

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Ecumenical Reception

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The establishment of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) created division within the global Orthodox world. Yet, what has received less attention is the effect of the Ukrainian autocephaly on other Christian denominations and ecumenical institutions. Inevitably, and sometimes unwillingly, these churches were drawn into the conflict and forced to choose sides between Constantinople (and the new Ukrainian church) and Moscow.

At the international level, the clash between Constantinople and Moscow has led to the withdrawal of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) from the inter-Orthodox and ecumenical commissions, which are chaired by the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This act endangered relations which the Orthodox had with other churches on a number of levels: Moscow’s withdrawal has put the ecumenical role of the assemblies of Orthodox bishops, which exist in many countries of the diaspora, in jeopardy. It has also threatened multilateral and bilateral dialogues, such as theological dialogue with the Catholic Church, as well as the functioning of various international ecumenical bodies.

Neither the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, nor the Holy See, have formulated their position vis-à-vis the OCU. They all wish to maintain neutrality within the conflict, and continue cooperating with both Constantinople and Moscow. However, the moment the OCU will seek membership within international ecumenical bodies, or direct contacts with the Roman Curia, they all will be forced to take a position. There is a shared understanding that the OCU finds itself in a changed status with respect to its predecessors (who lacked any canonical recognition), but, and more importantly, there is a pervasive fear across Christian churches that their contacts with the OCU will irritate the ROC. These churches’ approach of neutrality, which involves cooperation with both Constantinople and Moscow, while avoiding formal contacts with the OCU, essentially conserves the *status quo*, and thus benefits Moscow.

In Ukraine, the OCU is viewed very differently, and was warmly welcomed by both Catholics and Protestants. The new *Ecumenical Concept* of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), adopted in October 2021, praises the creation of the OCU as a step towards inter-Orthodox unity in Ukraine, capable of fostering ecumenical dialogue. Ukrainian Greek Catholics, over the past decades, have enjoyed a discrete but cordial dialogue with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, while being constantly under attack from the ROC. This contrast made Greek Catholics more receptive to the arguments coming from Constantinople, rather than to Moscow's narrative. At the same time, the UGCC was thirsty for dialogue with the Orthodox, as a way of expressing its feeling of belonging to both the East and West, and its desire to improve its ecumenical image, which was damaged during the period of violent conflict in the 1989-1990s. The prospect of positive relations with the new Orthodox church might allow the UGCC to advance these goals.

Ukrainian Protestants, who worked to increase their public presence, especially after the Maidan Revolution, have also welcomed the OCU. Due to their marginalized position under various regimes, the Orthodox non-canonical churches—which constitute the OCU's basis—were more open to cooperation with the Ukrainian Baptists and Pentecostals, and less anti-Protestant in its rhetoric, as compared to the canonical church, in unity with Moscow. Moreover, the Ukrainian Orthodox struggle for independence from Russia became something with which the Protestants—who cherish the autonomy of congregations—could easily sympathize.

What has mattered the most in this “ecumenical reception” was that the OCU presented itself as a church open for dialogue and cooperation. The importance of dialogue has been highlighted by the new Primate, Metropolitan Epiphany, in many speeches and interviews. Sometimes this openness has been articulated in ways which made the contrast with the ROC's position very apparent. This raises the question of whether we are going to see a Ukrainian ecumenical oasis in the desert of the global interconfessional crisis. The answer to this will depend on several factors.

The success of dialogue will depend on whether the OCU will be respectful of Ukrainian confessional pluralism. Although Epiphany has consistently declared he is not interested in building a (de facto) state church, both Ukrainian Catholics and Protestants were alarmed by the OCU's self-description in terms of the “single local (yedyna pomisna)” church of Ukraine and its proximity to President Poroshenko's government. Would the

OCU attempt to acquire a privileged status among Ukrainian denominations, it would likely lose its support and credibility.

Much will depend on the OCU's skill in conducting interconfessional dialogue. The vast majority of the members of this church have had little international exposure to other denominations. Curiously, seven out of twelve members of the OCU's newly formed Commission for Inter-Christian Relations have previously belonged to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, in communion with ROC, which is very disproportionate, taking into consideration that members originating from this church constitute only a tiny minority within the OCU. This suggests that the latter needs more experts in the field of interconfessional relations, if it truly wishes dialogue to progress. For example, the work on the "roadmap for cooperation" between the OCU and UGCC, announced in 2018, has led to no results, and if we assume the declarations of church leaders to be sincere, the lack of progress might be explained by the fact that the churches do not know how to properly carry out this dialogue.

One of the reasons uniting Catholics and Protestants in their support for the OCU, was related to the political situation in the country, in particular to the war with Russia and Russia-backed separatists in Donbass. In this context, the state of ambiguity vis-à-vis everything Russian became less tolerable, and the churches preferred to welcome the OCU, despite protests from the church in unity with Moscow. **However, inter-Christian dialogue conducted with the goal of contributing to nation-building in Ukraine — as is often claimed by church representatives—is theologically very dangerous. As with any polemical project, an effort to build a "Ukrainian world" in opposition to the "Russkiy mir," might end up imitating the adversary one tries to resist. In any case, an overly political understanding of ecumenism, not only secularizes dialogue, but makes churches servants of nationalistic agendas.**

In this situation, the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the institutions attached to it, both in Europe and the US, can be of decisive importance. The Patriarchate, with its spiritual and supra-national vision, is a moral authority for many Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholics, and its support for dialogue at the domestic level, will be of great significance. Constantinople also has a robust presence within international ecumenical bodies, as well as a longstanding dialogue with the Vatican and Protestant churches. Thus, it can assist the OCU's ecumenical reception worldwide. However, nothing will change if the OCU and other Ukrainian churches fail to develop a genuine working relationship, motivated by a desire to establish unity within the Church of Christ.

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