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Religion's role in the violence in Ukraine

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This week, I was a guest speaker in a journalism class at the University of Maryland. The class is called The Religion Angle, and it's taught by a seasoned religion journalist, Ira Rifkin, who used to work with Religion News Service.

The class had a wonderful conversation about the many ways religious identities and religion stories can be buried underneath secular stories. We discussed everything, including the Alawite Muslims (a small sect in Shiite Islam) vs. the Sunni Muslims in the Syrian conflict, the strong religious threads in the Egyptian struggles, and the religious leaders in this country currently lobbying for immigration reform and raising the minimum wage.

Then I said -- quite innocently -- that I have not yet found a religion angle in the struggle in Ukraine. "Oh yes," Ira said, "there is a definite religious difference in that nation, which splits its allegiances between Europe and Russia."

A little research told me that most of Ukraine claims no formal religious identity, but Western Ukraine, which wants strong relations with the European Union, generally embraces an Orthodox Christianity under the Kiev Patriarchate, which became independent after the Ukraine was no longer part of the Soviet Union. Eastern Ukraine, on the other hand, generally falls under the Moscow Patriarchate.

Religion is not the cause of the current struggle by any stretch of the imagination. But religious differences exist and can be used and manipulated (as they often are) by political leaders. It is heartening now to see religious leaders of all kinds, including Pope Francis, call for a cessation of the bloody violence in Ukraine.

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