

Yauhen Androsik

## CONFESSIONS

The first of the world religions to come to Belarus was Christianity. It began to infiltrate from Byzantium in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was established in the Duchy of Polotsk, the oldest state formation within the territory of today's Belarus. The official year in which Christianity was adopted is considered to be 992 AD, when the Polotsk Bishopric Chamber was founded. The arrival of Christianity from Byzantium conditioned the domination of Eastern traditions which are also present in Belarus today. Therefore, Christianity had appeared and established itself in these lands even before its official split into the Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1054.

Catholicism of the Latin tradition enjoyed a significant expansion after Grand Duke Jagiello of Lithuania, signed the Krev ("blood") Union in 1385 (when Belarusian lands became the nucleus of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, or GDL, founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century).

Islam came to these areas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the Tartar troops hired by Grand Duke Vitaut in order to reinforce his army. A large part of those Tartars later settled in the GDL. Famous literary and historical evidence of this is a copy of the Koran written in Belarusian, but using Arabic ligatured script.

Judaism was brought by Jewish merchants, and their presence increased as the foreign economic ties of the GDL extended. A great number of Jews moved to the GDL in order to escape oppression, because this state offered a certain degree of tolerance in its relations between religions. Another factor that influenced the concentration of Jews in this area was Catherine II's edict of January 3, 1792 that first introduced the so-called settlement line — a certain radius from large cities, inside which Jews were banned from settling. Due to

those circumstances Jews made up 50 or more percent of the population of various towns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They preserved their faith by living in compact communities.

The Reformation brought Protestantism to the GDL, and it was spreading from as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the forms of Lutheranism, Calvinism, Aryanism, and so forth<sup>1</sup>. Those trends, however, did not become widespread, remaining as the faiths of individual prominent feudal lords (particularly Cal-



Oppositional action "The Charnobyl" ' Way 2001,"

Minsk, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

Photo: IREX/ProMedia

vinism and Lutheranism). Some of their subordinate peasants were also forced into those faiths, as well as Germans and other immigrants from Protestant backgrounds. The growth of Protestant churches was largely halted by the signing of the Lublin Union, following which GDL Catholics were able to rely on

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopaedia of Belarusian History. Vol.5, Minsk, 1999, p. 568.

strong support from Poland in fighting against the Reformation <sup>2</sup>.

The Lublin Union of 1569 merged the Polish Kingdom and GDL into a federal unitary state and gave Roman Catholicism additional opportunities to expand into the East. An important milestone in this process was the Church Union signed in Brest in 1596; to a great extent the preservation of the Byzantine tradition in these lands was possible thanks to that treaty. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of Uniates resident in the Belarusian parts of the GDL <sup>3</sup>.

The Old Believers came to the GDL in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to escape oppression by the Russian authorities, and settled in compact groups all across the GDL.

Thus, thanks to historical circumstances, the GDL developed a tolerant attitude towards different faiths, resulting in the presence of a multitude of religions among the population.

The annexation of the Belarusian lands to the Russian Empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about changes in the religious life of the people. Despite the fact that all faiths were formally permitted, the Orthodox Church enjoyed much greater opportunities for expansion because it was the state religion of the Russian Empire.

Before the partitions of Poland (*Rzeczpospolita*), there was one Orthodox eparchy whose seat was in Mahyleu. In 1755, Georgiy Kaninskiy became head of the eparchy and started an active campaign to promote the spread of the Orthodox Church. When the first partition occurred in 1772, he requested permission from Catherine II to convert Uniates into Orthodoxy. In 1780, permission was granted to appoint Orthodox priests to vacancies in Uniate churches. Thus, the expansion of the Orthodox Church into Belarusian lands occurred mainly through conversion from the Uniate faith<sup>4</sup>. Until 1905, conversion from Orthodox to another faith remained illegal<sup>5</sup>.

The partition of 1772 meant that about 100 000 Catholics went over to the Russian Empire. Catherine II decreed that all directives and messages from the Apostolic Capital could only be publicised among the Catholic population with the empress's approval<sup>6</sup>. The annexation of new territories entailed changing of borders of Catholic bishoprics. A large part of the Catholic clergy were displeased by this joining and the changes that were taking place in the Catholic Church and society. Conspiratorial organisations started to form, and some of the clergy sided with the French during the 1812 invasion and participated in the uprising of 1830–1831. An 1832 edict led to the closure of a great number of monasteries. The next step was to reduce the amount of monasteries and categorise them as

“regular” or “irregular,” the latter were prohibited from accepting new monks. If there were less than eight monks left in a monastery, it was closed down.

The Tsarist attitude towards Catholics varied. Periods of loyalty would change into oppression, especially after an uprising. The 1905 law on religious tolerance led to numerous Orthodox Christians converting to Catholicism, but the Tsarist establishment only tolerated Catholics as long as their interests did not conflict with those of the empire.

As far as the Uniate Church was concerned, the attitude of the Russian Empire was strictly negative. An edict of April 1794 ordered that any obstacles preventing Uniates from returning to Orthodoxy be removed. Uniate priests were banned from staying in areas where they had formerly had temples. Generally, the official policy aimed to abolish the Uniate Church. Tsar Nicholas I planned to strengthen the Western provinces of the Russian Empire by increasing the presence of the Orthodox church. This was achieved by converting Uniate churches to the Orthodox faith. The Uniates suffered a severe blow following the uprising of 1830–1831, when more than half the Basilian monasteries were abolished to avenge their monks' participation in the uprising. Simultaneously, the Tsarist government was pursuing a policy aimed to control the Uniate Church, which resulted in it being abolished by merging it with the Orthodox Church in 1839. The 29<sup>th</sup> Cossack regiment was sent to Vitsebsk province in January 1839 in order to prevent unrest among believers. The feared unrest struck nonetheless, and the Basilian monks and nuns put up the strongest resistance. The Uniates were doomed, however, since their poor clergy, gentry, and peasantry were unable to withstand state policy and the treachery of the Orthodox Church patriarchs.

The Russian government's attitude towards Protestant movements was rather liberal. This was mostly to do with the fairly small Protestant population and their inconsequential influence on society, but the Tsarist authorities nevertheless took steps to limit the Protestants' activity. “*Once Belarus had been joined to Russia, its Protestant traditions were put on ice, as if awaiting better times.*”<sup>7</sup>

The first communities of Baptists and Evangelist Christians appeared in Belarus in the 1870s, followed by Adventists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses and others which gained an increased following throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The establishment of the Soviet regime radically changed the nature of relations between religion and the state. Throughout its history, the USSR applied a policy of state atheism, according to which fighting religion was seen as being akin to the fight against capitalism, and it was Karl Marx who dubbed religion the

<sup>3</sup> Faiths in Belarus (end of 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Minsk, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Faiths in Belarus (end of 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Minsk, 1998, pp. 32–33, 43.

<sup>5</sup> The Byelorussian SSR. A Concise Encyclopaedia. Vol. 1, Minsk, 1978, pp. 616–617.

<sup>6</sup> Faiths in Belarus (end of 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Minsk, 1998, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Lych L. — The Protestant Church in the National and Cultural Life of Belarus: Traditions and the Present // an annual publication by the Belarusian Academy of Science's Institute of History, 1999, p. 116.

"opium of the people." This policy dealt a serious blow to all faiths.

The state paid special attention to banning the "revivalist wave" among religious organisations which had become quite influential in the early 1920s. The Uniate Church was unable to revive itself in Soviet Belarus, but continued to exist, despite certain difficulties, in Western Belarus which was then part of Poland.

Even early as the first few years of its existence, the Soviet regime began to take a heavy toll on the material position of all churches by expropriating their buildings and other property. The church-robbery campaign reached its peak in 1922, based on a resolution by the administration of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) entitled "Concerning means of confiscating church valuables in use by groups of believers." This was implemented under the pretext of a need to help the starving people of the Volga<sup>7</sup>. Priests and laymen were harshly repressed if they opposed the state policy. In 1922 alone, 201 Orthodox priests were executed by shooting in the Byelorussian SSR<sup>8</sup>.

The next step taken by the CEC to limit the rights of churches was its 1929 resolution "On Religious Associations," which banned all clerical activity outside of churches and temples.

The repression campaign of the 1930s hit the Catholics painfully. The overwhelming majority of the clergy were repressed, which meant that, by the end of the decade, the religious life of Catholics in Eastern Belarus was in fact only able to carry on deep underground.

Other religious movements also suffered from the destructive effects of the 1930s' repression which effectively forced them into the underground as well.

After WWII, all the religions were in a difficult situation, but the Soviet regime remained most loyal towards the Orthodox Church. Aleksiy Simanskiy, elected Patriarch of Moscow and All The Russias in 1945, was awarded four Orders of the Labour Banner during the course of his patriarchate<sup>9</sup>. The way the church hierarchy was treated, however, did not reflect the actual state of the Orthodox Church. The number of parishes, monasteries and convents was dwindling; strong anti-religious propaganda resulted

in reduced followers of all the religions; and especially strong pressure was put onto the Protestant and Judaistic communities.

Belarus's religious life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been marked by a great diversity of religions which are both traditional and non-traditional for the region. The points at which they all began to grow more active coincided with the beginning of the democratisation process at the turn of the last decade, and with preparations for the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russian Christendom celebration in 1988.

Another factor that stimulated the emergence of various religious movements was the collapse of the USSR and the restoration of independence to the countries that had once constituted the Soviet empire. The changing way of life, streams of new information, and dropping standards of living forced former Soviet people to change their outlooks radically. After realising that the "Communist paradise" had been a myth, many people started to seek true heaven.

People's inner urge to turn towards religion was a good basis both for the expansion of traditional beliefs (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and the formation of movements which were new to Belarus (Krishnaism, Buddhism, Baha'ism, Aamoto), as well as for the widening of various Protestant movements within traditional religions. Unfortunately, destructive sects also began to multiply in Belarus, including the White Brotherhood, Satanism, Aum Sinrikyo, the Church of Jesus Christ's Disciples, etc. In co-operation with some state institutions (e.g. the state committee for religious and nationality affairs), representatives of traditional faiths are striving to prevent the spread of this kind of sects, and this has had some positive results. For example, in recent years it became possible to limit and, to some extent, liquidate branches of such sects as the White Brotherhood, Aum Sinrikyo, the Family of Love, and Ahmadzia<sup>10</sup>.

According to the state committee for religious and nationality affairs, the following list of religious organisations were active in Belarus by January 1, 1999:

Obviously, the degree to which these various faiths affect life in Belarus differs greatly. The leading faiths are traditional Catholic and Orthodox ones, with Protestantism clearly becoming more influential.

		All Belarus	Berastsye region	Vitsebsk region	Homel region	Harodnya region	Mahyleu region	Minsk region	Minsk City
1	Orthodox Church	1081	299	144	142	166	67	240	23
2	Roman Catholic Church	399	51	64	19	169	15	73	8

<sup>7</sup> Faiths in Belarus (end of 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Minsk, 1998, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> *Bozhim shlyakham* ("In A Godly Way"), No. 50, 1952, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Yakunin G. — The True Face of the Moscow Patriarchy, Brest, 1996, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Koktysh A. — The Sweet "Flute," *Svobodnye Novosti Plus* ("Free News Plus"), No. 7, 2000.

		All Belarus	Berastsye region	Vitsebsk region	Homel region	Harodnya region	Mahyleu region	Minsk region	Minsk City
3	Greek Catholic Church	13	3	2	2	2	1	1	2
4	Catholics of Roman tradition	2							2
5	Old Believers	36	1	20	2		7	3	3
6	Reformed Church	1							1
7	Lutheran Church	4		1		2			1
8	Evangelist Christians/Baptists	233	75	26	21	19	27	50	15
9	The Council of Churches	31	10	3	3	3	5	6	1
10	John the Baptist Church	1				1			
11	New Apostle Church	20	3	3	5	6	2		1
12	Church of the First Christians	1	1						
13	Christians of Evangelical Faith	414	132	35	50	32	32	114	19
14	Christians of Complete Gospel	47	6	5	12	6	1	7	10
15	Christians of Apostolic Faith	9	5			3			1
16	Christ Church	6	1			1	1	1	2
17	Messianic communities	2							2
18	Seventh Day Adventists	45	13	9	7	5	3	6	2
19	Jehovah 's Witnesses	21	3	6	6	4	1		1
20	Mormons	3							3
21	Judaists	13	3	2	2	1	3		2
22	Progressive Judaists	8		2	1	2	2		1
23	Muslims	24	2	5		10	1	4	2
24	Baha 'is	5	1	1	1	1			1
25	Aamoto	1							1
26	Krishnaists	7	1	1	1	1	2		1
		<b>2427</b>	<b>610</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>105</b>

The state's attitude to religion is impossible to sum up briefly. Although they do not support most religious organisations in any way, from time to time the authorities do grant certain privileges, particularly to the Orthodox Church. *"The Belarusian Orthodox Church is under the patronage of the state, of President Lukashenka."*<sup>11</sup> Evidence of this can be found, for example, in Aleksandr Lukashenko's speech during a visit to Minsk by Aleksiy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All The Russias, in July 1995: *"Just recently, the state assigned aid to the church which amounted to 1 billion roubles... Although this, of course, is clearly inadequate, but we will be continuing with this policy."*<sup>12</sup>

Inter-faith co-operation is developing mainly in social fields.

Ecumenical dialogue is obviously becoming more active. For example, there is a group for interclerical dialogue based at the Minsk International Education Centre IBB. In 1999, some meetings were held as part of a project entitled *Reconciliation in Europe — The Church's Mission in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Germany*, which began with interclerical dialogue designed to bring peace between the churches of Germany and Poland in the early 90s. The chosen theme for the jubilee year of 2000 was *Social Work of Christian Churches in Belarus*. The first working meeting was held on January 21–22, 2000, with representatives of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelist Baptist and Lutheran Christian churches in attendance. As a result of the meeting, a provisional working group made up of representatives of all the aforementioned faiths was set up to co-ordinate social programmes.

There have been a number of larger-scale ecumenical activities with joint participation from different faiths e.g. *The Samaritan's Purse*, a Christmas present-giving event for children organised by the Biblical Society of the Republic of Belarus; the publication of the Gospel according to St. Mark in four languages (Belarusian, Old Church Slavonic, Greek and Russian), edited by the Belarusian Orthodox Church's biblical commission (N.B. the BOC is the Belarusian Exarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church) with the participation of the Inter-Faith Biblical Society.

The Biblical Society's activities generally focus on distributing the Bible and other religious publications, and producing video films (including cartoons) on biblical or daily-life topics, aimed at teaching children and adults the Christian way of life.

Recent years have also marked the return, or revival, of the Greek Catholic church in Belarus. It has come a long way in the ten years since it resumed its activity, making it difficult to imagine an ecumenical dialogue without representatives of this faith nowadays. Lutheranism is also growing in popularity.

The various Protestant movements are the most active in co-operating with other Christian faiths.

The Catholic church organises its ecumenical activities according to resolutions from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Assembly and the "Rules for the Application of Ecumenical Principles and Norms" of the Papist Council for the Development of Christian Unity.

At present, ecumenical dialogue is most productive wherever it provides practical assistance in social matters, publishing and some other fields. It is usually implemented through joint projects finalised during ecumenical seminars and conferences. The round-up documents from these events include plans for various projects to be undertaken by representatives of all the faiths present at each given meeting.

The introduction of religious education into the school curriculum was supposed to result in an expansion of ecumenical activity, but the subject is usually taught by teachers who are non-believers and had an atheist education. Among the clergy, Orthodox priests have the biggest influence over the educational sector and control other faiths' access to it. There have been incidents where Protestant teachers were expelled from schools on the pretext that complaints had been received from parents who claimed their children were being forced to learn from "the wrong Bible."

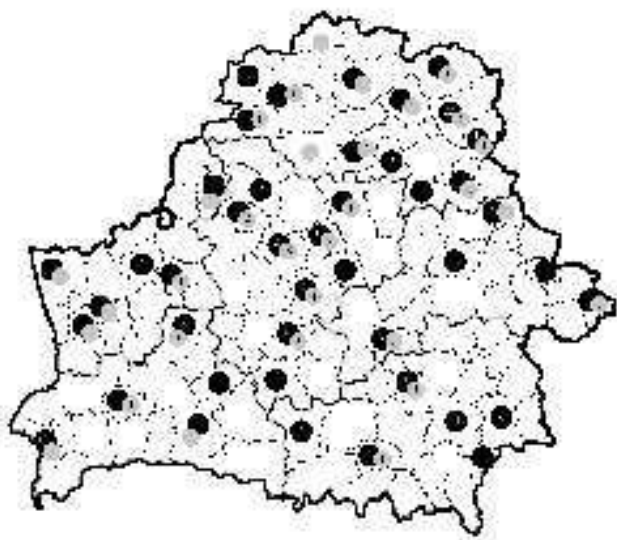
To summarise, we can state that the Belarusian Orthodox Church maintains the strongest position in Belarus, and enjoys a certain amount of support from the state. The Roman Catholic Church is also quite well rooted. The rest of the faiths come well behind in terms of their membership and influence on life in Belarus. In fact, other faiths are only allowed to expand their activities with the approval of the BOC hierarchy, which also has significant sway over the Belarusian authorities.

**Yauhen Androsik**, born 1969. Graduated from the Minsk Auto-Mechanical Technical School with a specialisation at constructing automobiles (1990). Between 1994 and 2000 was studying history at the State Belarusian University. Co-operates with the Belarusian Greek Catholic Orthodox Church, works as a co-ordinator of social programmes at one of the parishes in Minsk, deals also with some administration and history of the Orthodox Church. The first of the world religions to come to Belarus was Christianity. It began to infiltrate from Byzantium in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was established in the Duchy of Polotsk, the oldest state formation within the territory of today's Belarus. The official year in which Christianity was adopted is considered to be 992 AD, when the Polotsk Bishopric Chamber was founded. The arrival of Christianity from Byzantium conditioned the domination of Eastern traditions which are also present in Belarus today. Therefore, Christianity had appeared and established itself in these lands even before its official split into the Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1054.

<sup>11</sup> Faiths in Belarus (end of 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Minsk, 1998, p. 324.

<sup>12</sup> Vestnik Belarusskogo Eksarkhata ("The Belarusian Exarchy Newsletter"), No. 2, 1995, p. 12.





### 1. Cultural organisations:

dark points — cultural organisations

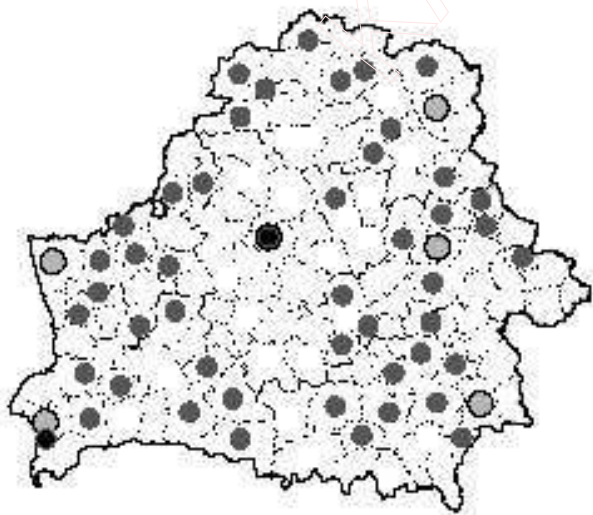
light points — The Society of Belarusian Language



### 2. Local press:

big points — non-periodical issues (bulletins)

dark points — state press

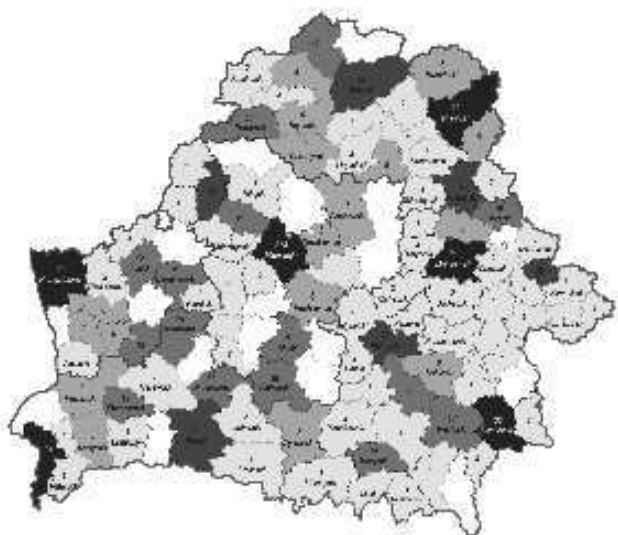


### 3. Members of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres (BARC):

bicolour points — regional resource centres

a four-colour point — "BARCNEWS"

one-colour points — resource mini-centres



4. Non-governmental organisations.



5. Organisations dealing with human rights' defence and self-governance:

dark points — human rights' defence

light points — self-governance



6. Ecological and social organisations:

dark points — ecological organisations

light points — social organizations