



THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: A MISSING OR NEGLECTED LINK?

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Abstract

This paper observes that the Russian-Ukrainian war has been ongoing for four years now. The raging war has caused colossal damage to lives and property. It is against the enormous destruction occasioned by the war that the paper appreciates the depth of concern given to the war by world leaders and other actors, all aimed at curbing the destructive effect or, better still, halting the war in order to allow peace to reign again between the two neighbouring countries. While these efforts are ongoing, and at different levels, scholars and policymakers have given their different perspectives on the war; some of these perspectives have to do with geopolitics and the quest to be a regional hegemon by Russia as well as the desire for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by Ukraine. Other scholars blame the war on economics and tart consanguine relationship between Russia and Ukraine. While these perspectives cannot be dismissed as if they do not have causative factors underpinning the ravaging war, the paper discovers with shock the missing or neglected role of religion in the conflict in most of the analysis on the war. It is, therefore, against this background that the paper argues that religion is the substratum upon which other perspectives hang and manifest. At same time it is religion that is influencing other perspectives but in camouflage and clandestine too. In arguing its position, the paper uses phenomenological and historical means in making its analysis while relying on both primary and secondary sources for data.

Keywords: War, Religion, Hegemon, NATO, Politics, Regional Peace

Introduction

Religion is a psychological trait that inculcates in humanity the subservience to authority and it is capable of causing or taming wars. It was Hugh (2010), Agber, Udu, Fiase and Anihio (2015) who separately and at different times assert that mankind has grown more secular, yet religion continues to exert its hold, and this is very palpable, betraying any denial. Scientific enquiry has attempted to weaken religious beliefs but has failed to annihilate the influence of religion. More so, the fact that religion has formed a crucial aspect of identity for the majority of people means that much of the history of humanity can be understood through the interplay and intersection between religion and other facets of human engagements. The above suggests, therefore, that religion and geopolitics (governance, economics, identity and war) cannot be disentangled. In an attempt to identify the actors of war, an African proverb alleges that “war is created by people too old to fight for those too young to die.”

It is significant to state that 24th of February 2022 remains a watershed in the annals of the Russia-Ukraine war. This is because on this date, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian-Ukrainian war has prompted many questions and from different quarters. Essentially, as



Pikulicka-Wilczenska and Sakwa (2016) point out, since the beginning of the confrontation, a lot has been written about its root causes, the motivations of the main actors, and possible scenarios for the future.

However, few have looked at the war from the point of view of Russo-Ukrainian relations and grasped the perspectives of various groups involved, as well as the discursive processes that have contributed to the developments in and interpretations of the conflict. It is instructive to reveal that the varying explanations and interpretations marshaled regarding the war have a common denominator of history. This explains why this analysis finds it worthy to examine the war from a historical perspective. Furthermore, available data seem to suggest that this is a war with deeper religious roots than even historical ones. It can be argued intentionally that if religion permeates all facets of life and human development is anything to go by, then it cannot be denied that religion has a role to play in the Russian-Ukraine war. This probably explains why Alder, Kakar and Minney (2020:1) argue that “while religious issues are not the primary drivers of the conflict in and around Ukraine, religion has played a significant role in it.”

The above makes the religious perspective that is critical and should not be neglected because of the valuable lessons that mirror yesterday, reflect the realities of today and at the same time guide toward a more peaceful tomorrow between the two countries and, indeed the region. Stressing the importance of understanding Russian-Ukrainian relations as a tool for proper analysis of the current war, Kappeler (2014:107) observes that “the legacy of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union is one of the crucial factors for an understanding and an explanation of current affairs in the post-Soviet space. This is especially true for Ukraine and for Russian–Ukrainian relations.” Kappeler (2014) further explains that Russia regards Ukraine as a part of its own strategic orbit, while many Ukrainians want to free themselves from the Russian hegemony and advocate closer cooperation with the European Union. This disagreement culminated in late 2013, when Russian pressure led to a re-orientation of Ukrainian policy and a rapprochement with Russia.

The Role of Religion in the Russian-Ukraine War

Evidence from the literature indicates that religion has a dominant role in the conflict (now war). A survey investigation has also revealed this development. For instance, in its quest to wipe up religious sentiments, Russia projects itself as the new *Pax Romana*. This is why Alder *et al.*, (2020) contend that the Kremlin promotes the narrative of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World or Russian Peace), centering around a geopolitical and ideological unity of Eastern Slavs in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. While also emphasizing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Russia, the Kremlin highlights its protection mandate towards all Russians and Russian-speakers against Western interference and moral corruption.

In this regard, the Kremlin has boosted its ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Russian Orthodox religion has become an integral part of the national aspirations to re-establish Russia’s influence. Allen (2022) discloses that the Russian Orthodox Church regards Ukraine as the cradle of its faith and its ‘canonical territory’. This notwithstanding, Orthodox believers in Ukraine are divided into three separate churches, with only one being directly dependent on Moscow. This is probably the reason why Alder *et al.*, (2020) say that the 2015 Russian National Security Strategy stresses the revival of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values as of strategic interest. Ukraine’s pursuit of religious independence from the ROC meant the loss of potential Russian influence in Ukraine.



Anticipating this, Russian political and religious stakeholders tried to avert a declaration of autocephaly. When visiting Ukraine in 2009, the ROC's head, Patriarch Kirill, used the narrative of *Holy Rus* (Holy Russia) to imply that the ROC is the church of all "historical Russia", including Ukraine. Therewith, he offered an alternative to autocephaly: "Holy Russia" as a decentered entity, with Kyiv as Russia's cradle, as a sacred city and as a fortress of Orthodox faith (Alder *et al.*, 2020). However, Russia's actions in 2014 undermined its notions of civilizational unity in faith, values, and traditions. The annexation of Crimea strengthened sentiments of Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian-ness. In the aftermath of the events in 2014, the ROC leadership's focus shifted from unity between Russia and Ukraine to a Russian World battling increasing de-Christianization in the West.

Alder *et al.* (2020) say that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) is seen as destabilizing the ROC's attempts to build an Orthodox civilization and to hinder unity across global Orthodoxy. Ukraine is framed as having come under Western – particularly US American – influence. According to remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2018, awarding the OCU with autocephaly is a provocation orchestrated by Patriarch Bartholomew I, with direct support from Washington (Alder *et al.*, 2020).

Religious Actors in the Conflict:

Religious actors have responded to the conflict in Donbas in ways that have driven both conflict and peace. Mobilization along ecclesial (church affiliation) lines has previously existed, but has intensified with the OCU's declaration of autocephaly in 2019. Ukraine witnessed waves of patriotic mobilization from 2014 onward, which churches and religious organizations in Kyiv and across both sides of the line of Contact reinforced.

Of notable interest is the fact that the all-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which encompasses many religious groups in Ukraine, urged Ukrainians of different religions and denominations to aid civilians in the Donbas and to defend their homeland against Russian-backed separatists, fueling the increasingly divisive discourse around religious identity. These mobilization trends have gone hand in hand with hostile attacks and discriminatory practices along religious lines. What the Chirovsky (2014:294) is instructive. He says that "since 1996 there exists in Ukraine a body called The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which includes representatives (at the national level) of some 95% of religious bodies operating in Ukraine".

Starting in 2014, nationalist Ukrainian volunteer battalions and pro-Russian fighting units such as the self-proclaimed 'Russian Orthodox Army' have assaulted members of other confessions. Alder *et al.*, (2020) say that recently, priests belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) have reported threats of physical violence and coercion aimed at forcing people to change their faith in government-controlled areas.

Moreover, Alder *et al.* (2020) report that new registration procedures in the Donbas region enable the de facto authorities to legally ban, fine, and confiscate anything related to the practice of an unregistered religious community, such as the OCU, Evangelicals, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) and the human rights office of the United Nations have expressed their concern at these developments.



The proceedings clearly underscore religious identity as a unifier as well as a divider. Thus, religious scholars must be saddled with the role of using religious identity to amplify unity and peace on one hand. On the other hand, religious scholars must also explore the role of creating narratives that there is much that unit than divides us. Therefore, instead of war-war, it will be more beneficial to jaw-jaw.

It is against this background that religious scholars will facilitate ecumenism as an important role in resolving denominational differences. Once denominational differences and rivalry are resolved, it will certainly pave the way for peaceful discussions that are targeted at peace and conflict resolution in the context of both the Russian and Ukrainian states. Indeed, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has arisen to this occasion.

For instance, in its statement of February 19, 2014, the council beseeched both the protestors and the government in Ukraine to refrain from violence. The council said:

We condemn the provocations seeking to promote confrontation and hostility between people in different regions of Ukraine and between different ethnic and religious minorities and we encourage the government to refrain from any steps that could be interpreted as seeking to divide Ukrainians on religious, linguistic, national, regional or other grounds. Under such difficult conditions, we must do our utmost to maintain a united Ukrainian state and we must take all possible steps to prevent any attempts to divide our country (Chrirovsky, 2014, p. 293).

Furthermore, in various statements, Patriarch Kirill has taken care to avoid condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, in his August 15, 2014 letter to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew lays blame on the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyivan Patriarchate). He is quoted by Chrirovsky (2014, p. 295) as saying, “we cannot ignore the fact that the conflict in Ukraine has unambiguous religious overtones. The *Uniats* and schismatics are trying to overpower the canonical Orthodox Church, which continues to minister with patience and courage to its suffering faithful in a harsh environment.”

Nevertheless, the foregoing, a religious historian, Diana Butler, is captured by Allen (2022), saying that the conflict in Ukraine is all about religion and what kind of Orthodoxy will shape Eastern Europe and other Orthodox communities around the world (especially in Africa). This is a crusade, recapturing the Holy Land of Russian Orthodoxy and defeating the westernized (and decadent) heretics who do not bend the knee to Moscow’s spiritual authority.

According to Baaret *al.*, (2022, p. 1) “at the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), secular political issues had already been reflected in the religious sphere, although Christian churches, in particular, were just gaining ground in an atheised society at that time, and the communist ideology had made space for the return of religion.” Furthermore, Baaret *al.*, (2022) posit that religious disputes remained overshadowed by political events, particularly Russia’s efforts to reassert its geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet and, subsequently, post-communist regions, such as Russia’s early support for Abkhazian, South Ossetian, and Transnistrian separatists; its support for the increasingly autocratic regime in Belarus; its military aggression against Georgia in 2008; and above all, its unprecedented annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea and military support for Donbas separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014.



Therefore, religious diplomacy has thus, developed against the backdrop of the highly publicised events mentioned above. It has remained in the shadow of the attention of conventional state diplomacy; however, it became more visible after the recognition of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Patriarch of Constantinople in January 2019. Baaret *al.*, (2022) point out that this act triggered a wide-ranging debate among Orthodox churches, or rather, their top leaders, exposing significant differences of opinion among them. It should be stated that the differences certainly do not concern theological issues but political ones, although they are often cloaked in theological rhetoric.

The preceding confirms the need for a religious scholar who understands these complex regio-socio and cultural realities in Russia as well as Ukraine in order to facilitate the necessary ecumenical move that will bring about the desired peace. Additionally, dialogue of life that deals with critical existential realities such as sickness, climate change, hunger, and a regressing sense of common brotherhood, among others, will be necessary in facilitating reconciliation and peace in the troubled region.

Does Ukraine Really Matter?

It needs to be mentioned from the outset that Ukraine occupies a central place that earned it considerable influence in the old Soviet Union. For instance, Freedom (2014) says that Ukraine was the center of the first Eastern Slavic state, Kyivan Rus, which during the 10th and 11th centuries was the largest and most powerful state in Europe. Weakened by internecine quarrels and Mongol invasions, Kyivan Rus was incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and eventually into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In the view of Freedom (2014), the cultural and religious legacy of Kyivan Rus laid the foundation for Ukrainian nationalism through subsequent centuries. A new Ukrainian state, the Cossack Hetmanate, was established during the mid-17th century after an uprising against the Poles. Despite continuous Muscovite pressure, the Hetmanate managed to remain autonomous for well over 100 years. During the latter part of the 18th century, most Ukrainian ethnographic territory was absorbed by the Russian Empire.

Buttressing the above point, Freedom (2014, p. 24) affirms that “following the collapse of czarist Russia in 1917, Ukraine was able to achieve a short-lived period of independence (1917-1920), but was reconquered and forced to endure a brutal Soviet rule that engineered two forced famines (1921-1922 and 1932-1933) in which over 8 million died. In World War II, German and Soviet armies were responsible for some 7 to 8 million more deaths”. According to Freedom (2014), although final independence for Ukraine was achieved in 1991 with the dissolution of the USSR, democracy and prosperity remained elusive as the legacy of state control and endemic corruption stalled efforts at economic reform, privatization, and civil liberties.

Russophone and related areas (especially Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as in Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kharkiv, and others) in Ukraine have been aiding and abetting the conflict (now, war) between Russia and Ukraine. For instance, in the Russophone areas, political conflict arose when the legitimacy of Russian culture in Ukraine was challenged. Thus, Russia has been using such areas to remotely control Ukraine and to stoke internal tensions in the country. Onuch (2016) observes that since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainians and Russians have been living peacefully in two separate and independent states for nearly a quarter of a century. Much has been said about



the cultural and historical links between these two ‘brotherly’ countries, but also about the tensions between the two countries’ different perspectives on nation-building and democratization processes.

Although Russian leaders, in the manner of an older brother, have consistently labelled Ukraine as the central element of Russia’s ‘near abroad’ (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012; Rywkin, 2003; Trenin, 2006), the citizens and their foreign policy preferences have historically (i.e., on gas, on the Georgian War, on the EU and NATO) converged and diverged several times over the course of the last twenty-plus years. Onuch (2016, p. 32) further observes that “though there were sensitive moments during the last twenty-plus years of Ukraine-Russia relations (October 1996 crisis, 2004 Orange Revolution, gas crisis of January 2006, gas crisis of January 2009), the events of 2014 (the Euromaidan Protests, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas)” are predicted by social scientists to not only sour formal relations between the two states, but also between ‘ordinary’ citizens. Apparently, deducing from foregoing, it is only appropriate at this juncture to make arguments for and against Russian invasion of Ukraine Russia, which has resulted to the ongoing war.

Arguments for the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

- i. There is a general principle that dictates that no sane mind will allow a distant enemy to use his neighbour to harm him/her. Thus, in the spirit of protective defense, Russia is attacking Ukraine to make it uninhabitable both for the Ukrainians and for those distant enemies that want to use it against Russia.
- ii. In the history of foreign policies, no nation is made a hegemon. Rather, nations are hegemon simply because of their ability to destabilize their potential or actual rivals. Ukraine is certainly a rising power in the region that Russia wants to be the only hegemon. Therefore, Russia is fighting to subdue Ukraine rising profile of possible hegemon in the region in order to remain as ‘only the king of that jungle’.

Arguments against the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

- i. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia violates international laws and the UN Charter of the principles of territorial integrity and respect for states’ sovereignty.
- ii. The interference of Russia in the internal crisis of Ukraine is simply unacceptable and runs contrary to established laws and protocols. Thus, Metreet *al.* (2016) warns that Putin’s consistent tactic of creating instability in multiple places to maintain overall strategic control is becoming too dangerous to ignore.
- iii. Attacks on unarmed populations in Ukraine are war crimes and thus unacceptable. To this end, Russia should be tried for war crimes.
- iv. Unilaterally annexation of some parts of Ukraine by Russia is a violation of international protocols. This explains why Notoiu (2016:7) says that “there is the agreement on sanctions and common declarations condemning Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine.”
- v. Russia’s support for some rebellious groups in Ukraine is a clear testament to undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and a violation of the treaty on non-interference. For instance, Metre *et al.* (2016:1) say that “the Ukraine crisis escalated in early 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of key government buildings in the country’s east by pro-Russian separatists.”
- vi. The ongoing unprovoked attacks in Ukraine by Russia have the propensity to culminate in another European or even world war.
- vii. Freedom of association is a human right that is unequivocally guaranteed by international human rights conventions and other statutes. Therefore, Russia has no justifiable reason to



refuse Ukraine from joining NATO, should Ukraine feel that is best for it. It is rather unfortunate that the intervention of NATO during the political crisis in Ukraine has become a tool of mischief by Putin. To this end, Metre *et al.*, (2016) accuse him of monopolization of the conflict narrative. According to them, “Moscow has successfully harnessed support for the war in Ukraine by turning the Maidan narrative on its head, arguing that Ukraine’s political transition was a strategic move by the West to make Russia more vulnerable. This revisionist account of current events has allowed Russia to monopolize the conflict narrative throughout many neighboring countries.”

The United Nations’ Charter on Territorial Integrity and the Principle of State Sovereignty and the Russia-Ukraine War

The critical question that begs for an answer is: does the attack on Ukraine by Russia violate the United Nations (UN) principles of territorial integrity and state’s sovereignty? As important as the question is, it will only be answered if the concept of sovereignty is properly understood. Thus, Mattern (1926:200) says that “the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference remain at the very heart of international law and can be traced as far back as the treaties of Munster and Osnabruck signed in 1648, commonly referred to as the Treaty of Westphalia.” Additionally, Mekinde (2018:2) reveals that “the core elements of that sovereignty-based system were codified in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States 1933. The attributes of statehood include effective government, territory and people.” Thus, sovereignty is the fundamental principle on which contemporary world order rests, affirmed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and expressed in the UN Charter Article 2(1). Externally, sovereignty means the legal identity of the state in international law and equality of status with all other states and the right to be the sole legal personality in international relations on behalf of a people.

The above notwithstanding, Henrickson (2014) is of the view that sovereignty entails two important elements. The first is universality, the ability to subject all entities in a particular territory, regardless of their mode of grouping. The second element is right-creation, which is characterized by the fact that all areas of activity are regulated by legal standards that are recognized by the state authorities. Sovereignty is characterized by three important features. Probably, this is the reason why Akani (2019:2) hints that the first feature is the authority, the law of the state to command, and at the same time being obeyed. We must not confuse authority with power. Authority differs from power in a way that power is exercised by someone who has the ability to influence others despite their real interests. Outside of authority and power, sovereignty also includes supremacy and territoriality.

However, with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, I have no reason other than to agree with Gareth (2008) that it has become a common refrain to assert that the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity presents a challenge to traditional conceptions of state sovereignty. The offensive of war of Russia against Ukraine violates the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. The atrocities of war perpetrated by the Russian government in Ukraine have reached a point that International Criminal Court has opened a case of war crimes against Russia. The UN needs to be more decisive on war than mere media statements of condemnation.

For the United States of America (USA), the Russian-Ukraine war is a discomfiting experience. This is because the USA has no moral justification to accuse Russia. The reason is that the USA itself has also unilaterally invaded many countries, often even against the warning of the UN. Some of these include Nicaragua and Iraq, among others. This brings to mind the issue of the USA’s



Monroe Doctrine, which, to my mind, is a self-serving policy. For the purpose of history, it is important to recall that the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) defeated Spain. This created a golden opportunity for the Spanish colonies in South America to gain independence. After this war, the Spanish empire in the Western Hemisphere disintegrated. With the support of France, the colonies that wanted to break away from Spain formed republican governments themselves, like the United States (Sang and Tien, 2018).

The Monroe Doctrine says that 1) the United States would not get involved in European affairs. 2) The United States would not interfere with existing European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. 3) No other nation could form a new colony in the Western Hemisphere. 4) If a European nation tried to control or interfere with a nation in the Western Hemisphere, the United States would view it as a hostile act against this nation. From the foregoing, the Monroe Doctrine was or still is, out to stop any further colonization of the people of the Western Hemisphere.

West (2019, p. 8) argues that “the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 stated that any effort by a European nation to take control of any North or South American country would be viewed as ‘the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.’” In 1962, the Doctrine was invoked during the Cuban Missile Crisis. With the support of the Organization of American States (OAS), President Kennedy established a naval quarantine around the island. Therefore, following the example of the USA, Russia does not want Ukraine to be a party to NATO or its ally. Rather, Russia wants to remain the only hegemon in the region. Thus, the ongoing war is to further push forward this agenda.

Conclusion:

According to Mearsheimer (2022), understanding the root causes of the Russia-Ukraine war is essential if we are to prevent it from getting worse and, instead, to find a way to bring it to a close. It is against this background that the paper has demonstrated that the Russia-Ukraine war cannot be properly understood without proper comprehension of the religio-cultural history of both Russia and Ukraine. The paper has also marshaled arguments for and against the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Additionally, the paper has also examined the needed ecumenical and dialogical role that religious scholars must champion in order to entrench peace and reconciliation in the troubled region.

Meanwhile, the researcher is worried that the longer the conflict takes, the wider the religious involvement will become. For instance, in finding a diplomatic solution, the Ukrainian political authorities have suggested that a meeting should take place in Jerusalem. This is suggestive that religion is key not only in shaping conflicts but also in finding solutions. Religious diplomacy remains an unexplored avenue which could provide support not only to people in need but also in reaching diplomatic consensus. Thus, the paper also argues that the religious scholar has the role of facilitating religious diplomacy aimed at conflict management and resolution for peaceful coexistence and global stability. This does not in any way jettison the efforts being made by President Donald Trump of the United States of America in order to secure a ceasefire between the two warring countries.

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