

Exploring Religious Transformations Amidst the Russia–Ukraine Conflict: Insights from Theory and Practice

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Examining the intricate relationship between religion and war, this article highlights their multifaceted presence in human experience. It explores “lived religion” complexity, political orthodoxies and “everyday agnosticism,” discussing how conflict disrupts these dynamics in three Russo-Ukrainian war cases. Ultimately, it argues that both religion and war transcend boundaries, profoundly impacting human existence.

A Preliminary Note

This essay won’t offer a tidy theoretical analysis. Rather, it’s an impressionistic sketch of Ukraine’s religious sphere undergoing transformation amid the Russo-Ukrainian war. It’s a patchwork, drawing from diverse sources: scholarly debates, sociology, documentary accounts, philosophy, and cognitive science. Think of it as a preliminary dive into a history in the making, a subject ripe for years of scrutiny and study to come.

No Country for the Middle Ground

War has always presented a moral enigma. A grand-scale armed conflict involving organized groups, and more specifically, its escalating violence leading to staggering casualties, has long captivated the ethical mind, presenting a clear paradox (for without such a paradox, matters would be far too straightforward): war is not merely a wellspring of suffering and, in the words of the German philosopher Schelling, the “dark ground” of every individual; it is also a monumental generator of virtue. It gives rise to sublime sentiments, heroic imagery, noble emotions, and gestures.

This perception of war’s essence, carved deep within the European political imagination, finds its portrayal in the image of “Scipio’s continence.” According to Livy’s account, the Roman general Scipio Africanus,

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amidst his military campaign in Spain during the Second Punic War, declined a ransom offered for a young female captive, reuniting her with her fiancé, Allucius. It's noteworthy that Scipio had achieved a military triumph, which, in essence, entailed causing deaths of many people. His continence could only have emerged against the backdrop of his cruelty and military prowess.

Concentration camps, nuclear weapons, genocidal wars—it is not difficult to enumerate the diverse scenes of the war as tragedy. The true challenge lies in recognizing that those very scenes are also the scenes where triumphs of war manifest themselves.

But there is one thing the war does not favor. The one thing war disregards, so to speak, is neutrality. War has no tolerance for indifference. War is no country for the middle ground. And so is Christianity. At least, Christianity in its classical forms.

The Bible is full of military metaphors, not to mention vivid depictions of warfare. And wasn't the notion of "spiritual combat" fundamental in making the figure of the monk within both Eastern and Western Christianity?¹ To continue, wasn't it Ignatius of Loyola, the eminent founder of the Jesuit order, who replaced martial exercises with spiritual ones? These are just a few examples.

Having considered all this, would it be surprising that during the recent Russo-Ukrainian war, these two modes of engaging with the escalatory tendencies of human nature have met again?

The Messiness of the Lived Religion: Some Theoretical Remarks

Let's begin our initial theoretical reflections with a trite truism. Religion does not exist solely in its highest forms. Just as there is a history "from below," there exists a religion "from below." The term "lived religion" is at times employed to characterize this phenomenon.

"Lived religion," as was insightfully noted by David Hall, is usually characterized by a certain degree of "messiness."² The term "messiness"

¹ David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2006).

² David Hall, "Introduction," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. Hall (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001), x. It is worth noting that the term is quoted with approval in Catherine Wanner's recent book to describe the situation with "lived religion" in Ukraine: Catherine Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2022), 8.

merits our attention not solely for its descriptive utility (it seems to be well-suited to delineate the vibrant religious tapestry of Ukraine, marked by its diversity and complexity), but also for its methodological relevance.

"Messiness" falls within the realm of amalgamating concepts, which are emblematic of a particular philosophical and sociological line of thinking that centers on the complex, and in a sense impure, generative processes shaping objects and phenomena. We can mention Gilles Deleuze's "assemblages,"³ Karen Barad's use of the term "entanglement,"⁴ and Bruno Latour's "hybrids,"⁵ to name a few conceptual metaphors of the kind.

The primary methodological lesson to be learned from these scholars pertains not only to unveiling the hidden processes that shape the seemingly immutable aspects of everyday life, including sacred objects, spiritual practices, and religious traditions, but also to recognizing that each "messy" object *is messy in its own way*. Therefore, merely diagnosing "messiness" is insufficient. The whole idea is to focus on an individually assembled phenomenon; or, even more specifically, on elements it is assembled from. Or, to us words of Bruno Latour: "You begin with assemblages that look vaguely familiar and you end up with completely foreign ones."⁶

Adopting this perspective allows us to accomplish several objectives. Firstly, we can dispel the notion of "lived religion" as a negative, or at least *human, all too human*, counterpart to a highbrow, theoretically coherent, and rigidly classical religion. Furthermore, we can explore the interwoven, "messy," assemblages within the same religion, simultaneously diverse and cohesive.

In her recent study, Catherine Wanner provides an illustrative Ukrainian example with the *tomos*, which serves as an assemblage of high theology, and, remaining the same *tomos*, elements of everyday political discourse, TV debates and even folk culture.⁷

³ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶ Idem, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

⁷ Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity*, 2-5.

This “messiness,” however, should not be equated with ambiguity. While it may be ambiguous, there is no necessity for it to be so. Furthermore, the trajectory of Ukrainian history after 1991 can be interpreted as a process of disambiguation. The concept of Ukraine as a “borderland,” characterized by ambivalence and lacking a strict identity, was called into question following Russia’s aggression that began to unfold in 2014. In her research on the transformation of Ukrainian identities after the onset of the Donbas war, Tatiana Zhurzhenko apprehended the process in the following manner: the war “has become a new rupture in contemporary Ukrainian history, a point of crystallisation for identities, discourses, and narratives for decades to come.”⁸

The crux lies in this: viewed through the lens of the amalgamating discourse elucidated earlier, the crystallization described by Zhurzhenko constitutes, and can only ever be, a novel form of reconfiguration—a re-assembly of the “messy” discursive, experiential, memorial, and other constituent blocks it comprises. The proclaimed “end of ambiguities” initiates a process of creating new, equally complex forms that emerge and unravel during its progression.

With these introductory remarks in mind, we are nearly prepared to delve into more recent matters concerning the Ukrainian religious landscape during the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, there is one aspect of the “messy” Ukrainian religious assemblage that needs to be discussed before we proceed.

Everyday Agnosticism as Discursive Gilding

Undoubtedly, the era of Soviet atheism (to simplify, 1917–1991) exerted a profound influence on the religious imagination and practices of the nations residing under the communist regime, Ukrainians included. There is also no doubt that Soviet atheism, with its preaching of purificatory godlessness, was no less, and maybe even more, “messy” than any religion.⁹

⁸ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Ukraine’s Eastern Borderlands: The End of Ambiguity?” in *What Does Ukraine Think?*, ed. Andrew Wilson (London: The European Council on Foreign Relations, 2005), 52.

⁹ This can be regarded as one of the primary insights of the book dedicated to the history of Soviet atheism, written by Victoria Smolkin: Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). The author examines how the Soviet regime replaced traditional religious practices with newly created “atheist” practices that closely resembled classical religious traditions.

Even though one of the challenges for Communist ideology arose from religious revival, this “messy” atheism, with its secular and everyday aesthetic, has left a lasting imprint on the configuration of the Ukrainian public sphere. It is crucial to note that, apart from the Soviet legacy, other processes, like globalization and urbanization, as well as consequent rise of so-called “fuzzy fidelity,”¹⁰ have also played a role in the reduction of religiosity in the public sphere, fostering a pragmatic indifference to religion in everyday life.

I propose to use the term “everyday agnosticism” to serve as a conceptual framework for describing the prevailing discourse. Despite the pivotal role played by religious dissidents in dismantling the old regime and despite the resurgence of religion in visible forms, the everyday culture in the Ukrainian public domain, at least on the surface, remains secular.

So, what exactly does everyday agnosticism entail? Essentially, it embodies a state of religious indifference, at times intermingled with a casual commitment to quasi-religious or even directly religious customs, but often as tools for self-improvement or social conformity.

In the Ukrainian context, everyday agnosticism can readily transform into what Catherine Wanner terms “Just Orthodoxy,” characterized as a typically seasonal, vernacular Orthodox practice free from the constraints of an officially sanctioned tradition and affiliation with a specific Orthodox jurisdiction.¹¹

Worthy of notice, Volodymyr Zelensky embraced everyday agnosticism during his 2019 presidential campaign. A secular Jew, he openly expressed his disinterest in religious affairs, in stark contrast to President Poroshenko’s emphasis on the political aspect of religious matters.

In this context, we can consider this everyday agnosticism as a kind of discursive gilding—an overlay that conceals a multitude of diverse phenomena, but one that can be easily peeled away or removed. This gilding, for a time, smoothes over the complexities, rendering them uniform.

¹⁰ David Voas, “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe,” *European Sociological Review* 25, 2 (2008): 155–68. Nevertheless, it should be noted that strong, data-based arguments against modern prophecies of the upcoming secularism era exist, for example: Eric Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth? Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

¹¹ See Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity*, 76 and throughout the book.

However, it is susceptible to crumbling during moments of upheaval—especially, political and military.

In three cases that follow, I aim to illustrate that it is precisely the aspect of everyday agnosticism within the “messy” Ukrainian religious assemblage that is being challenged due to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The set of examples provided below is neither exhaustive nor complete. It is better considered as food for thought, as a record of the endless, fluid, and elusive experience, for which, in the future, one should establish a research distance and carefully study using all the rigorous academic methods. However, the conditions of war impose their terms, and in this sense, one must be concise, brief, judge on the basis of limited information, and rely on the reader’s ability to draw their own conclusions, as well as forgive the author for the inevitable errors and inaccuracies.

Case #1. Political Orthodoxy Goes to the People

For Soviet atheism, which viewed religions, particularly Orthodoxy, as direct political competitors, it was critical to downplay and minimize the political aspect of Christianity in every possible way. Despite occasional political appeals to religion within the Soviet Union, any relaxation in this regard was strategically instrumental.

Hence, after Ukraine got independence from the Soviet Union, the general attitude toward the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate remained relatively indifferent.

This was a typical case of everyday agnosticism discursive gilding. It covered the fundamental processes behind the development of a new political and religious ideology, now known as the Russian world ideology, which played a prominent part in advocating the war among faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Cyril Hovorun calls this type of ideologies “political orthodoxies,” contrasting them with another, positive, instance of orthodoxy—namely, a religious one.¹² Despite the appeal of Hovorun’s idea that Christianity initially separated religion and politics, given our earlier reflections on the “lived religion,” we find this distinction to be superficial and modern

¹² Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2018).

(in a sense of being a simple *doppelgänger* for typically modern pairs, like Nature–Culture, Object–Subject, Noumena–Phenomena).¹³

We agree with Hovorun's description and diagnosis of Russia's political and civil religion, as seen in some of the Moscow Patriarchate's teachings. However, we should reconsider his broad solution, which points to the problem as a kind of unholy mixing of politics and religion.

This "messiness," or the fact that religion inherently has a political nature, that we always deal with a mix, has become clear because of the event of war. The reverse process, the process of recognizing politics as inherently connected to religion, has also become more noticeable.

Ukrainians acknowledging this reality is reflected in recent sociological studies. The influential role played by the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate in escalating the Russo-Ukrainian war has significantly altered the attitudes of ordinary citizens, usually everyday agnostics or Just Orthodox people. They now support the government taking a more assertive stance regarding the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁴

This acknowledgment can be additionally illustrated by the overall surge of religious sentiment and identifications. As per data from the Razumkov Centre, published in the Religious Information Service for Ukraine (RISU), at least 74 percent of Ukrainian citizens self-identified as believers. By 2021, this number had declined to almost 69 percent. For non-believers, the percentage decreased from 13 percent to 12.2 percent. As for "convinced atheists," that number saw a decrease from 3.4 percent to 2.1 percent.¹⁵

Though these changes might not seem numerically significant, they are influenced by various factors. These factors range from insights

¹³ *Ibidem*, 2. For a paradigmatic critique of the type of modern distinctions Hovorun is basing his argument on, see: Latour, *We Have Never*. Also, Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Anton Hrushetskyi, "What Should Be the Policy of the Authorities Regarding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate): The Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on December 4-27, 2022" in *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, 2022: <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1165&page=1>, accessed December 16, 2023. Of course, any sociological research results during the war should be taken with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, we consider this preliminary survey as pretty accurate.

¹⁵ Religious Information Service for Ukraine, "During the Year of the War, the Percentage of Believers in Ukraine Increased. Religious Information" (February, 2023): https://risu.ua/en/during-the-year-of-the-war-the-percentage-of-believers-in-ukraine-increased_n136850, accessed December 16, 2023.

originating in evolutionary biology studies¹⁶-where there's substantial evidence suggesting that particular religious beliefs and rituals can strengthen social unity and encourage cooperation within the group-to the simple observation that things that are talked about tend to attract more attention and interest, and are more likely to influence the behavior.¹⁷

As the Russo-Ukrainian war began, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate increasingly appeared in the news, not solely concerning religious rituals or teachings, but rather entangled in what, following the analysis of Bogdan Synchak, Maksym Balaklytskyi, and Volodymyr Dudarets, can be termed as “non-religious influence”-pertaining, mostly, to political, societal, and cultural affairs. These matters also encompass instances of cooperation between clergy from the Moscow Patriarchate and Russian occupiers.¹⁸

While the concept of “non-religious influence” remains a valuable analytical tool in policy matters, our “messiness”-focused approach should disregard such distinctions as irrelevant when describing human experience and religious practices. The religious response observed in at least a segment of Ukrainian society, demonstrated through religious behaviors such as conversions, church attendance, and changes in belief, emerges as a reaction to what is perceived not as “non-religious influence,” but rather as the continuation of the religious sphere. In such a way, the perception of occasional proven acts of betrayal and collaboration with occupiers by the clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate is not simply seen as a “non-religious matter” but as something that should impact the religious behavior of people, and their confessional choice.

The rivalry between Orthodox confessions in matters of “non-religious influence” had already surfaced before the full-scale invasion, notably evident in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included their engagement with government policies concerning social distancing

¹⁶ Joseph Henrich, Michal Bauer, Alessandra Cassar, Julie Chytilová and Benjamin Grant Purzycki, “War Increases Religiosity,” in *Nature: Human Behaviour* 3 (2019): 129-135.

¹⁷ Aumyo Hassan and Sarah J. Barber, “The Effects of Repetition Frequency on the Illusory Truth Effect,” in *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6:38 (December 2021).

¹⁸ Bogdan Synchak, Maksym Balaklytskyi and Volodymyr Dudarets, “Non-Religious Influence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate on Ukrainian Society,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 42, no. 4 (2022): 50.

and the adaptation to “new normal” practices such as online liturgies.¹⁹ In the midst of the escalating Russo-Ukrainian war, the competition has intensified further.

Did this acknowledgment of political orthodoxy’s reality result from a sincere theological investigation tracing the genealogical roots of the Russian world doctrine and scrutinizing contemporary heresies? Certainly not. Our article commenced with the notion of a deep interrelation between politics and religion, especially accentuated during times of war. This serves as merely one example.

Case #2. Vatican, Rediscovered

Another profound realization tied to the Russo-Ukrainian war, and which relates not only to Ukrainians, but probably to the whole Western world, was uncovering the pivotal role that religious leaders still play in contemporary politics. This revelation owes much to the complex and enduring love-hate relationship of Ukrainian civil society with Pope Francis.

Once more, it might be a prejudice entwined with the fabric of everyday agnosticism, but within the Ukrainian public sphere, the mediating role of religious leaders remained insufficiently articulated. Its emergence began to be more evident right at the moment when the mediating role of Pope Francis came under increasing scrutiny.

As mentioned previously, war is a realm that abhors neutrality, and to a warring party, particularly one fighting a defensive war, any attempts at diplomatic compromise can appear as concessions and betrayal.

I am inclined to interpret this sequence of misunderstandings not solely through the perspective of Pope Francis’ charismatic persona, cultural context, and his skeptical politics towards the US and NATO, as the usual pundits’ line of defense or attack goes, but also through the lens of what one might call corporate, or to be more precise, diplomatic culture.

The Vatican stands as an institution with a memory that surpasses the recollections of nation-states and civil societies. It has weathered numerous states and wars, and from this vantage point, as unsettling as it may sound, the Ukrainian war is merely another chapter in an ongoing saga.

¹⁹ Timofii Brik, “Church Competition During the Pandemic: The Case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” in *Euxeinos*, vol. 12, no. 33 (2022): 22-23.

Ukraine is a young country, both from a state-building perspective and taking into account its leadership's average age. Its diplomatic activities have been labeled differently during this war, but what one cannot deny is the level of innovation employed. Nevertheless, whether we speak about Ukrainian "selfie diplomacy"²⁰ or "guilt diplomacy,"²¹ The Holy See seems to be untouched.

This is mutual, since Francis' softly pro-Russian statements, aimed at securing his mediatory role, for example evocations of Russia's "great empire legacy,"²² cause outrage and dissatisfaction among the Ukrainian populace.

Nonetheless, I believe delving deeper into the fundamental causes of these recurrent miscommunications and misunderstandings between the two sides serves no real purpose. Francis will persist in outlining an anti-Putin vision for young Russians by invoking tropes reminiscent of the 'empire legacy,' and Ukrainian civil society will not readily align with this strategy. However, beneath this veneer, there is a burgeoning mutual curiosity and rediscovery. Ukrainians have never been more captivated by the pontiff's words and actions, and the attention, as well as inevitable rapprochement will only grow.

Case #3. Invisibility of the Obvious

Let us conclude our case studies with a perspective somewhat distinct from the previous two. Let's delve into the personal accounts of so-called «ordinary people,» which carry a religious significance significant for the individuals describing them.

But firstly, some theory.

The study titled "Lifespan Changes in Autobiographical Memories," authored by Cohen and Faulkner, examined the prevalence of various types of memories in individuals' autobiographical recollections over

²⁰ Brandon Boatwright, "How Ukrainians Savvy Official Social Media Rallied the World and Raised the Bar for National Propaganda," <https://theconversation.com/how-ukraines-savvy-official-social-media-rallied-the-world-and-raised-the-bar-for-national-propaganda-210116>, accessed December 16, 2023.

²¹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Zelensky's 'guilt-based' diplomacy leaves its mark on NATO summit," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/13/zelensky-diplomacy-twitter-nato-summit-ukraine-russia/>, accessed December 16, 2023.

²² Claudia Chiappa, "Pope Slammed for Telling Russians to Hold On to 'Legacy' of a 'Great Empire'," <https://www.politico.eu/article/pope-francis-russia-youth-legacy-empire/>, accessed December 16, 2023.

the course of their lives. The study categorized memories into different thematic domains and provides the percentages of each category in participants' autobiographical memory accounts. These categories included "Births, deaths, marriages" at 22.2%, "Holidays" at 11.8%, "Trivia" at 8.2%, "Illness/injury" at 8%, "Education" at 8%, "Family" at 7.5%, "War" at 6.1%, "Love affairs" at 5.1%, and "Recreations/sports" at 4.9%.²³

So, "War" is considered to be a vivid memory only by 6.1%. Why? The study highlights the fact that 'war' isn't a concrete, universally defined phenomenon. Instead, it's a conceptual framework that contextualizes diverse, individual experiences.

Religious experiences, much like the perception of war, emerge in the subtleties of everyday life. Unlike the grandiose, almost cinematic visions we might associate with religious epiphanies, these moments of spirituality are frequently unassuming and easily overlooked. They are, in a sense, too "messy" to count as such.

Here is an example. That is a testimony of Volodymyr, businessman, 56. He is describing his pre-war experiences:

The day before the invasion, I had guests over. We were talking about the possibility of war. I remember telling them about my dream. About ten days before that, I had dreamed that someone was bombing us. I did not believe in prophetic dreams; I did not believe in the possibility of war. It turns out I was wrong.²⁴

Volodymyr's dream before the war seems to anticipate the impending conflict. This premonition, indistinguishable from every other bad dream, the majority of which we simply forget for they never turn out to be prophetic, underscores the subtle and often concealed nature of life-altering and religious experiences.

Here is another testimony, now of a woman, Olena, 57, who had been living under Russian occupation in the Kyiv area:

My husband is not very religious, but we read prayers three times per day during the occupation. And I don't know how many prayers we read when there were shellings. Whereas now the prayer books are

²³ Gillian Cohen and Dorothy Faulkner, "Lifespan Changes in Autobiographical Memories," in *Practical Aspects of Memory: Current Research and Issues, Volume 1, Memory in Everyday Life*, eds. Gruneberg, Morris, and Sykes (1988): 277-282.

²⁴ Anton Tarasyuk, ed., *Living the War. Kyiv During the Russian War Against Ukraine* (From A to Z, 2022), 24.

lying around, I don't pick them up. Sometimes I'll cross myself near the grandmother's icons, and that's it.²⁵

No Ezekiel-style aftereffects. Just daily routines of scared people. And, as peace returned, the prayer books were left untouched, exemplifying how religious experiences can ebb and flow, much like the tides of war.

These experiences are obvious, yet invisible. The existential conditions we are put in because of the war make them a bit more tangible, a bit.

Instead of Conclusions

Through these brief glimpses into theory and practice concerning religion and war, my aim was to delve into the inherently assembled, complex nature of these phenomena.

We started with a “high” notion of war and religion, and ended with a “low”. This journey should provide us a conceptual framework encompassing a wide array of experiences that can unfold in great imagery, intervene with politics, or hide in the seemingly inconspicuous details of daily life.

Both war and religion manifest themselves in big and small, mundane and grandiose, sublime and banal, or, to use the word we already employed, “messy” objects which we usually tend not to recognize as such. But sometimes obstacles force us to do that.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 25.