

“Just Orthodox”: belonging to a tradition but not to a religious community

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“JUST ORTHODOX”.
BELONGING TO A TRADITION BUT NOT TO A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Review of:

Catherine Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine*.
Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2022.

Every scholar of religion chooses between two options: to describe people, their beliefs and practices in their own words, visions, and explanations, or to re-describe them using the concepts of social sciences and humanities. Traditionally, social and cultural anthropology tries to combine both approaches, starting from emic self-description and ending with etic interpretation from the point of view of various social theories. This book by Professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, Catherine Wanner, links emic and etic approaches.

As a Ukrainian scholar, I look at Wanner’s book as an “insider” looking at an “outsider’s” research. My attitude to this situation is that scholars should not seek the insider’s approval. Furthermore, an outsider’s perspective can be helpful for insiders, as it proposes explanations of the facts that are usually never questioned by insiders. In my case, I myself do not identify as “Just Orthodox”, as do those who are the focus of Wanner’s research. As a Ukrainian scholar, I am curious about the new perspective that scholars such as Catherine Wanner can offer.

Two issues are crucial in the book: the correlations between everyday religious practices and Church institutions that try to regulate and promote them (p. 7); and how Ukrainian society may be “simultaneously increasingly religious and enduringly secular” (p. 21). Studying the Just Orthodox (*prostō Pravoslavni*) helps to explain these problems because they are involved in religious practices while not belonging to any ecclesial institution. They demonstrate religiosity but are removed from Church influence. In the Ukrainian case, the Just Orthodox are a notable group of believers (8.4% according to the last sociological survey of the Razumkov Center, 2023) who identify themselves with a particular religious tradition (Orthodox Christianity) but do not belong to a particular Church or religious community. One of

their main features is the refusal to identify themselves with the two main churches of Ukraine: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (24.7% and 13.3% of Ukrainians identify themselves with these Churches, respectively, in 2021). The latter Church was part of the Russian Orthodox Church, but it declared independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022. Nevertheless, the Church's current status is unclear, and many people, e.g., experts in religious issues, think that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is still part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Identifying oneself with one of the Orthodox churches is often not so much a religious but a political act; people would like to show their support to a certain church, just as they might support a certain political party. To be "Just Orthodox" means to refuse rivalry between the Churches. This is one of the options of being *spiritual but not religious* or manifesting *believing without belonging*. These people often practise vernacular religiosity and belong to a tradition but not an institution. When the author first mentions Just Orthodox in the Introduction, she compares them to the "Nones", as American sociologists call people who are not affiliated with a particular religious institution. Interestingly, when I first heard about the "Nones" during my stay in the USA, I associated them with the Ukrainian Just Orthodox!

Wanner describes several religious practices that are widespread not only among Just Orthodox Ukrainians but among the adherents of both Orthodox Churches. I must say, even as a professional scholar of Ukrainian religion myself, I found the book informative. This is the strength of the outsider approach, to start from seemingly trivial facts that lead, through studying them deeper and deeper over a long period, to finding something new, unknown, or unrecognised, even to expert insiders.

At the centre of Wanner's book is an event known as the Revolution of Dignity or the Maidan (2013–2014) and what happened after it, namely the war with Russia that started in 2014. The author focuses on the religious dimensions: rituals and commemorating practices. One of the things that caught my eye is the repetition of the now-dominant narrative in Ukraine about the Maidan and the granting of a *tomos* for the Orthodox Church in 2019, the document officially granting the independent status of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from the Constantinople Patriarchate. This recognition had been seen by the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, as the final step toward the full independence of Ukraine. As such the idea that an independent Ukraine should have an independent Church only came into being in the 1990s.

I expected greater balance in interpreting popular understandings of such events in the book, however, some attempt to represent alternative points of view. For instance, according to sociological surveys from that time, the Maidan was supported by approximately 50% of Ukraine's citizens,¹ which means that the other half of

¹ There were at least four sociological surveys on the issue, conducted at different times, for instance: https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%84%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD#%D0%A1%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8F_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8F

Ukrainians had a different opinion. What were the attitudes of the Just orthodox? In Wanner's book, we can read about the Just Orthodox who supported the Maidan but not about those who were against it. That lacuna moves me to ask: How do we select people to interview or observe? Who do these insiders represent? Although the reader will not find the author speculating on this problem, there are other issues that she reflects on, like the weaponisation of religion, the integration of religion into everyday life, the affective atmosphere of religiosity, etc.

In the book, a reader will find some historical flashbacks to Soviet times and comparisons between Ukraine and Russia. The latter has not been popular for decades in Ukraine, but Wanner demonstrates that it can still be productive to make some comparisons because findings of similarities and differences in behaviour and beliefs can lead us to understand them better. I am glad that Western readers now have Catherine Wanner's book as a good source for explaining crucial aspects of religious and political life in Ukraine. It shows us how to combine fieldwork with theoretical interpretation and be attentive to factual details and the use of concepts. As such, it is an excellent example of a qualitative study of Ukrainians' spiritual lives and vernacular religiosity.

