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Book Review
Tornike Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia.* Routledge, 2021.

The recent book by Tornike Metreveli provides a compelling reading on church-state relations in Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia during the „period of transition." Building on existing scholarship and extremely wide fieldwork, the author focuses on "the complex dependencies of church-state relations on national-historical patterns and the organizational interests of actors."

The book's central point is that churches have their „organizational interests," either ideological or pragmatic. If the state accommodates these interests, the church „self-limits its involvement to the 'softer' social issues, such as poverty, drug use, and alcoholism," and legitimizes the regime. If these interests are not accommodated – the church either "challenges political power by demonstrating its mobilizing potential and political maneuvering" or – if there is a competition between churches "for organizational interests or the status of 'the national church'" – it evokes "nationalism as analogous to religion."

Metreveli's book consists of two uneven parts – the first focusing on church-state relations' historical context (chapters 1–2) and the second one about church-state relations during the transition democracy (chapters 3–6).

The first chapter attempts to explain the history of church-state relations in Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia in order to better understand how these relations work today. Metreveli takes advantage of the well-studied concept of 'symphonia' and sets it against an extensive comparison with Catholics to develop his point. He argues that while in Georgia and Serbia, the local churches managed to sharpen "a sense of ethnic belonging, providing ethnocentric mythology to the nationalist imagery" and thus became 'national churches', the same thing never happened in Ukraine because it "did not have an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church within the Russian Empire."

Controversial as this point might be, this is the way Metreveli takes to come to it. He points out that when the state disappeared in Georgia and Serbia, the church ended up replacing it to promote the national memory and national language (in the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, as far as I get it). Ukraine "took a different trajectory." First, "the old Kyivan Rus harmony ended with a split within the church creating two entities" in the fifteenth century (in fact, these two entities had repeatedly popped up over the previous two centuries, putting the harmony into jeopardy long before the fifteenth century). Russia consequently incorporated the Kyiv church into the Russian, and when the Ukrainian national movement appeared, there was no Ukrainian church to side with so as to confront the Empire.

The second chapter moves on with church-state relations during Communism. In simple words, it repeats the existing scholarship by arguing that churches learned how to survive at that time and that state pressure on the church in Yugoslavia was not as intense as in the USSR. Upon closer look, however, an attentive reader might notice several inaccuracies.

First, Metreveli argues for "intertwining of communism and Orthodoxy" and that his clerics-informants are "romanticizing (…) the Soviet past." He never tries to develop this point to determine how Soviet nostalgia works and influences churches in the post-Soviet period. This is strange given the book's supposed objective to find out about the logic of the actions of the modern church. He also forgets to mention that religion was interpreted as a "result of intellectual and material backwardness" not just in Yugoslavia, but also in the Soviet Union.[1]

Some figures in the chapter are confusing, like the numbers of the churches closed during the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign (p. 41–42), which for some unknown reason represent only Crimea, Zaporizhia and the Ternopil regions. There are also several inaccurate passages such as – the church sided with the „Whites (Mensheviks) against the Reds (Bolsheviks) during the civil war and revolution" in the Russian Civil War, as if the Whites and the Mensheviks were the same (p. 39); and "In the aftermath of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a short-lived Western Ukrainian National Republic was soon incorporated into the Soviet Union with the western Galician region ending up as part of Poland" – such a jump from 1918 to 1939 in just one sentence[2] (p. 40).

Chapter three compares how churches responded to 'color revolutions' and how church-state relations developed before them. Metreveli accurately examines how churches contributed to the national imagery in Serbia and Georgia during the 1990s, and shows that for the Georgian church, Abkhazia was never as important as Kosovo was for the church of Serbia. He argues that the churches in both countries supported regimes as far as their "organizational interest" were accommodated. Both, in the end, allied with revolutionaries either explicitly or unintendedly.

But in the case of Ukraine, the author confuses the Ukrainian political elite's latter-year intentions to create "a national church based on UOC-KP and UAOC"[3] with what which was going on in the early 1990s (p. 63). He also misrepresents the clash between adherents of UOC-KP and police in 1995 as the violent confrontation between the different churches (p. 64). The pre-revolution Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004), in his narrative, sided with UOC-MP[4] but never seemed to advocate for "a United Local

[1] See more in: Sonja Luehrmann *Religion in Secular Archives* (2015) and Viktoria Smolkin *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty* (2018).

[2] In fact, after the demise of Austria-Hungary, the West Ukrainian Republic ended up in Poland. And only in 1939, after the infamous Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Soviet troops invaded Poland and annexed the territory of the former West Ukrainian Republic.

[3] UOC-KP stands for *The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate*; UAOC – *The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.*

[4] UOC-MP stands for *The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate*

Church."[5] He also overlooks the tensions and changes inside the UOC-MP between the two revolutions.[6]

The fourth chapter takes you to the heads of clerics of Georgia and Serbia, in order to understand why it is natural for priests in the former to talk about „hot political issues" in their sermons, while their colleagues in the latter tend to reflect on daily "social problems." It also provides wonderful insight into how churches at the grassroots levels approach religious minorities, EU integration and their nation-states' daily politics.

It has a somewhat misleading title, "Being a prominent priest in contemporary Georgia and Serbia." Indeed, it begins with a focus on two priests – "the most celebrated priest in the city" from Georgia who has his own website and YouTube with thousands of followers, and a father from Serbia who "does not enjoy publicity even remotely close to that of his Georgian counterpart" and has only a few people attending his services. So how can we compare them?[7]

Misleading as the title is, the chapter does not focus on what it means to be a prominent priest. Instead, it examines how interactions between priests and parishioners "renegotiate the discursive borders between church and state." To study this, Metreveli makes use of not only his interviews with these two "prominent priests," but of a solid bulk of interviews with at least 70 priests/bishops/experts, as well as participant observation throughout Georgia and Serbia.

In chapter five, Metreveli argues that the Ukrainian churches/political elites in a time of war promoted two competing narratives linking „a historical attachment to Orthodox religion to a distinctive feature of group identity" – a pro-Ukrainian "Unified State, United Church" against a pro-Russian "Russkii Mir." Forced to choose between the two, the ordinary parishioners on the ground "remained in a kind of identitarian in-betweenness." To back this up, the author studies the parishes transferring from UOC-MP to UOC-KP in several west-Ukrainian villages in 2017–18.

The problem I see here is how Metreveli juxtaposes two narratives. He begins with an extensive 2009 partially mistranslated quote from the Moscow patriarch Kirill explaining the meaning of "Russkii Mir." He then sets it against the 2018–2019 narrative of Ukrainian President Poroshenko et al. about making the Ukrainian church independent from Russia, as if "Ruskii Mir" has not evolved since 2009, or as if Kirill's subordinate, the UOC-MP elite, seriously put "Ruskii Mir" to use in 2017–2018.

Once done with the narratives, the author switches to „a typical exit strategy" – how being „forced to choose" one identity/narrative over the other, the parishioners decide about

[5] See more in Viktor Yelenskyi Ukrainskoie pravoslavie i Ukrainskiy proekt (2013) Pro at Contra, May-August 2013.

[6] See more about the Orange revolution and its consequences for UOC-MP in Nikolay Mitrokhin *Orthodoxy in Ukrainian Political Life* 2004-2009 (2010) doi 10.1080/09637494.2010.499281

[7] Later in the text, Metreveli tells us, "prominence of the cleric was operationalized by the cleric's public presence in (social and mass) media and social networks, involvement in church activities, and the number of parishioners" (p. 151). Thus, even according to his definition, Serbia's priest seems ineligible, or the author has just failed to properly present him.

whether they should stay with UOC-MP and "Ruskii Mir" or go. Metreveli demonstrates that leave-or-stay in each case depends on (a) how the UOC-MP priest responds to the war in east Ukraine; (b) parishioners' attachment to the personality of the priest and church building; (c) the liturgy language. He also points out that his informants referred to their church not as UOC-MP or UOC-KP, but rather "our Ukrainian Orthodox" or "ours from my grandfather's great-grandfather."

Building exactly on these findings, Metreveli argues that parishioners are "identitarians in-betweenness." His sources instead suggest that local communities do choose between two narratives/identities imposed-from-above; they merely adapt them to their daily reality – their church building, priest, funeral services for ATO, etc. The binary approach he employs seems to me an uncritical repetition of the Ukrainian 2018–19 pro-exit narrative, in which if you leave UOC-MP – you are 'a true' Ukrainian, but if you stay – you are an adherent of "Ruskii Mir."

The last chapter once again compares Georgia and Serbia, leaving Ukraine aside. It shows how religious education at schools influenced church-state relations in the two countries after the „color revolutions."

In Georgia, the new western-oriented government adopted a law banning religious education at schools in 2005. The church consequently "established practices of direct communication with the schools" to preserve it in any form possible. The "secular teachers turned into preachers," believing that it was their civic duty to convert pupils into Orthodox-Georgians. And "the church strengthen(ed) its influences in education as an outcome of the law."

I am ready to accept his point that the church became more influential "as an outcome of" the 2005 law. Metreveli convincingly demonstrates that the school autonomy introduced by that law combined with poor law enforcement actually made the church's grasp on education stronger. I am not ready to accept, however, his point about teachers. The author never attempts to investigate what attitudes towards religion school teachers had before 2005, so how can he claim they 'turned' if he has no foundation for his argument?

In Serbia, in contrast, the post-Milosevic government introduced religious education at schools and, by doing so, „neutralized the political influence" of the church. Discussing the educational reform and the debates around it in too many details, the author cannot demonstrate a clear link between religious education and the decrease in the church's influence on public policy.

"Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition" in general suffers from three flaws. The first one is sources. This book is literally overflowing with second-hand „as quoted in" citations from primary sources. It sometimes lacks proper references in the text (the last chapter especially) or draws extensively from one source for several consecutive pages. The second flaw concerns the comparison. We see the comparison between the three countries in the first three chapters, then Serbia-Georgia on the one hand and Ukraine on the other take different trajectories and never meet again. The last flaw is that there are many misleading passages, even paragraphs, that do not contribute to the book's point, such

as how much the Georgian government spent on 'preferential funding' of the church or how different from the Orthodox the Catholic experience of church-state relations was.

Overall, the book has demonstrated how path-dependency and organizational interests influenced church-state relations in several instances from Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. Readers can learn a great deal from this research. Metreveli's book falls short, however, of a fully-fledged comparison between the three cases and has not made the most from the uniquely-wide set of interviews, participant observations and existing scholarship.

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