Empire might help to preserve and develop a truly Russian culture, so relieving the Russian Church of its imperial role could deepen its roots in native Russian soil.

It is thus possible that for some of the present Russian hierarchs, hostility to the Ukrainian churches is simply a matter of obligation to the regime. Ecumenical considerations might eventually lead them even to abandon their insistence on the reconversion of the Uniates as a precondition to ecumenical dialogue with the Vatican. It is the Soviet government's position, of course, which will be decisive. But the Soviet position may depend on how forcefully the Catholic Church insists on the rights of its Ukrainian faithful.

The Ukrainian issue makes the desirability of an official Catholic (and especially a Papal) visit to the Ukraine for the millennium problematic for the Soviet government. Even a purely pastoral visit to Kiev (though it is not in a traditionally Catholic region) could have great significance, should the Pope make one of his characteristically bold statements in defence of religious liberty. It would also be an opportunity for him to correct the distorted view of the millennium currently being propagated in Moscow.[6] The Soviet authorities will have to weigh such possibilities against the diplomatic advantages of a Papal visit.

The millennium of state Christianity in Kievan Rus' will provide scholars with an opportunity to compare the Russian and Ukrainian

[6]For the Pope's view of the Ukrainian millennium, see his letter of 19 March 1979 to Cardinal Iosyf Slipyj, in Ivan Hvat', *The Catacomb Ukrainian Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984) (appendix).

interpretations of Eastern Slavic church history, and to re-evaluate their own views on the subject. For Russian and Ukrainian believers and for their churches, it will be the best occasion to begin the long-overdue dialogue which, conducted in a Christian spirit, may some day lead to tolerance and mutual understanding.