

Religious Factors in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine and Its Enlightenment

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Abstract: Recently, a serious geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine has attracted global attention. Historically, the two countries belong to the nation of East Slavs, which can be described as the same origin. However, in recent years, the contradiction has deepened and sharpened, and finally the war between the two countries has caused a serious political and economic crisis, and also brought profound disasters to the people of the two countries. There are a series of geopolitical reasons behind the military conflict between the two countries, as well as the western forces to intensify the conflict. Among them, the religious factors include the improper handling of relationship between Russia and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the relationship between the Orthodox Church and Catholicism, etc., and the progress of dialogue, communication and harmonious integration is not smooth, which also plays a deep-seated motivation in the deterioration of the relationship between the two countries. It is of practically significant inspiration for us to properly handle the religious relations among different nationalities and countries, strengthen dialogue and exchange, enhance understanding and harmony, and realize peaceful coexistence.

1. The Interweaving of Historical Homology and Reality Split

Today's conflict between Russia and Ukraine has relatively more complicated historical and realistic factors. Russia and Ukraine belong to the nation of East Slav, and their commonly recognized history can be traced back to the 12th century Eastern Slav region's historical records *Primary Chronicle*. The Rus name began here. In 862 A. D., people of East Slavs established the Rus Kingdom of Rurik in Novgorod, then moved south to occupy Kiev and establish Kievan Rus. Kievan Rus's ruling scope covers most of today's Ukraine, parts of Belarus and the European part of Russia. It is recorded that the second Grand Duke of Kiev Oleg built a small village on the banks of the modern Moscow River at the end of the 9th century, which was the forerunner of Moscow and the earliest birthplace of Russia. It is clear that the Russians trace their origins back to Kievan Rus and share the same roots with Ukraine. Today, Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, also enjoys the reputation of "the mother of the cities of Rus".

With the establishment of feudalism and internal power struggle, Kievan Rus gradually declined and split into many small dukedoms, which provided an opportunity for invasion and domination of foreigners. For example, the invasion of the Mongols and the dominion of established Golden

Horde, Poland-Lithuanian Duchy, etc., clash, struggle and reconcile on this land. In order to resist the invasion and rule of Poland, the Ukrainian nation stood in the line with Russia, which is of the same ethnic origin. In 1654, Kazaki leader Khmelnytsky and Tsar Russia signed the *The Treaty of Pereyaslav*, which marked the unification of Russia and Ukraine to a certain extent. Since then, Russia has incorporated western Ukraine into its territory by means of war and annexation with Poland. It is worth mentioning that *The Treaty of Pereyaslav* is unclear as to whether the relationship between the two is joint rule or complete ownership. In the subsequent history, Ukraine has been trying hard to maintain or strive for its own autonomy and even independence, thus the relations between Ukraine and Russia also showed the characteristics of separation and unity.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became a truly independent country, but its nationality, language and religion were complicated. At present, there are more than 100 ethnic groups in Ukraine, among which the main ethnic groups are Ukrainians and Russians, accounting for 95% of the total population, of which the Ukrainians account for 72% and the Russians account for 22%.[1] In western Ukraine, mainly Ukrainians, believe in Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and more inclined to the west; Crimea and the eastern Donbass region have relatively large number of Russians, mainly believe in Orthodox Church and are close to Russian culture. Due to the complicated ethnic composition the pattern of religious belief is also full of complicated situations. For example, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine includes the Moscow Church of Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the Kiev Church of Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Independent Orthodox Church, while the Catholic Church includes Greek Catholicism, Latin Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, etc. In addition, there are Protestantism, Islamism, Judaism and so on. Different religions and sects have not strengthened dialogue, promoted exchange or facilitated integration. On the contrary, various religions and sects in Ukraine are intertwined with ethnic and political issues, and at the same time, they are intervened by western forces, which aggravates the contradictions and confrontations between different nations and countries.

Geographically, Ukraine is located between the East and the West, and has become the key point for many forces to contend with. History and reality, culture and politics, interests and values, etc. are intertwined, and Ukraine has faced the risk of being contested and divided by the West and Russia since its independence. In 2014, Crimea was merged into Russia in a referendum, and Ukraine began to "de-Russianize", which highlights the increasing deteriorating Russian and Ukrainian relations from the political and linguistic aspects. At the same time, as for religion, in 2018, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church separated from the Moscow Patriarchate and returned to the Patriarchate in Constantinople. It also opened the distance from Russia in terms of faith and culture, deepening the contradiction and rift between Russia and Ukraine. Early in the morning of February 24, 2022, Russia decided to launch a special military operation in the Donbass region. A serious military conflict broke out in Russia and Ukraine. The relations between Russia and Ukraine are complicated due to the involvement of history and other forces, among which religious sects and religious relations, to some extent, have become important factors for the deterioration of the relations between the two countries.

2. Traditional Belief and Identity Construction

As mentioned above, Russia and Ukraine have a lot of grudges, and are divided and combined, which is probably due to the initial national memory and historical accumulation of the two. "Like the golden years of childhood, Kievan Rus has never disappeared in the memory of the Russian nation. Just like Pushkin's feelings for artists, Christianity in Kiev has the same value to Russian religious thought: a standard, a golden scale and a shortcut." [2] Nicholas Riasanovsky also said: "It is unlikely that one underestimated the importance of religion in Russian life, even before the

massive conversion to Christianity that began in the late 10th century." [2]

In the early days of the history of people of East Slavs, the religion was mainly primitive polytheism and worship of nature. With the establishment of feudalism and centralization, it gradually developed into monotheism. In this process, Kievan Rus was greatly influenced by Byzantine politics, economy and culture because of its proximity to the Byzantine Empire. Especially in religion, due to the need of political rule and the development of monotheistic belief, Kievan Rus gradually embraced the Orthodox Church. It was recorded that in 988 A. D., Lord Vladimir of Kiev converted to Christianity and baptized his subjects on the Dnieper River. Historically, the baptism of Rus and the establishment of Orthodox Eastern Church, as a state religion, play an important role in the development of Rus' history and culture and the formation and identification of nation-state. In terms of belief, it is the symbol of the transformation from polytheism to monotheistic belief of Rus. From the aspect of national unity and politics, it accords with the social process of feudalism and the need of unified centralized state. The unity of faith promoted the unity of the tribes of the East Slavs, strengthened the cohesion of the country, and sustained economic, social and cultural development in Ross.

Christianity was divided into Roman Catholic Church and Byzantine Orthodox Church in 1054. Rus became an integral part of the Orthodox Church in terms of beliefs and organizational forms. The Church of Rus belongs to a Metropolitan Episcopate directly under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and its management organization is located in Kiev, the capital of Old Rus. All Metropolitan Episcopates are jointly appointed by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Byzantine emperor. Under the social and historical conditions of that time, religion played an important role in the society, and the formation of their national cultures was closely related to religion. Churches and Orthodox monasteries throughout Rus, including Kiev and Moscow, are not only religious centers, but also political, cultural, educational, artistic and military centers. The architectural style, decoration and art forms of Russia and Ukraine are deeply influenced by the style of Byzantine Orthodox Church. With the spread of religion to Rus, the "Cyrillic Alphabet", founded by Orthodox missionary Cyril in the 9th century, is still the alphabet of the Slavic languages such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and all belong to the East Slavic branch.

From the perspective of the whole historical process, the mutual tracing of the two ethnic origins, as well as the common historical memory and cultural precipitation of Kievan Rus, constitute the institutional basis and psychological ties that Russia and Ukraine agree with to a certain extent. According to Nicholas Riasanovsky: "Kievan Rus' system and culture created the connecting bonds that prevented an era of division and failure, especially in the first dark hundred years after the Mongol conquest, that evolved into a historic rupture and termination. These ties include a common religion, language, literature and art, despite their numerous regional and local transformations; and a rich legacy of economic, social and political aspects". [2]

3. Religious Separation and Strife Contributing to Constant Conflict

Paul Kubisek, an American scholar, wrote in *The History of Ukraine*: "By choosing Christianity over Islam, Rus and its successors are linked to Europe rather than the Middle East. Since it chose Orthodox instead of Catholicism (the two were officially split in 1054), people of East Slavs was separated from its western Catholic neighbors, such as Poles. [3]"

The development of history is extremely complicated. In his letter of September 21-22, 1890 to J. Bloch, Engels said: "History is created in such a way that the final result always comes from the conflict of many individual wills, each of them becomes what it has become because of many special living conditions. In this way, there are innumerable intertwined forces and parallelograms of innumerable forces, thus producing a general result, that is, the historical events, which can be

regarded as the product of a force acting as a whole, unconsciously and involuntarily." [4] For a country, its development trajectory is restricted by production mode and material base, but cultural spirit, but the cultural spirit and religious beliefs, as well as the external forces, all play a positive or negative role in the country's development. From the perspective of religious belief, different religions and sects have caused a certain degree of separation, but there must also be communication and integration. If it can't be properly handled, the forces of separation occupy the upper hand or even replace the integration, which will become an important factor causing conflict.

Since the 11th century A. D., Kievan Rus declined gradually due to the increasing intensification of feudal separatism and the invasion of Mongolians. The Rus began to move from the south to the southwest, west and north, especially to the northeast. For centuries from the Mongol rule to the Polish-Lithuanian invasion and domination of western Ukraine, Rus Dutchys fought for hegemony, and finally Moscow won victory and established the Great Duchy of Moscow. Consistent with this, the shift of the Orthodox centers was accompanied by a change in political power centers. After "Rus was baptized", the Metropolitan Episcopate was established in the capital Kiev, which was subordinated to Metropolitan Episcopate of Constantinople Patriarchate. During the period of separation, the Kiev Metropolitan Episcopate moved to Vladimir as the political and religious center of East Slavs, and moved to Moscow after the rise of Moscow. Since the 14th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Union, taking advantage of the chaotic division of Kiev and Rus, started to invade and occupy the Dnieper River basin, which roughly includes today's Ukraine and Belarus. Catholicism in the Polish region, after the occupation of Rus, Catholicism was vigorously promoted, and has led to constant friction and conflict between the local Orthodox people and Catholicism.

During the history of the rise of national state consciousness in Russia and Ukraine, the disputes within the Orthodox Church and the relationship with Catholicism played a significant role in the relations between countries and the regional political pattern, and had a great influence on the situation today. As a result of disagreeing with the agreement on the merger of Orthodox and Catholicism, the Moscow Metropolitan Episcopate was declared an autonomous Metropolitan Episcopate in 1448, no longer under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine Patriarchate, while the Kievan Rus Metropolitan Episcopate was still loyal to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and there were differences between them in organization and management. Until the end of the 16th century, the Moscow Metropolitan Episcopate acquired the status of the Patriarchate, and the heads of the Orthodox Churches all over the world signed a legal proclamation to "recognize and approve the status of the Moscow Patriarchate" and called it the "fifth Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, ranking behind the Patriarchate of Jerusalem". [5] Subsequently, by means of war against Poland, Russia brought the territory of western Ukraine into Russian territory, and since then, it has also placed the Metropolitan Episcopate of Kiev under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became an independent country, but its relationship with Russia became more complicated because of geopolitical factors, western intervention and religious issues. At the same time, Ukraine's voice of "giving an independent church to an independent country" is also rising. In the aspect of the contradiction between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, it is mainly the problem of Eastern Rite Catholic Churches. For historical reasons, the influence of the Catholic Church of Ukraine is mainly in the western Ukraine, especially in the Galician region. During the Soviet period, Greek Catholic Episcopate was placed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Orthodox Church. In 1989, Catholics in western Ukraine rejected the resolution of "Lviv Conference" and restored the Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, which further aggravated the contradiction between Catholicism and Orthodox Church, but at the same time had a negative impact on Russia-Ukraine relations afterwards, resulting in tension between Moscow Patriarchate and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches in western Ukraine. In 1997, in the draft "Joint Statement" prepared for the meeting between the Pope and the

heads of the All-Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Moscow, the All-Russian Orthodox Church made it clear "to refuse to recognize the existence of the Eastern Rite Catholic Churches as a means of union between the Catholics of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States" [6], and there were serious differences between the two and dialogue and reconciliation have been unsuccessfully made.

In addition to Catholics, Ukraine's main religion, the Orthodox Church, is not united among its different denominations, and has a very different attitude towards the West and Russia. Ukrainian Parliament and President Poroshenko have repeatedly requested the support of the Patriarchate of Constantinople for the "De-Russia" of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This decision of Constantinople reflects Ukraine's struggle for independence in religious affairs and its efforts to get rid of the influence of Russia. From it, we can also see Ukraine's pro-Western tendency, its active choice to enter Europe, and its intention to distance itself from Russia culturally. On October 11, 2018, Bartholomew I, the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church in Constantinople, declared that "the decision to transfer the Kiev Capital Episcopate to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1686" was canceled, and the Ukrainian church was granted the right of autonomy. The Russian Orthodox Church strongly objected to this. On October 15, the Moscow Patriarchate announced that the clergy and believers of the Russian Orthodox Church were cut off from the prayer and holy rituals of Constantinople. It has had a negative effect on the sectarian relations in Ukraine, deepened and intensified the contradiction and conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and also shocked the international community and the Orthodox Church world.

For a long time, the relationship of Patriarchate between Constantinople and Moscow was not harmonious. Once this situation is mixed with international political issues and national identity, influences among believers and causes sectarian contradictions, it will cause serious consequences, in fact, lead to more tension between Ukraine and Russia, and aggravate the internal division of Ukraine. The split between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Moscow triggered a crisis of the Orthodox world, which corresponded to the political crisis in reality, and caused the concern of the world. The Orthodox Church in the world is also trying to remedy this situation and try to reconcile the relationship between them. On February 26, 2020, all Orthodox Church meetings were held in Amman, Jordan, and the topic was to achieve unity and reconciliation through dialogue. At present, however, this dialogue has not achieved remarkable results, and there is still a long way to go to reach a consensus.

4. Enlightenment: Communication and Mutual Learning, Harmonious Integration

Historically, the common Orthodox faith between Russia and Ukraine was an important cultural and spiritual bond between them. In the modern period, especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, religion became an important factor for the separation of the two. The reason for this is that conflicts between different sects have triggered a crisis of identity within Ukraine and largely broken the psychological and emotional ties it shares with Russia. Because of its geographical location and cultural gap, Ukraine vacillates between the West (especially the European Union and NATO) and Russia. On the whole, the Ukrainian Moscow Orthodox Christians are basically Russians, who prefer Ukraine to be closer to Russia, while other Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Jews are mostly Ukrainians, who want Ukraine to be closer to the United States and the European Union. This situation obviously caused the internal tear of Ukraine, at the same time produced the internal psychological alienation and increasing practical alienation of Russia-Ukraine relations.

This shows that in the construction of the relationship between the two, religion has played a negative role in ethnic and national identity, the convergence of values, integration of history and culture, etc. It is also separated from each other in domestic and international relations, lacking of

in-depth communication and integration, and being interfered and provoked by western political and religious forces, it has gradually become the deep inducement of regional tension, internal division, and geopolitical and civilized conflicts.

Today, the COVID-19 epidemic is still raging, with blocked globalization, warmer climate, intermittent occurrence of regional conflicts. The world is not peaceful, and all countries face serious challenge. As an important carrier of different cultures and civilizations, religion may be an important factor causing conflicts and social contradictions, and it can also be an important bridge to promote unity and mutual trust. Therefore, conflicts and crises are not the whole thing, and there are positive forces that learn from each other's strengths, achieve mastery through a comprehensive study and complement each other in the process of mutual interaction, dialogue and understanding and communication.

Shortly after the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the two countries held talks in Belarus to seek a dialogue to resolve the issue. In doing so, religion should play a positive role by strengthening communication at the level of faith and culture, acting as a bridge of solidarity and understanding rather than otherwise, and making positive contributions to the effective progress of dialogue between the two countries, the elimination of the gap between them and the speedy end of the conflict. Therefore, this requires strengthening the communication and mutual learning among different religions and different sects of religions so as to promote harmonious integration.

From the perspective of reality, religious exchanges, mutual learning and harmonious integration are not an option, but a common need of all kinds of crises and challenges facing mankind at present. Chinese leaders, speaking at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, said: "We need a broader mind than the sky to deal with different civilizations. We should seek wisdom and nourishment from different civilizations, provide spiritual support and comfort for people, and work together to solve the common challenges facing mankind. Civilization is colorful due to communication, and civilization is enriched by mutual learning. ...The exchange of civilizations and mutual learning is an important driving force to promote the progress of human civilization and the peaceful development of the world."

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