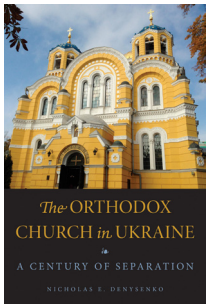


The Road to Autocephaly: Review of Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine*

Michael Plekon



Nicholas E. Denysenko
*The Orthodox Church
in Ukraine: A Century
of Separation*. DeKalb,
IL: Northern Illinois
University Press,
2018.

With the granting of a tomos of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) on January 6, 2019, by Patriarch Bartholomew I and the synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the pursuit of a century was finally attained: an authentic local church in Ukraine, truly self-determining and no longer a dependency of another church. Soon after, however, the Moscow Patriarchate halted eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and there has been no abating of attacks back and forth since.

The grant of autocephaly has elicited various critiques, ranging from statements made by the heads of other local churches to comments by clergy, monastics, and laity. There are ongoing campaigns of information and disinformation, of genuine education and sheer propaganda. Calls have been made for a pan-Orthodox gathering of church leaders to work toward restoring communion. The conflict has had consequences beyond Ukraine, affecting inter-church relations all over the world. There is a lot of talk and a great deal of posturing. Hyperbole rules. A few have said it is the beginning of a general schism as momentous as that of 1054. Many of these commentators have spun

out their own accounts of the history leading up to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's action and of its long-term impact in Ukraine and worldwide. In the midst of such confusing claims, Denysenko's new volume informs us of the context leading up to this rupture (the recent grant of autocephaly and the responses it elicited will be the focus of a forthcoming volume).

Facts, authentically truthful accounts—these are not doing well in today's global political and cultural climate, it must be said. A few years ago, we heard an American political aide argue that there are facts, and then there are "alternative facts." Historians of state and church are familiar with this kind of challenge. Documented facts about historical events and figures no longer hold sway in the politics of nations, nor in those of the Church. This crisis of truth is especially relevant to the situation in Ukraine both now and stretching back into the last century and beyond. Denysenko's careful examination of the development of Orthodoxy in Ukraine sifts through competing versions of this history in search of the facts. Denysenko is among the leading American experts on the church in Ukraine. In his probing, coherent narrative of

Ukrainian Orthodoxy over the last hundred-plus years, he provides an honest and accurate account.

Questions of identity and self-determination have raged around Ukraine for more than a century. In examining the history of tensions between Ukraine, Russia, and the Soviet Union, Denysenko shows Ukraine's long struggle for recognition as a nation and all the ways the Russians and the Soviets tried to suppress its independent identity. He takes on questions about the legitimacy of Ukraine as a nation with a language, literature, culture, history, and church of its own, as well as claims that it is better understood as a former territory of the Russian empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, or the Kingdom of Poland. He also takes a close look at the central role of the Ukrainian language in liturgy, preaching, and teaching in the past century of church history and how this has played into political warfare, especially when a short-lived Ukrainian republic was taken over by the Soviets.

Denysenko's analysis is by no means partisan. It is a necessary pursuit of the historical record and provides much-needed balance, given the stream of invective to which Ukraine has been subjected, deriding its desire for an independent church as rampant nationalism or, worse, as fascist and Banderist. Not surprisingly, some of the most vicious attacks on the autocephalous church in Ukraine, the OCU, accuse it of ethno-phyletism—that is to say, of nationalism passing as religion.

Sorting the facts from the spin is hard work, and Denysenko has done just that. Whatever one feels about how autocephaly should be granted;

about the meaning, past and present, of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's ceding of the Kyiv Metropolitanate to Moscow in the seventeenth century; or about the prerogatives of both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate in the matter of an independent church in Ukraine—in these and other cases, Denysenko's investigation is eye-opening. He lays out many problems relating to the situation of the church in Ukraine, such as the emergence of multiple autocephaly movements in the last century, the complex and destructive Soviet visions for Ukraine (including the Holodomor, the enforced starvation of millions in Ukraine in Red Famine), the Soviet-imposed pseudo-sobor in 1946 that dissolved the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and the driving underground of what remained of this church till the end of Soviet rule. Such great state violence—with the cooperation of the Russian Orthodox Church, it must be said—shows why the desire for independence and self-determination by many Ukrainians cannot be ignored or dismissed. Denysenko also urges us to consider the complexity of the geographical situation of Ukraine and the evolution of its different regions, and he sheds light on the diversity of ethnic and language groups as well as the presence of other faith communities.

More must and will be published on Orthodoxy in Ukraine, exploring the complex questions surrounding autocephaly and what it means for the rest of world orthodoxy. Several areas demand particular attention. One line of inquiry is how the current situation is playing out on the ground. The action of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is supported by strong historical and theological arguments, but the Moscow Patriarchate rejects

the grant of autocephaly and is attacking it relentlessly. The future not only hinges on the further reception and acceptance of autocephaly by the canonical churches who have not already acknowledged it; it also concerns relations of the OCU with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

Then there is the question of how the various ecclesial communities in Ukraine relate to each other and how they express their identities in this complex context. Yet another line of inquiry concerns the church's politi-

cal connections. This discussion has been too limited to the role of presidents, who may not exercise as much influence as oligarchs. Finally, there is the question of the ideological origins of Ukrainian autocephaly.

Nicholas Denysenko is at work on these and other questions. He is writing a book that will explore the granting of autocephaly to Church in Ukraine and beyond. In the meantime, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine* is a necessary read if one wants to understand Orthodoxy in Ukraine in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. ✱



The Very Rev. **Michael Plekon** is an emeritus professor of sociology and religion and culture at the City University of New York-Baruch College and a priest in the Orthodox Church in America.



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