

The Religious Situation in Belarus in 2002

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Belarus is supposed to be a secular state. President Lukashenka describes himself as a nonbeliever, but aims to reintegrate Belarus into the Soviet Union, and he sees an alliance with the Orthodox Church as useful in this respect. The latter is an exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), and its head is still Filaret of Minsk, as it was in Soviet times.

Lukashenka has given the Orthodox Church many privileges, many of which are unconstitutional. For example any religious publishing house in Belarus has to have the approval of the Orthodox Church, whatever its denomination. The president has often denounced the Roman Catholic Church as a tool of NATO and anti-Belarusian. More and more restrictions are placed on foreign clergy. Now the situation is that no 'servant of a foreign religion' can go to Belarus without the permission of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs. There has been an attempt by two or three priests of the Orthodox Church to link up with the Autocephalous Belarusian Orthodox Church based in Canada.

When the Eastern-Rite Catholic (Uniate) Church was crushed in 1839 many Belarusians became 'Church Poles': that is, although officially classed as Orthodox they would frequent Polish Catholic churches on Sundays. There are many more Catholics in Belarus than people who claim to be Poles. Nevertheless the Roman Catholic Church is dubbed the Polish church. The abrupt cancelling of broadcasts of the mass in January this year has caused enormous resentment.

Rome has not been helpful to the Uniates, who have regenerated themselves in the 1990s. The Balamand agreement of 1993 argues that Uniatism is not a fruitful way forward in achieving improved relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. One of the pope's cherished aims is to visit Russia, and in this context he is keen to take opportunities to placate Patriarch Aleksii of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is difficult for him to take any measures against the Ukrainian Eastern-Rite Greek Catholic Church, because of its size, but the much smaller Belarusian Uniate church is an easier target. One thing the Vatican is doing is to insist that all newly-ordained Uniate priests be unmarried; this is an unpopular move in Belarus, where priests are traditionally married men. Many Uniates are in the Belarusian democratic opposition.

Lutheranism has a long history in Belarus. At the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth many of the big landowners in the region were Lutherans. The Lutheran Church now has 11 parishes. It has broken its ties with the Lutherans of Russia and now has its own hierarchy, but in doing so it has lost its chance of financial support from abroad.

In line with the isolationist policy of Belarus, all foreign church aid in general has come to an end, as has quite a lot of medical aid, including aid to Chernobyl victims.

At the same time there is quite a lot of Jewish 'find your roots' tourism to Belarus. The authorities allow this because it brings in money for the state budget.

Islam is also a longstanding religion in Belarus. Ever since the Mongol invasion into Europe there have been Tatars in Belarus. There is an old translation of the Koran into Belarusian written in the Arabic script.

The most recent reliable poll in Belarus, dating from 1993, gave the following statistics for religious adherence:

- 60 per cent Orthodox
- 30-35 per cent atheists
- 1 per cent Uniates
- 1 per cent Roman Catholics
- the rest Protestants and Muslims.

There are no reliable figures since then because statistics, like everything else, are now heavily manipulated.

The prognosis is that as opposition to Lukashenka increases, so the number of people claiming allegiance to the Orthodox Church will decline, since it has become so identified with Lukashenka and his pro-Russian policies.