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Unorthodox Views April 26, 2012

By Volodymyr Kish

One of the notable events that took place in the Ukrainian community in Toronto this past weekend was the visit of Patriarch Filaret, Head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyivan Patriarchate. Normally, the visit of a dignitary and spiritual leader of such rank from Ukraine would be a welcome occasion that would draw together all elements of the Ukrainian community as well as the ecumenical participation of the other Ukrainian confessions.

Instead, religious politics has caused the visit to be overshadowed by no small amount of acrimonious controversy and debate. The reasons for this are mired in the tragic and bloody history of Russian – Ukrainian relations, and have more to do with the machinations of big power politics than matters of Faith.

Ever since 1686, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine has been subjected to the rule of the Russian Orthodox Church. As the Tsars of Russia conquered Ukraine and made it part of their empire, they also forcibly brought to an end the autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It was only in the aftermath of Ukraine becoming an independent country again in 1991 that an autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP) first under Patriarch Mstyslav, then Patriarch Filaret, came into being. Regrettably, a large number of Orthodox churches and believers in Ukraine chose to remain affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church

under the banner of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) with Metropolitan Volodymyr as its Head. To complicate things even further, there is a third Orthodox Church in Ukraine, going by the name of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Ukrainian Church under its Metropolitan Mefodiy.

Although there have been many efforts over the past two decades to try and unite the three Orthodox factions in Ukraine under one roof, they have borne little fruit. In the meantime, the UOC-MP, with the support of the current Yanukovich government in Ukraine as well as the Russian Mother Church and the Russian government, has been very active in trying to re-assert its dominance over its Ukrainian rivals. It insists that it is the only “canonical” Orthodox Church in Ukraine as recognized by the World’s Orthodox community, whose authority comes through apostolic succession through the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It looks upon the other two Orthodox churches as being illegal schismatics.

The problem for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada is that it derives its spiritual authority from the same Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople under Patriarch Bartholomew I. As a result, it is forced to recognize the UOC-MP as the only legitimate Orthodox Church in Ukraine, and the other two as illegitimate schismatics. This is particularly difficult for Ukrainians in Canada to swallow, since the UOC-MP has clearly shown itself to be antagonistic to Ukrainian aspirations for both political and religious autonomy from Russian rule. In fact, many have characterized the UOC-MP as a *de facto* tool of Russian imperialistic foreign policy.

All this has placed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada (UOCC) and its Head, Metropolitan Yuriy, in a no-win situation. As part of the “ecumenical” World Orthodox community, it cannot have any dealings with the UOC-KP and Patriarch Filaret. Unfortunately, it would be fair to say that the vast majority of the Orthodox faithful here in Canada clearly sympathize with the UOC-KP and Patriarch Filaret’s efforts at establishing a unified autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarchate. The Ukrainian Nation State historically has always been closely associated with the Orthodox Church, and it is particularly painful for Ukrainians to accept Russian dominance, be it political or religious.

I have been told that prior to Patriarch Filaret's arrival, Metropolitan Yuriy issued an edict to all his clergy, churches and parishes, forbidding them to have any official contact with Patriarch Filaret lest it be interpreted as support for the UOC-KP. This came as direction from Patriarch Bartholomew, and I would guess that it was the result of some strong arm twisting by the UOC-MP and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church who has been particularly active in trying to assert his influence over Ukrainian religious affairs.

All this of course has raised strong opinions and protests by the more nationalistic oriented members of the Ukrainian community, be they Orthodox or not. What stand should the UOCC take when "canonicity" comes into conflict with truth, fairness and justice? Should "ecumenical" policy take precedence over the rights of an indigenous National Church? Where does one draw the line between church authority over spiritual versus secular and political matters?

These are not easy questions to deal with. Nonetheless, I think they are issues worthy of some broad discussion and open debate that needs to include both church leadership as well as all the faithful.