"If We Don't Do It, No One Will"

Some Sociological Considerations on the Ukrainian Greco Catholic Church in Canada

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Abstract

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) is an Eastern Catholic Church that has had a presence in Canada since the last decades of the nineteenth century. As such it has moved from an immigrant Church to one, like many other established Churches, which must deal with the increasing secularization of contemporary culture. The UGCC has relied on cultural support for the transmission of beliefs and practices. Cultural models, however, rely on substantial and ongoing levels of engagement and it is in these areas that the UGCC is facing significant challenges. Large numbers of its members can be identified as affiliates of the Church but this affiliation is likely to become even more tenuous in the future. In light of this the UGCC needs to explore new transmission models that involve more active engagement with members.

Some Preliminary Considerations: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

The aim of this paper is to examine the position of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with an eye to the future in light of several key sociological considerations that underscore vigorous religious communities. These apply to how secular cultures engage with religious groups and to how religious groups can best position themselves in such an environment. In discussing future trends and arguing for certain scenarios, some mention should be made about the dangers of framing this discussion in morally indicative terms. In particular, one distinction that often appears in this type of discussion is between optimistic

and pessimistic scenarios. It is possible to extrapolate too adversely from what is known. However, to describe a sociological analysis as pessimistic does not really address the issue: is the analysis the most accurate account of what we know about the world? A better characterization is to ask whether the analysis is a realistic assessment. Unfounded optimism is not a moral virtue. To be optimistic should be a function of a valid interpretation of the evidence. Seeing the state of the UGCC with some alarm is not giving into a poorly established pessimism but can, indeed, be a realistic and accurate analysis and, most importantly, it can lay the foundation for purposeful future action based on emerging challenges.

This type of argument is brought into sharp relief by Pope Benedict XVI:

> As we know, in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of being extinguished, like a flame that has lost its fuel. We are facing a profound crisis of faith, a loss of the religious sense, that constitutes the Church's greatest challenge today…the risk of a false irenicism and of an indifferentism, that is completely alien to the mind of Vatican II, require our vigilance.

Transmission of Faith: A Cultural Model

Gill (178-85) describes the cultural paradigm of religion as a way to better understand the place of religion in contemporary societies and comments that the natural state of religious communities is worth noting as they crystallize arguments for the importance of the work of religious groups.

> Left to their own devices congregations tend to decline over time simply because elderly churchgoers die and young people need persuasion to replace them. Church growth, on the other hand, may require both considerable energy from churches and a period of social mobility (184).

The cultural transmission model comes under close scrutiny in countries such as Canada that have experienced what Hay describes as a swift and intense secularization. In cultural models religion persists in two ways. The first is through the general, and somewhat passive, support that religious communities get from the wider culture. This is often in the form of endorsement for moral and social precepts. For example, for centuries the wider community supported the religious understanding of the Sabbath as a day of rest. Sympathy for the beliefs and practices of religious groups was further enshrined in law. The same cannot be said about general cultural support for religion today. In fact, it could be argued that there is a growing disparity between long held religious principles and current community mores.

Although emerging for many decades, this disparity has now taken hold and, in all likelihood, will become more pronounced in the foreseeable future. It is important to note, however, that authors such as Allen argue that in the global South, as opposed to Western nations such as Canada, states and religious communities typically share a deep and abiding common purpose. A good illustration of this disparity in countries such as Canada is the definition and utility of marriage. There was a time, not so long ago, when the community view of marriage reflected the traditional Christian view. Farrow points out that this is no longer the case and gives one example of a now well-established trend.

The second aspect of mediated religious transmission is through the internal culture of religious groups. The strength of this internal culture can vary significantly. To be effective as a transitive agent in the absence of wider cultural support, the internal culture of a religious group needs to be intense, responsive, and monitored. It is, in essence, a very active process. Internal culture does not directly depend on wider societal support and is controlled by the group. Internal culture is best illustrated by how well religious groups are able to build and sustain meaning by the myriad of activities, events, and human connections they foster (Kelly). A simple example of this is provided by a mother, Olena Cybulsky, who comments on her family's participation in a celebration of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan held at the Ukrainian heritage village outside of Edmonton:

> Over a meal of perogies, cabbage rolls, cucumber salad and other dishes, Sylvia Masikewich said she comes to this event every year to keep her culture and traditions alive. "These days, children don't know the traditions of our forefathers," she said, dressed in a red and black hand-stitched blouse she bought while visiting Ukraine two years ago. Stephan and Olena Cybulsky don't want that to happen to their two-year-old son Matthew so they speak to him in Ukrainian at home and participate in all the festivities. "*If we don't teach him, no one will*," Olena said (Ellwand, my emphasis).

Hudak notes that in the early decades of Ukrainian settlement in Canada the community was generally able to provide the rich textured metaphors, symbols, and signs that helped initiate the young into the religious community. In more recent times, however, the loss of many key contributors to sustaining this complex cultural matrix has greatly weakened the internal culture of Ukrainian Catholic communities. Anderson, quoting figures from the 2001 *Annuario Pontifico,* noted that Ukrainian Greco-Catholics (UGC) in Canada from 1990 to 2007 had declined 58% from a figure of 201,957 to 85,608.[1]

This is not to say that there is no mediation of internal culture in UGC communities or that this is the only factor contributing to the vitality of religious groups. To be effective, however, the scope and intensity of a group's internal culture needs to be set at a very high level. In simple terms this can be understood by comparing the amount of family and community time and energy dedicated to formative religious activities to the time and energy given to other pursuits. If the ratio is too much in favor of other activities, then the general impact of religious socialization and formation will be low.

Bruce makes a similar point; the capacity of religious groups to first sustain the allegiance of members and then to grow and expand is conditional on the work of religious groups.

> Evangelicals are in the main produced by evangelical parents, Sunday schools, youth fellowships, seaside missions and camps, Christian Unions in

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[1] Decline on this scale is not unique to the UGCC in Canada. Wilkens-LaFlamme, for example, notes very significant falls in membership in the United Church of Canada across Canada from 1971-2007. Most notable, perhaps, was a 70% decrease in membership in Western Canada. Many of the arguments made in this paper about the UGCC can be extrapolated to other denominations.

universities and colleges, and membership in one or more of the many inter-denominational evangelical organizations (402).[2]

The work of religious communities is seen here in very pragmatic terms and describes what the community does to involve and engage its members. Ukrainian Catholics have lost a large portion of the industry that is necessary for religious vigor. This can be contrasted with other religious communities, which, for a variety of complex reasons that cannot be explored here, have maintained a much higher degree of Bruce's notion of the work of religious institutions. One pertinent Canadian illustration is provided in Francis, Fawcett, and Linkletter. They examine a group of young highly committed Christians who invest a large amount of time and energy in engaging young people in the work and mission of the group. They do this with a conscious sense that their efforts are critical as there are no other compensatory general cultural mechanisms that provide much assistance. In contrast, the UGCC and other religious communities inadequately respond to the breakdown of strong, sustaining, and ongoing social structures. In the past these structures provided a strong entree into the Christian life and, by corollary, into the life of the Church.

Smith (347-57) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between religious groups and prevailing social structure: communities flourish when they provide on-going structural support and encouragement to members. This is especially important when there is no strong accord between internal expectations and practices of a group and what is seen as normative by society. This point is worth reiterating and explains well the importance of the changed relationship between religious communities in Canadian culture today. Smith uses the analogy of skating at an ice rink. For new people coming to the rink, it is easy to join the activity if they move in the same direction as other skaters. This illustrates the power of conformity or what Smith calls collective activity currents. If skaters take a different route, they face acute and chronic challenges that, in the absence of great dedication and effort, are likely to overcome them. By analogy, as the UGCC becomes more counter cultural, at least in its official pronouncements, it needs to provide on-going support for its members who seek to "skate" against the flow.

Supportive structures are strengthened by the amount of time and effort expended in sustaining them. This is an elaboration of Bruce's argument and builds on the idea of binding social capital (Baron, Field, and Schuller). A key dimension of social capital is cultivation of the bonds that keep younger members of a community in touch with their elders and, through them, with the religious community. A critical question for UGCC is how successful has it been in retaining high levels of religious salience in what can loosely be called the middle aged of the community. Age limits are important here. D'Antonio and his colleagues in studies of Roman Catholics in the United States have noted there is a strong "generation gap" in the religious beliefs and practices of those surveyed. This gap, however, was relatively binary, that is, it separated those who were now well into their fifties and all those younger than 50 (D'Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier). It is true that older members of religious communities tend to be more religious; they have built up over many years large

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[2] A similar sense is made by Lonergan when he writes, "What counts in a person's life is what he does, and says and thinks" (235).

amounts of binding religious social capital. The current middle-aged generation of UGC, by and large, has not accumulated this capital. This has obvious critical implications for the socialization of children into the religious community, even more so for generations to come. The challenge here for UGC leaders is that sustained high levels of involvement in the community are hard to manufacture. As people get older, their lifestyles tend to solidify and habituate. If Church-based activities, prayer, and a conscious sense of being a follower of Christ are not a significant part of a person's worldview, it is difficult to change this after a certain age. In addition, other things have replaced religious consciousness. One simple but important example of this is the replacement of regular communal worship, such as participation in the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, with other activities such as a regular round of golf with friends. In this scenario religious connections diminish and, over time, a more secular way of life becomes ingrained.

A religious sensibility is not, however, immediately lost; it may take a number of generations. In the meantime a sense of religion remains, but in a highly weakened form, in what Leger calls a chain of memory that is indicative of a generational movement away from Christianity. Over time chains of memory that bind individuals to particular traditions become looser. This suggests that the trajectory for many today is toward, over time, greater estrangement. Bibby (2009: 169) described this process well in his comment on intergenerational religious affiliation data:

> The adult change has not involved a movement to outright atheism so much as a movement from decisiveness about belief in God to tentative belief or increasing agnosticism. With teens we see what amounts to an ongoing intergenerational shift – from tentativeness to agnosticism, and from agnosticism to atheism.

This estrangement may be accompanied by some identification with spirituality, but this is the type of belief that does not lead to the accumulation of binding social capital. It also gradually disassociates individuals from the grand narrative of religious traditions by ensuring that they do not satisfactorily acquire the language, symbols and metaphors of the religious community. Ammerman (301) sees this as akin to learning a formative language, "If they do not learn the language, it does not shape their way of being in the world. They can neither speak of – not perhaps even see – a layer of spirituality reality alongside the mundane everyday world." Moreover, if this spiritual discourse is to arise it is likely to be disconnected from a sustaining religious tradition and, as such, become more and more personalized over time.

The Rise of Spirituality

The widespread mantra, "I'm spiritual but not religious!" may be more a cause for concern rather than reassurance for leaders of traditional religious communities such as UGCC. Spirituality can be conceived in a number of ways. Mason, Singleton, and Webber (33-42) point out the need for considering spirituality in a historical context. This is especially important in a discussion about the relationship between spirituality and building strong and supportive social structures within religious communities. If spirituality is understood as a highly privatized, personal, and idiosyncratic set of beliefs that do not have a clear derivation from a faith tradition, are not expressed in a communal and ritualistic way,

and do not have a strong impact on one's way of life, then the rise of spirituality should pose a serious concern to UGC leaders. Described in this way, spirituality seems to have a number of parallels with the loose affiliation of many nominally affiliated UGC (Rymarz 2006).

Pointing out that large numbers of UGC have this spirituality is merely to restate in a different manner that the lack of religious vitality leaves unanswered the question of how to respond. If spirituality is understood in its classical sense, as an intense personal encounter with the Divine leading to a transformation of life that is closely connected with a great Tradition, then spirituality is almost the natural ally of those who are trying to promote stronger religious formation and integration within the religious community. However, it is the diffuse, generic type of spirituality that appears to be on the ascent among many young people today even though they find it hard to articulate. Mason et al. write: "We conclude that our findings do show a very strong movement in the direction of a new kind of spirituality focused on the self, and remote from religious traditions" (38).

A range of issues arise if large numbers of UGC describe themselves as spiritual in the generic sense that sees relationship with God as primarily personal and private as opposed to communal. Ascribing to such a strongly ascendant cultural view may have major consequences for self-identity. If members of a religious group align themselves with cultural norms too frequently, they may not be able to effectively establish a boundary between themselves and others. A sociological boundary is a fundamental concept; without adequate boundaries, groups lose a sense of identity. If a group has no or very low boundaries or distinguishing features, then it loses sociological validity because it is unable to define itself. In light of Smith's analogy, it is difficult to detect differences among skaters if they all go in the same direction.

There are a number of theological issues that can be raised, albeit, very briefly, when the private and personal sense of connection with God is placed above a communal sense. This kind of spirituality runs counter to the whole Byzantine metaphysic that sees the individual in communion with God through the Church. To suggest, as Tacey does, that a way forward for Catholics is a "personal and mystical encounter" between the believer and God is to undermine any sense of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ (169). The basis of the Christian life is ongoing fellowship with God and with others expressed most perfectly in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. If a person claims to be a Ukrainian Catholic but rejects this communal understanding of faith in favor of a private spirituality, then there is a serious rupture between the views of the individual and the Tradition. Guardini notes one implication of this view:

> The way to the truth then cannot be to "seek God" as we like to say merely through our own experiences and our own thought. For if the seeker pictures God in this way and establishes a relationship with him, he really remains with himself – only in a more subtle and more closed binding manner than if he declared openly, "I do not want anything to do with God; I am sufficient for myself" (60-61).

To return to a more sociological analysis, to recast many younger UGC today as diffusely spiritual simply recognizes the current condition of the Church. It does not proposes any way forward to those interested in reinvigorating the religious community.

A final aspect of strong social structures is that they are generated and reproduced though social interactions (Smith: 353). Many Catholic teenagers and young adults lack networked peer support that can enhance their connection with the faith community. For young people with an emerging religious commitment, the lack of ongoing support is especially acute (Regnerus and Uecker: 219). A characteristic of active Roman Catholic youth is that, on the whole, they were not well integrated with other religious adolescents (Rymarz and Graham: 59). For many, the only time they came together with others who could offer peer support was weekly Mass, and this was only a fleeting contact. In their typical daily routines, they did not associate, either formally or informally, with other religiously active Catholic teenagers. Even when they go to Mass, many younger Catholics are aware of the absence of people who are like them. Young people who attend Catholic school can at least explore others in the religious community around them. Those who attend a religious school have the advantage, using Smith's analogy, of skating in the same direction as everyone else. This is the community of more loosely affiliated Catholics that does not eschew religious affiliation entirely and is made up of many people with relatable experiences. It is unlikely, however, that integration with this group will lead to greater commitment and much more likely that it will contribute to the growth of what Bibby (2012) has described as the largest growing group in the study of Canadians today, namely, religious affiliates.

What to Make of Affiliates?

Bibby traced for decades many aspects of religious belief, association, and expression in Canada.[3] A key is that traditional Canadian religious communities now contain large and growing numbers of affiliates who wish to remain associated with a religious community but are not actively involved. In terms of the classification developed by D'Antonio et al. (15-17), these affiliates are not strongly committed to their religious community. Commitment here is understood as marked by three characteristics: a high level of practice, a self-described profession of religion being very important, and a resolve to remain an active member of the religious community.

Bibby contends that affiliates present an opportunity for religious communities to reengage those on the margins and that affiliates are in a state of flux about the level of their religious association. Bibby (2004) predicts a coming renaissance for religion in Canada on the basis of successful outreach to this group. There are, however, several difficulties in this analysis. Dawson and Thiessen's study examined in much closer detail the disposition of Bibby's original group of affiliates and suggest that this group is not likely to raise their level of religious commitment (145-49). Those who choose to remain affiliated with a religious community in contemporary secular culture have demonstrated a strong, and in many ways, rational decision. They are not indecisive, testing the waters to see which way they will align themselves in the future.

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[3] Bibby's views have undergone some change over the years, from a classical secularist view that, sees the role of religion losing its place in the public domain, to a more private and eclectic view of the 21st century that adopts a more market driven perspective. His current view is that the religious future of Canada will be one of greater polarization (see Bibby 1993, 2009, 2012).

This is a powerful exemplification of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), a position that Bibby has some affinity with in recent years. In this view, religious behavior is not seen as a type of irrational and poorly grounded response that accommodates the frightened masses by assuring them of divine benevolence (Lucas).[4] Rather, individuals make choices about religion on the basis of benefits gained. In a secular culture many advantages come with nominal religious adherence. In parts of Canada such as Alberta and Ontario where publically funded Catholic schools exist, a child can more easily be enrolled in a Catholic school if the parent and/or child is a baptized Roman or Ukrainian Greco Catholic. Marriage in the church and burial from the church are also based on having been baptized. The key is that options greatly expand if one maintains at least a loose religious affiliation. In addition, one avoids the existential void that comes from completely dissociating from a great religious narrative. Living as an atheist or agnostic brings with it a range of challenges that are avoided by staying loosely connected with an abiding religious group.

In RCT, a key consideration is the cost associated with religious belief and practice; Stark and Finke (100), note in their Proposition 17, "People will seek to minimize their religious costs." The combination of low cost and high individual benefit does not, however, augur well for the community. While individuals may for their own reasons see value in retaining an association, this does not result in a strong communal religious dynamic. Iannaccone (274-76) has written extensively on the decline of religious communities and identifies a key factor that he calls the free rider problem: individuals associate with a group but contribute little to it in a corporate sense. Although they are not synonymous, there is some similarity between those who are loosely affiliated with a religious community and free riders. This is especially evident in efforts to reengage affiliates.

The difficulty for reengaging affiliates is that they receive significant benefits in their current disposition without incurring significant costs. Hechter (27) comments that a rational person will not join an organization if he or she can reap the benefits of membership without participating. They are not, among other things, asked to contribute to the financial running of the Church, to attend religious services, to hold difficult or counter cultural beliefs. In short, they have struck a very good bargain. Why should they change their arrangements? This has been likened to an insurance policy that delivers substantial benefits for very little cost, a scenario in which a person is unlikely to agree to any policy that raises their premium. Those UGC who could be described as affiliates in Bibby's terminology are most likely to remain in this category or to move to an even weaker affiliation once the benefits of a fragile continuing connection diminish. New ways of envisaging strong and ongoing affiliation need to be explored. Rymarz (2013) provides one example of such a renewed approach, UGCC sponsored intensive community experience and fellowship such as attendance at World Youth Day.

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[4] There is overlap here with the classical sociological notion dating from Weber that one of the key pillars of religion as opposed to rationality is "magic." This is characterized as using spiritual forces for worldly ends (for further discussion see Collins).

Conclusion

The UGCC in Canada, like many traditional Christian communities, faces challenges, and prominent among them is how to provide effective formation and catechesis to younger believers in a cultural context where passive socialization models of cultivating strong religious affiliation and identification have broken down. The UGCC, like many other religious groups, used to rely on the general culture to support its goals and aspirations, but that is no longer the case.

In the absence of effective passive formation, large numbers of young UGC can be described as expressing a personal spirituality that is often juxtaposed with traditional religious beliefs and practices, and also they can be described as religious affiliates who maintain nominal connections with ancestral religious communities. These developments point to a serious decline in the vigor of the UGCC. In the absence of a renewed emphasis on what has been called here the internal culture of the group, the trajectory of most Ukranian Greek Catholics will be further disengagement from their religious community. The challenge for the Church is to take upon itself the task of better integrating believers in a deliberate and self-conscious way. This integration should acknowledge that being a member of the UGC cannot can be assumed as synonymous with being part of a wider culture norm. Indeed, such an association will be seen as counter cultural, involving a good deal of effort from those within the community. To paraphrase the words of Olena Cybulsky mentioned earlier, "If we don't do it, who will?"

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