

War in Ukraine likely to have lasting consequences for Orthodoxy

There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine and the support given by Patriarch Kirill and some Russian bishops to the Russian government will have lasting consequences for Orthodox Christianity, first in Russia and Ukraine, but also around the world. Within the Moscow Patriarchate, reactions have been ranging from distancing to taking a hard line. In Lithuania, Metropolitan Innocent of Vilnius has publicly stated that Kirill's "political statements about the



Remains of an Eastern Orthodox church after shelling near Donetsk International Airport. Eastern Ukraine, May 2015 (Mstyslav Chernov - Wikimedia Commons).

war in Ukraine are his personal opinion” and that he does not share them (*LRT English*, March 18). In Paris, Metropolitan John of Dubna, the head of the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Churches in Western Europe (a group under the Moscow Patriarchate, but with its own features), has written to Kirill that he could not support his statement and has left local clergy free to decide whether or not to commemorate the patriarch during Divine Liturgies (*France Inter*, March 28). At the other extreme, Metropolitan Mitrofan of Murmansk, near the border with Norway, sees the war as a war for Orthodoxy and has preached that “the mission will be accomplished because if not, it will be the end of everything, and the Dark Prince will reign. Russia is the last barrier, you and I are the last ones to oppose Antichrist” (*The Barents Observer*, March 25).

Most observers agree that Ukraine will be lost for the Moscow Patriarchate. While it still retains a substantial number of clergy and parishes in Ukraine, 15 Ukrainian bishops under Moscow have already ceased to liturgically commemorate the patriarch, and some clergy are calling for autocephaly. What is less clear is the path that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) will follow. In an article on the UOC-MP at this crossroads, Fr. Nicholas Denysenko (Valparaiso University) deems it unrealistic to think that the Moscow Patriarchate would grant autocephaly to its autonomous church in Ukraine. He considers a self-declaration of autocephaly to be unlikely as well, since the church would then neither be recognized by Moscow nor Constantinople. According to him, the most viable option would be negotiations with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (which received its autocephaly from the Patriarch of Constantinople in early 2019), despite the disputes and distrust between the two ecclesiastical bodies. “It might be possible to adopt a gradual process of unification...without immediately reconfiguring eparchies and assignments” (*Public Orthodoxy*, March 31).

Cyril Hovorun (University College Stockholm) sees another possibility, which would, however, require a change of power in Russia, something to which the war could ultimately lead: the transformation of the Russian Church itself from a centrally controlled to a synodal church (*Meduza.io*, Russian edition, March 23). There are indeed voices in the church against the war, as evidenced by the signing of an open letter of opposition by more than 300 Russian clergy in Russia and abroad. For the time being, few parishes and clergy abroad have left the Moscow Patriarchate, with the Russian parish in Amsterdam being the most prominently reported instance. But tensions within parishes should not be underestimated, especially in those areas, such as Europe, where many Ukrainians attend Russian churches. Besides the likely creation of a number of Ukrainian parishes in Europe following the arrival of Ukrainian refugees (assuming they are not able to promptly return to their country), other faithful within Russian parishes and beyond them will raise issues that might lead to stronger demands for autonomous local Orthodox churches.

At an early April talk he gave on Long Island, NY, which was attended by **RW**, Russian Orthodox journalist Sergei Chapnin said that the Moscow Patriarchate’s loss of Ukrainian

Orthodoxy is a foregone conclusion. He pointed to two monasteries—the last church institutions that would cut ties with Moscow and leave the Patriarchate (with conflict brewing even in the mother monastery of Ukraine, the Monastery of the Kyiv Caves). He predicted widespread disintegration of the ties between Orthodox churches outside of Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate, including the traditionalist Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). Chapnin, who edited the Moscow Patriarchate’s journal for 14 years and recently fled Russia under pressure, compared the situation of priests in the Patriarchate to “modern slavery,” where many desire to leave its authority but are prevented from doing so by Kirill. Regarding the global impact of the war, Lucian N. Leustean (Aston University) has gone much further, writing on the LSE’s *Religion and Global Society* blog (March 3) that the consequence of this “first religious war in the 21st century” might be the breaking of Orthodoxy into two separate bodies, with the Moscow Patriarchate “setting up its own ecclesiastical jurisdictions around the world” on the pattern it has started in Africa [as reported by **RW** in December 2021].

African American Christians adapt homeschooling to own needs

Black Christians are among the new wave of homeschoolers that have been swept into the movement by the pandemic, but along with their interest in a Christian alternative to secular education, *Christianity Today* magazine (April) reports that a concern for African American heritage has been among participants’ motivations. Homeschooling rates have grown fastest among African Americans during the pandemic, up more than fivefold from 3 percent to 16 percent. But even without taking Covid into account, there has been a simmering interest in homeschooling among blacks, writes Liuan Huska. She cites a recent study of black Christian homeschoolers by Cheryl Fields-Smith of the University of Georgia, finding some differences between them and their white counterparts. Fields-Smith found that fewer black parents expressed the idea that God told them to homeschool or felt a Christian obligation to do so. Rather, they were more often reluctant to leave the public schools, which have been the site of integration and civil rights, and looked for Christian inspiration only after they had made the decision to do so. The African American homeschoolers wanted to instill a Christian worldview into education but also criticized the existing homeschooling curricula as too politically conservative and white-oriented, ignoring black contributions to learning. Such homeschooling parents thus find themselves having to challenge, create, and adapt existing material to their needs.

Huska writes that there have been several initiatives to adapt the evangelical expression of homeschooling to more diverse students and teachers, including more secular parents, especially since the pandemic. Delina Pryce McPhaul, an Afro-Latina homeschooling mother in Dallas, has created her own prayer supplement and curriculum on history and has drawn 13,000 members to her Facebook page, including white parents who want to diversify their lessons.



Source: *Afrometrics*, 2015.

Some of the black homeschooling efforts have dovetailed with the trend of classical Christian schooling. For instance, the Nyansa Classical Community features black and brown images of classical figures and draws on the black intellectual tradition. While the Home School Legal Defense Association has attempted to diversify its ranks from its largely conservative base to include more minorities, Huska writes that white homeschooling communities' concerns about critical race theory and conservative political orientation have discouraged black homeschoolers from participating. A roadblock preventing more black Christians from joining the ranks of homeschoolers is that few in the movement or the curricula look like them. Black homeschoolers also tend to have higher incomes and educations than other blacks. But Huska concludes that the new efforts to reach out to fellow blacks are broadening the movement, both in the black and Christian communities.

(*Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/black-christian-homeschoolers-redefining-movement-mason.html>)

Hillsong faces loss of status, affiliates in wake of scandals

The future of Hillsong, a popular megachurch denomination, as well as its model of “celebrity pastors,” are being called into question after a series of ethical scandals that have led to some congregations pulling out of the network. Much of the crisis surrounding the Australian-based denomination involves the resignation of its global leader, Brian Houston, after he was accused of inappropriate sexual behavior, but Hillsong has faced several leadership scandals in the past decade. The *New York Times* (March 29) reports that the scandals, not to mention a new streaming three-part expose of Hillsong, have demoralized pastors who fear that the denomination’s “brand”—which extends to its prominent recording and music ministry—has been damaged. This had led in late March to the exodus of 9 of its 16 American churches; its



Scott Morrison opening Hillsong conference 2019 (L32007 - Wikipedia | Creative Commons).

remaining U.S. congregations are in the Northeast and California, with the denomination losing its presence between the coasts. The issues under contention also involve financing and leadership style, with local leadership boards being disbanded given that congregations were under the direct authority of the Australia-based global board. Critics and former pastors of Hillsong also object to how they were asked to sign noncompete and nondisparagement agreements in the wake of scandals affecting the East Coast branches (such as charges of sexual immorality against the New York pastor).

Several of the departing congregations will remain independent of any denominational affiliation, reports Ruth Graham. Hillsong's website says 150,000 people attend services weekly in 30 countries, although that estimate was made before the pandemic. But the denomination has also served as a model for scores of other megachurches and smaller churches around the world that have followed its charismatic style, which emphasized miracles and personal encounters with the Holy Spirit, with services tailored for a hip, upscale audience that included celebrities like Justin Bieber. Meanwhile, *Relevant* (March 28), a magazine for younger evangelicals, sees the scandals coming out of Hillsong as presaging the end of the era of "celebrity pastors." Tyler Huckabee writes that megachurches' corporate model of pastoral leadership quickly evolved into a form that took its cues mainly from the entertainment industry, with churches operating like a brand. While entertainment-style pastors have been a fixture for much of evangelical and charismatic history, the trend of the celebrity pastor with a team behind him to "streamline[] his content for maximum impact and [run] interference on potential scandals" is more recent. Huckabee adds other megachurch pastors to the roster of scandal-ridden celebrity-based ministries, from the premier megachurch Willow Creek to abuse cases among prominent Southern Baptist pastors. He lays the blame for the recent scandals on the practice of branding churches, since "Brands survive because they deflect damage, control the narrative, protect talent and promote new successes over recent failures. Accountability is bad for brands. For them to listen and respond to people they've hurt is a liability."

Buddhist chaplains filling the "none" niche

Everywhere from prisons and the military to hospitals, Buddhist chaplains are finding that their non-dogmatic and often non-theistic approach is resonating with the rising non-affiliated population, writes Pamela Gayle White in the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* (Spring). In the last decade, the chaplaincy in Buddhism has expanded considerably, with "dharma-inspired chaplain-track degrees, certificate programs, and books for those looking to enter the field." "Mapping Buddhist Chaplains in North America," a recent multi-institutional study funded by Harvard Divinity School, found in a survey of 425 chaplains that more than half had gone through Christian-based Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) programs. Buddhist participants in these programs find that Christian suffused concepts, such as hope and the belief that things will get better, run against the contributions they see themselves offering to the chaplaincy, such as

meditation, presence, and a non-theocentric voice. It is the last value that especially appeals to the non-affiliated people they encounter, and White reports that these chaplains in fact “find themselves relegated to working with the nones.”

These Buddhist chaplains see themselves as engaged in “code-switching,” as they minister to theistic and then non-theistic clients. The inroads that mindfulness has made in prisons and other sectors of society make the chaplains’ emphasis on meditation seem non-threatening. Since not all Buddhist groups have ordained clergy, there has also been greater flexibility in allowing non-ordained Buddhists to minister as chaplains or making ordination include laypeople as well as priests and monks. But Buddhist chaplains are trying to work outside the mold of the chaplaincy that has been established for decades, such as by seeking to serve as spiritual counselors or even “public theologians” as well as religious care providers. The issue of “compassion fatigue” or burnout has become more important since the pandemic for all chaplains and clergy, but many Buddhist chaplains “feel very alone and disconnected.” Organizations like the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, based at Brandeis University, have worked to create resources and support services for chaplains, with the Buddhist Chaplains Peer Circle providing more specific ministry and fellowship to Buddhists in the field. The circle hosts monthly virtual gatherings and plans to



Lt. Piyaratana Hingulwala, a Buddhist chaplain at Recruit Training Command, hands a flower to a recruit during a Vesak ceremony inside the Recruit Memorial Chapel. Vesak is a celebration of the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha. More than 35,000 recruits train annually from the Navy's only boot camp. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Spencer Fling) (source: NARA & DVIDS Public Domain Archive)

“expand and deepen networking in order to support and connect Buddhist chaplains across traditions and roles.”

Orthodox-Catholic dialogue imperiled by Ukraine war?

Even if the war in Ukraine ends in some tolerable outcome, the theological divisions it has generated and its effect on Orthodox-Catholic dialogue will persist for some time, writes Robert Royal in his blog *The Catholic Thing* (March 28). Since the Russian Orthodox Church has in large part supported Vladimir Putin’s call for a “holy war” in Ukraine, there will be a chill on the significant Catholic-Orthodox dialogue that has developed over the years. Royal writes that “we now see not only political corruption among compromised Russian religious leaders, but a deep spiritual divide that was somewhat covered over by professions of Christian brotherhood.” Several recent popes have made serious efforts to heal the schism between Rome and Orthodoxy—and have generally been rebuffed. While Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill had expressed a “deep desire” for unity before the war started, the fraternal spirit has not lasted. During a Zoom meeting in early March, Francis is said to have chided Kirill for claiming the Ukrainian “special military action” was a “holy war.” The pope turned up the heat when he made the consecration of Russia, Ukraine, and the whole world to Our Lady of Fatima. Royal writes that “Kirill and Putin know that Our Lady asked for that consecration to stop Russia’s errors



Metropolitan Hilarion, Cardinal Schönborn and Cardinal Koch in Vienna, February 2018 (source: Aid to the Church in Need).

from spreading and to bring about the nation's conversion...Under the circumstances, it's difficult to see how Moscow will be part of any future ecumenical dialogue—even how Russian Orthodoxy will hold together...The Eastern window is, for now, closed.”

Independent missions targeting specialized needs rather than casting wide net

While short-term missions have already challenged older models of career missionaries, there is a new tendency among Christian volunteers to embrace “independent missionary” organizations that “operate without the infrastructure provided by a denomination, congregation, or parachurch organization,” write Carrie Miles and Frank Michael Salongo Tweheyo in a paper appearing on the website of the missions organization, Empower International Ministries. “These ‘new’ missionaries,” they write, “often focus on a specific social issue, people group, methodology, doctrinal point, or spiritual practice. Unlike the traditional mission, with its provision of both proselytizing as well as a full range of pastoral and developmental services, these new missionaries offer specialized, almost proprietary programs.” These emergent, small-scale, specialized, and independent missionary efforts are similar to small-scale development efforts in developing countries known as “amateurs without borders” or “grassroot INGOs.” In fact, there is a significant crossover between secular and religious independent organizations, with some grassroot INGOs receiving congregational support. Examples that the authors give of such independent mission efforts include the building and supporting of a Christian college in India, training and empowering of women leaders, training of clergy to minister to traumatized parishioners, and production and distribution of recordings of the Bible in local languages.



Source: Empower International Ministries

Miles and Tweheyo write that many of these efforts are targeted to places in the world where a missionary infrastructure is not available due to social and governmental restrictions, such as Muslim countries and China. They note that many of these independent missions and missionaries are working under the radar. Because some of these efforts draw an income below \$25,000, they are not on the lists of the Internal Revenue Service's tax-exempt religious groups. The authors add that the independent agency model depends on personal ties between missionaries and local clergy, and that most support comes from the founders' personal networks. Miles and Tweheyo write that as Christians in the global South become more educated and discerning about Western Christianity, and especially as they challenge traditional sexual morality, they are becoming more selective about what missionaries can offer them. Thus independent mission agencies or individuals are effective because they follow a "pull" rather than "push" model of mission focused on demand rather than supply, "striving to provide the services that their national partners say they need rather than the things the agency wants to give them." The paper points to Empower International, for which both authors work, as an organization that uses this kind of pull model allowing mission partners to teach each other.

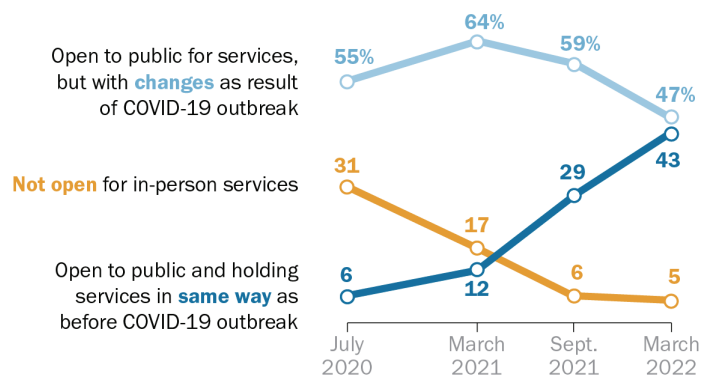
(Miles and Tweheyo's paper can be downloaded from: <http://empowerinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/Miles-Changing-Nature-of-Missions-in-the-Twenty-first-Century.pdf>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **The percentage of Americans returning to church since the lifting last year of public health restrictions addressing the pandemic may have plateaued, according to the latest statistics from the Pew Research Center.** While people steadily returned to in-person services during the first half of 2021, the trend appears to have reached a plateau. Around two-thirds of all people who usually attended church at least monthly said they were back in the pews in March (67 percent), which is roughly the same proportion as in September 2021 (64 percent). Evangelical churchgoers returned

Share of churches and other houses of worship operating as they did pre-pandemic continues to rise

Among U.S. adults who typically attend religious services at least monthly or attended in person in the past month, % who say the house of worship they attend most often is currently ...



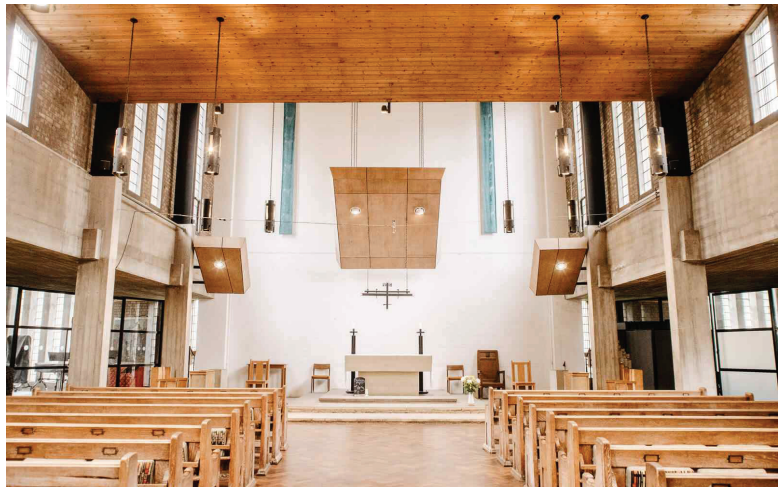
Note: Those who said "not sure" or declined to answer the question are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted March 7-13, 2022, among U.S. adults.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

at the highest rate, even as their figures held steady at around 75 percent. Black Protestants have remained the most cautious, with a return rate of about 50 percent. The Pew report concludes: “Going into the third year since COVID-19, congregations and their leaders are left with the reality that the people who worshiped alongside them before may not be coming back.”

(The Pew Research Center report can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>)

● **The long pandemic lockdowns in England have served to disabuse even devout churchgoers of the habit of attending services, a new survey suggests.** Writing in the *Church Times* (March 18), sociologists Leslie Francis and Andrew Village report on the Covid-19 and Church 21 Survey they conducted among 826 participants who had attended church either once a month (96 percent) or once a week (84 percent) before the pandemic. Of these participants, nearly one-in-four (23 percent) had either given up on at least one activity of online worship or on going to church by the third lockdown, 15 percent had given up on online worship altogether, and 13 percent had given up on going to church. Ten percent had given up online worship, but not church services; eight percent had given up on church services, but not online worship; and five percent had given up on both. Most of those who had given up on online and in-person church did so because they felt that both forms, including socially-distanced services, did not work for them rather than because of the inconvenience of using technology or booking a place for worship, while 34 percent discovered they could do without church. The drift away from online services was especially prevalent for those under 40 and Anglo Catholics, who prefer a more liturgical worship, while those dropping in-person services tended to be women and extroverts. Analysis showed that keeping both kinds of worshipers depended on the quality and experience of worship.



Source: COVID-19 and Church-21, York St John University.

● **While the number of priests around the world is holding steady, the number of Catholics continues to grow, suggesting that even some of the most vital parts of the Catholic world**

may face a priest shortage, according to a report appearing in the Catholic newsletter *The Pillar* (March 28). Brendan Hodge looks at the impact of vocations on the total number of diocesan Catholic priests, focusing on the net change measured by the number of ordinations against the number of priests who die or are laicized. He writes that in the 1970s and 1980s the net change in priests was negative because of the large numbers who sought laicization in the 1970s and the dramatic decrease in the number of ordinations in Europe and North America after Vatican II. In the 1990s and 2000s, the net change in the number of priests shifted in a positive direction due to the declining number of laicizations and the increasing number of ordinations in Africa and Asia. Hodge adds that in the last few years the net change in the number of priests has remained neutral because of a slowdown in diocesan priestly ordinations in the developing world and the death of priests ordained in the 1960s and early 1970s.

While the number of diocesan priests remains flat, the number of Catholics around the world is continuing to grow. Both Europe and North America are seeing a net loss in the number of diocesan priests each year, while many developing countries see a positive net change each year. But a steady number of ordinations over the last 30 years suggests that the number of diocesan priests in the U.S. might stabilize in upcoming years. In countries such as Brazil and India, where the number of diocesan priestly ordinations remains much higher than the number 50 years ago,



Source: The Catholic Sun (August 24, 2018).

the net change in the number of priests remains positive, although the number of ordinations has declined somewhat in recent years. Hodge writes that in countries like Nigeria, where the number of diocesan priestly ordinations per year is steadily increasing, the annual net change in diocesan priests continues to rise.

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/is-there-a-global-vocations-crisis>)

Cult of Saint Brigid resonates in post-Catholic Ireland

There is a revitalized interest in the cult of Saint Brigid in Ireland and beyond, even as the Catholic Church is in retreat in the country, writes Ed O'Loughlin in the *New York Times* (March



Source: Brooklyn Museum

14). The legend surrounding the spiritual power of Saint Brigid and its relation to nature, ecology, and healing, and the way feminists interpret this as defying patriarchy, have drawn a mixture of “interfaith groups, no faith groups, goddess groups, Buddhist monks, all sorts of people,” according to a nun who opened the prayer center and hermitage Solas Bhride (the Light of Brigid) in 2015 to minister to these seekers. As the cult of Brigid has gained a wider following, its patterns of devotion and prayer have shifted. In place of rosaries, worshipers, mostly women, light candles from a central flame by the well at the settlement in Kildare that Saint Brigid founded. One nun recited a new kind of prayer: “The earth is waking from its winter sleep. Just listen—Brigid brings the spring.” The nuns, especially the Brigidines associated with the cult of the saint, are engaged with feminists around the world, reflecting what they see as Vatican II’s call for a less cloistered role for nuns. The remains of the original shrine to the saint are being restored by the Anglican Church of Ireland, with a major celebration of the saint planned for 2024, the 1,500th anniversary of her reputed death. The Irish government announced that starting next year there will be a new annual holiday, on or near February 1, to mark both Imbolc and Saint Brigid’s Day—the first public holiday to honor a woman.

Influence of Islamic transnational networks declines in Europe

While transnational networks have played a crucial role in the organization of Muslim life in European countries, that role is being eclipsed by more local networks. Muslims have developed their own thought and activities in close correspondence with contextual and local needs as they encounter more critical attitudes from European states and public opinion in regard to foreign political influences. This more critical environment has had an inhibiting effect on transnational connections and favored the local shaping of Muslim life, write Hansjörg Schmid, Noemi Trucco and Federico Biasca in a new report published in March by the Swiss Center for Islam and Society (University of Fribourg). The report focuses on transnational networks with an Arabic-speaking background, which are often at the center of concerns about transnational ties or radical trends.

The stronger role of the local relative to the global seems to be a trend across these networks. In Switzerland, transnational networks have not succeeded in federating a broader spectrum of Muslim groups. The organization of regional Muslim associations has allowed Muslims there to develop their own local structures and umbrella associations focused on building constructive relationships within Swiss society. Muslim communities in Switzerland are also influenced by local debates on religion, and more than 35 percent of Muslims living in Switzerland now hold Swiss citizenship. Prof. Schmid also remarks that younger, second- or third-generation Muslims brought up in Switzerland and less susceptible to foreign influences have been taking over key positions in mosques for more than a decade (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 31).

The study is focused on four transnational networks: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, also known as Al-Ahbash, the Tablighi Jamaat, and the Wahhabiyyah. They do not share the same goals and agenda—indeed, Al-Ahbash and the Wahhabiyyah are at odds. Despite Saudi support for the largest mosque in Geneva, it has not succeeded in influencing the whole Muslim scene in the country, despite initial Saudi hopes. The report concludes that “it is not helpful to categorize certain phenomena under general terms such as ‘Islamism’ or ‘political Islam,’ which do not do justice to the complexity and dynamics of both transnational networks and local cases.”

(The report can be downloaded from: <https://folia.unifr.ch/unifr/documents/313356>)



Flag of the Muslim Brotherhood (source: European Eye on Radicalization - EER).

Anti-war sentiment shares minority status among Russian evangelicals and Orthodox

There is a small yet growing anti-war movement among evangelicals in Russia that matches that of their counterparts in the Russian Orthodox Church [see the cover article in this issue], write April French and Mark Elliott on the website *Religion Unplugged* (March 29). Russian

evangelicals have traditionally been careful and passive in resisting and protesting in Russia because of their lack of religious freedoms in the country. They have been loyal Putin supporters for the most part, and even up to the war a large segment of Russian evangelical churches rejected the appeals of their fellow believers in Ukraine to speak out about the invasion. Yet nine evangelical leaders recently issued a statement opposing the war and asking fellow evangelicals to endorse it. As of late March, there were 500 signatories, mostly Russian Baptists and some Pentecostals and other Protestants. French and Elliot conducted a study of the signers of the peace statements from the two denominations. Among the 281 signers of the Orthodox statement, they found eight abbots of monasteries, 21 monks, 214 priests, and 38 deacons (no bishops signed). Most of the signers were from Russia, though there were few from east of the Urals, and there was also a contingent from Belarus, most of the members of which had actually resisted the fraudulent election of Lukashenko.



Source: Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith

The signers of the evangelical statement were both from western Russia and from points east, including Siberia, due to this area being the site of “sectarian” exiles under both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Interestingly, women were far more represented in the evangelical statement than the Orthodox one, with evangelical women representing 35.3 percent of all who signed. “Despite pronounced patriarchal tendencies in Slavic evangelical communities, women have been de facto leaders in their congregations.” French and Elliot conclude that the signers represent a small part of the Orthodox and evangelical worlds of Russia, far outnumbered by the protests organized by civic organizations in the country. In fact, the war has intensified deep tensions in the Christian churches of Russia. “On social media, one can easily find Christians in Russia insulting each other for holding opposite views about what is actually taking place in

Ukraine, prompting evangelical leaders to call for cessation of such activity. One point is clear: The war that Putin has unleashed, which is the life and limb of millions of citizens of Ukraine, is also fracturing the Christian communities of Russia—not only economically, but relationally.”

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/3/29/the-russian-believers-boldly-issuing-anti-war-appeals/>?)

Jews' Ukrainian identity intensifies with war

For Ukrainian Jews, both at home and abroad, the war in Ukraine has helped solidify their Ukrainian identity where they had previously been wary of such identification or had called themselves Russian, writes anthropologist Marina Sapritsky-Nahum in the London School of Economics' *Religion and Global Society* blog (March 2). Focusing on the Jewish bastion of Odessa, Sapritsky-Nahum writes that when she first began research on Ukraine's Jews back in 2005, she found that they eschewed Ukrainian nationalism and that those who had emigrated felt even less connection to being Ukrainian. Those Ukrainian Jews who spoke Russian commonly



Source: Ukrainian Jewish Encounter

identified as Russian. It is different now. “For Odessan Jews, home and abroad, the horrific war waged by Putin...has solidified their identify as Ukrainian Jews,” she writes. Jews and other Russian speakers living in Ukraine had been “shedding their Russianness” in favor of Ukrainianness since the political reverberations of 2013–2014’s Euromaidan protests, but recent events have intensified this identity change. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has proved to be the new face of Ukrainian Jewry, even though his Jewishness was deemphasized for most of his political career.

Ukrainian synagogues and Jewish leaders have been forthright in defending and deciding to stay in the war-torn country. “In sermons, leaders of Jewish congregations are recounting themes of Jewish bravery and survival of a few at the hands of the many by connecting the war in Ukraine with the stories of Hannukah, Purim and even the Jewish exodus from Egypt.” Rabbi Shlomo Levitansky, one of the 183 Chabad emissaries and other community leaders who have promised to remain in Ukraine, says that Christian leaders have been inspired by Jewish stories of survival, such as the Jews surviving in the desert with no other food but manna sent from heaven. “Empty shop shelves and a shortage of wheat and other products leave people looking for something spiritual, a higher force,” Levitansky says. Sapritsky-Nahum concludes that while “Putin’s war has killed people and destroyed places and ideologies,...it has also birthed the strongest Ukrainian sentiment around the world. It is paving the way for a new chapter of Ukrainian-Jewish relations and a shared identity as Ukrainian Jews.”

(*Religion and Global Society*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2022/03/putins-war-and-the-making-of-a-ukrainian-jewry/>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ An excellent resource for keeping track of the religious aspects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*,



published and edited by Paul Mojzes, a veteran specialist in this field. The monthly journal has published less on Russia, but it obviously frames the Ukraine situation in the context of Russia and its religious dynamics. The most recent issue (42:2) is devoted to the Ukraine war, including articles on the religious factors involved in Putin’s invasion; a chronology of church-related public statements on the war; the historical dimensions of the conflict within Eastern Orthodoxy between Moscow and Constantinople (the Patriarchate that a segment of Ukrainian Orthodox are now affiliated with); and several articles on non-Orthodox faiths and religious freedom in Ukraine, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Writing on the last topic, Roman Bogachev views the case of the Witnesses as a litmus test for religious freedom in the country and writes that there are “no complaints regarding the protection of the believers’ rights in Ukraine from domestic human rights activists or foreign observers, who in recent years have hardly received any complaints about forced conversion to a different religion. The unhindered operation of

Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, especially in contrast to the temporarily occupied territories and some post-Soviet countries where this organization is banned (in particular, in Russia since 2017), is convincing evidence of the actual freedom of religion in this country." He adds, however, that his research was conducted before the invasion and that the climate of religious freedom in Ukraine may drastically change. The journal is open access and can be downloaded at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol42/iss2/12/>