Ukrainian Protestants After Maidan

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Abstract
Protestant Christians are a small minority in Ukraine, but there are a variety of religious groups (Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans). In his contribution, the author examines the social status and positioning of Ukrainian Protestants before and after Maidan. It was not until Maidan that Protestants became aware of their social responsibility; however, the events of Maidan simultaneously lead to a separation in the church.

Maidan has become not only a social, but an ecclesiastical symbol. The church and Maidan have permeated one another--neither society nor the church have remained as they were. I will try to demonstrate these changes by examining the experience of Protestants in Ukraine, prior to and after Maidan.

Before Maidan, Protestants in Ukraine were precisely what their name implies: alienated from society, national traditions, and political responsibilities. Before Maidan, Protestants were considered "post-Soviet," which is to say that they were no longer Soviet, but also not yet Ukrainian. Protestants were denominationally isolated, kept to themselves, too concerned about their own exclusivism, and scarcely interested in other traditions. The Protestants were sectarian in their relations with society; they lived in an oppositional subculture, in their own "small world." They considered themselves as being "spiritual," ignoring "human" or "earthly" questions and focusing on the salvation of the soul. They were staunchly apolitical, or, as they said of themselves, "neutral."

In the wake of Maidan, Protestants became "Ukrainian Protestants," having begun to speak about the Ukrainian people as their own, historical churches as "brotherly" institutions, social injustice as a plea for Christian solidarity, and politics as a common affair. The Protestant relationship with the Soviet past is better defined as "anti-," as opposed to "post-Soviet." Protestants unexpectedly discovered a practical ecumenism—Christian solidarity under extreme conditions, namely in a conflict zone, as opposed to finding unity in a theological cabinet or the church. Protestants were not consciously seeking this solidarity, but found it manifested in their solidarity with the Ukrainian people, as if it were a gift. They felt themselves to be the 'light and salt' of society, a responsible part of the population. Protestants reestablished the integrity of their particular worldview and missionary responsibility: a holistic understanding of salvation as both individual and collective, spiritual and social. They had found themselves politically engaged, even though their involvement came about without an invitation, volens nolens.

Again, it is necessary to underline that not all of the aforementioned changes began literally, but trends of change became apparent: different atmospheres, themes of discussion, and methods of self-understanding began to develop. The Protestant churches of Ukraine were faced with tough lessons that call for a socio-theological analysis. These are founding points of reference, which Protestant leaders propose to hold onto, in order not to lose their collective experience, to understand Maidan as "a particular period in our history, during which God is galvanizing, cleaning, and preparing the Church in Ukraine for a more responsible service in to the world."

First off, the theological points: The gulf be-

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tween dogmas and life exists to this day. The answer Protestants give when faced with the question, “what would Jesus do in this situation,” is always dogmatic. However, theology (concerning incarnation in particular) should serve as a point of orientation for socio-political participation, as opposed to dismissive contemplation. We must rely not only on Christology, but also sociology, politicology, and culturology, for a singular model of the interaction between the mortal and the divine. As a result, it is becoming extremely important for theologians to show Christological implications for social practice. Unfortunately, for the majority of Protestants, incarnation (in reality, socio-political life) will remain an abstract theological idea. For them, Christ is always God and by no means human, while earth is a godless and graceless place. Pastor Mikola Romanjuk complained about this issue during his presentation, Theology in the Presence of Maidan (January 15, 2014): “I fear that we, Protestants, are more isolated from the world than Christ.[1]” And so a new task rises before Protestant theologians: to recognize God’s presence and plans as they relate to the events of social history, and thereby to justify this history and responsible Christian participation within it.

Solidarity in difficult times is the first form in the development of ecumenism. As the Protestants erected their prayer tent in Maidan Square at the beginning of December 2013, no one imagined that it would become cross-denominational, not only in name, but also as a result of the multiple aspects of its mutual service. It became the symbol of interfaith unity, as did the cross-denominational prayer-marathon in Donetsk, initiated by Pastor Sergej Kosjak in early March 2014, which unified representatives of all Christian denominations, with the exception of the Moscow Patriarchate. The experience of “ecumenism in troubling times” has become an irrevocable precedent. It will be difficult to separate those who have found unity in the mortal danger encountered while defending the Ukrainian people. It will also be difficult to speak about unity with those who preferred “peace and security” and fearfully assured, that “we took no part in the protests on Maidan.” As Protestant Maidan-activist Anatolij Denisenko testifies, “The spirituality born on Maidan is unique in its ecumenical character. It doesn’t belong to any single denomination. I heard a devout man saying that, from this point forward, his denomination is not the religious group whose church he visits, but those who stood side-by-side with him in prayer on Maidan. Henceforth, the Catholic and Orthodox people who rescued him from the snipers belong to him”.[2]

A question then arises concerning how to move forward with the ecumenical experience of Maidan—will it remain a strange episode, or will it serve as a precedent for further rapprochement between churches? In any case, it is becoming apparent that the time has come to speak not only about the “one local Orthodox Church” as a unified structure, but also about the “one Ukrainian Church” as an association of independent churches, to include the Protestants.

Another important point is the question of leadership: The new spiritual elite, whose formation was necessitated by churches and society, is born out of an atmosphere of social extremes. Maidan called upon new leaders; it became a strict test of leadership qualities among church defenders. A strong demand for lustration and skilled renewal has become

1 http://www.rmikola.com/pohlyad/uroky-majdanu-dlya-ukrajinskyh-protenstantiv.html.

2 http://studgazeta.com.ua/articles/s-nami-byla-vera.

apparent. Consequently, the traditional relationship to the church hierarchy, like the relationship to the holy elite, is not in agreement with the new requirements of society. Most importantly, this touches on certain odious personalities, such as Sandei Adeladzha and his protégés (the most well-known among them, Alexander Zinchenko, became the "Anti-Maidan Commandant," and, subsequently, one of the leaders of the separatist movement). This also touches on those who remained silent and were assured "power from God" in exchange for full loyalty, but the people denounced the revolt against the "lawful authorities."

The question remains as to whether a change in generations and types of leadership will come about within the existing church or whether new leaders will create their own structures and movements. Ultimately, this concerns the broader question regarding the capability of church structures to bring change, the necessity of reformation as an internal renewal, and the possibility of reformation as a new model of leadership.

Finally, there are aspects of ecclesiastical reform: the Maidan should serve as a symbol of church renewal, an appeal to socio-political responsibility, and a call for change – not only within society, but in the church as well. Perhaps strained relationships between Protestant leaders and the social Maidan can be explained if we consider the apprehension of the religious Maidan, which is to say "the revolution in the church." At the outset of the revolution on 11 December 2013, Protestant publicist Oleg Turlak recognized this possibility: "the Euromaidan exposed the diverging perspectives held by Christian leaders, and those of devotees of evangelical discipline. Given this divergence, as denominational leaders retain a diplomatic language and the principle of "non-interference" in politics, devoted Christians are flocking to Maidan… Ideally, one of the results to come out of Maidan would be the appearance of a pleiade of new, realistic leaders to Ukrainian Protestant Christianity who wouldn't be afraid to go out to Maidan and express their civil and Christian position. The Protestant Church in the Post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, must embrace spiritual reformation and elaborate social guidelines to demonstrate that faith on earth is tangible and apparent. If this does not come about, I am afraid that the Protestant movement may well experience its own Maidan."[3]

Obviously, without consideration of the aforementioned points, Protestants will fall away from transformational processes in Ukrainian society. But even moving within the field of perspectival transformations, it will be extremely difficult for them to change their role in society—to change their socio-theological position—and, as a result of this, maintain unity between churches. The "post-Maidan" period has turned into an epoch of differentiation between ecclesiastical theology and civil Christianity.

Maidan has divided the country and the Church. Protestants have themselves experienced both theological division and regional resistance. While some, in light of Maidan, have found their lost sense of being Ukrainian, others have maintained an even stronger grip on their Soviet propensities and their anti-Ukrainian sentiments. The Church was scattered. If the Maidan in Kiev was a "revolution of dignity" and freedom, then the East became a breeding ground for the counterrevolution of "stability and order." It has come to light that Eastern Ukraine has remained

3 http://www.christianmegapolis.com/2013/12/4898.

for all twenty-three years of its independence a haven for Sovietism, an undisturbed and only slightly embellished oasis of the USSR. It is difficult to call this a discovery—the scale and depth of Soviet influence is astounding. It takes its most unexpected form in the fact that many Protestant churches have chosen the side of anti-Maidan, "the powers," the shovel, and the past.

Local "theologians" were quick to remind people that "all authority comes from God" (prov. 24:21), and that one should not associate with rebels. "Christian" bloggers from Donetsk began to defend the memory of Lenin from "nationalists" and to complain about the destruction of the population's Soviet culture. Church leaders took it upon themselves to reason that "the corruption is not as bad; at the very least, it is well known what we should give to whom and how to decide our questions, but should these Banderivtsi (Ukrainian nationalists) succeed, it could disturb our usual scheme."

The 'Euromaidans' drew dozens, hundreds of well-meaning and fearless people who had no connection to the Protestant Church. There were units of activists, and people steeped in silent prayer, though church-functionaries claimed to be "apolitical," and to preserve neutrality. The majority of Christians were not afraid of the "shovel" in the Church; they had grown used to it, but Maidan in the church terrified them.

Under the initiative of Pastor Sergei Kosyaka, soon after the victory of Maidan in Donetsk, the Christian Maidan arose—a prayer marathon around a tent in Constitution Square. Pastor Kosyaka, however, only managed to gather a few dozen patriotic worshippers, even during times of relative safety. Thousands of Donetsk churchgoers remained on the other side. A similar situation transpired in Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk. Young leaders and churchgoers—lacking ties to the system and experience of "communal struggle" and having nothing to lose—came out in support of a unified and democratic Ukraine.

The majority of Christians in Eastern Ukraine genuinely anticipated the end of the revolt, rebellion, and an uprising against "lawful authorities." The citizens of Donbass, unaccustomed to freedom, recoiled from fearlessness and loyalty, the love of freedom and solidarity. Maidan became a call which strength and courage alone could not fulfill. It called for an answer, not only for the crimes of Yanukovich and the depravity of his system, but also for the corruption and slave consciousness of his constituents, the servants of this system. As they still said in 2004, "Yanukovich is a bandit, but he's our bandit." And now Maidan has arisen, along with "Ukraine After Maidan." We will admit, these concepts are great, but they are not ours. Maidan does not fit into the old system of thinking, values, and world view. As a result, people have begun to hate it. Why did people begin to defend the Berkut men, even though the hate for cops in Donbass is unlike anywhere else in the country? Why are they still embracing Yanukovych as one of their own, despite their firsthand knowledge of his crimes? Why were church elders professing their unswerving loyalty to the mayor during the last days of the regime's existence? Because a certain awareness has risen: we are a part of this godless system. We must either change (a terrifying and difficult proposition), or prove our faithfulness to it in the hopes to be left undisturbed in our quiet corner. The stability of the already established "shovel" appeared to lead to a better future, for which it is still necessary to struggle. Added to that is the insecurity that Maidan might actually change something—that repression from authority will not follow support for democracy.

A relationship to Maidan has revealed an unpleasant truth about the church and its actual influence. It has truly served the people, but it has not changed them. They have cured drug addicts, helped the poor, and adopted orphans. And now, former clients of these centers of rehabilitation are fighting on the side of the Donetsk People's Republic.

And now we have reached the point of no return. Separatists have captured numerous churches, dozens of Protestant leaders have suffered, and orphanages and charitable organizations have been destroyed. Under conditions of war, fear in the wake of beckoning changes in the country, and the revolution in the church, people have retreated to a second plan. Tragic experiences have created the possibility for comparison between Maidan and the anti-Maidan, European and Eurasian perspectives, and the faces of the "heavenly one-hundred" as they compare to those of DPR fighters. A long and arduous battle lies ahead so that the churches can experience their own Maidan and become truly Ukrainian, so that the leaders of the prayer tent can become leaders of churches, and so that they can become an influential minority and lead communities and society. But positions are clearly defined, and this prevailing clarity will define further choices and actions.

Generally, one could write a postscript about the Soviet epoch. The events on Maidan Square and the ensuing Russian invasion of Ukraine accentuate the long-lasting post-Soviet transitional period. Eurasia is emerging as the new project of Russia, Belarus, and mid-Asiatic "camps." There is no longer a place for atheism here, but there is a place for a bizarre mixture of militant Orthodoxy, Islam, and Slavic Paganism.

According to an old assertion by Vladimir Putin, Orthodoxy has more in common with Islam than with Western Christianity. It goes unsaid here that worldwide Orthodoxy is not identical to Moscow Orthodoxy; but if we follow Putin's logic, one could say that Moscow Orthodoxy has more in common with Islam than it does with the Orthodoxy of Constantinople or the Patriarchate of Antioch; this is to say that Russia presents itself as central to the true faith, not only setting itself in opposition against Catholicism and Protestantism, but also Orthodox diversity. Again and again, like a mantra, Filofei's old seductive words to the ruler of Moscow are repeated: "Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and there will not be a fourth… you alone are tsar to the Christians of earth." Russia, enchanted by myths of having a "special path," has chosen a path of isolation and anti-Westernism, and is now seeking to bring her neighbors onto this path in order to create a Eurasian empire.

Most unfortunately, this myth of a special path and anti-Western resentment has become infectious to post-Soviet Protestants. Instead of choosing a difficult integration into global Christianity, Protestants often opt for the comfortable alternative. By emphasizing their exclusivity and converting their insufficiencies into merits, Protestants do away with theology and Christian Universities—there will be fewer intellectuals and discussions, the church will take no active social positions, but, on the other hand, there will be no problems with the state.

At the same time, however, it cannot be said that this Eurasian path will be the only one. A differentiation is taking place within the post-Soviet world, within society and the church. Separate states, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova, are choosing the European vector of development. But divisions are also appearing within every state, nation, and

church. Some are choosing in favor of a post-Soviet transition and, afterwards, the Eurasian path. Others are in favor of a European turning point, to be followed by a gradual integration into global society.

The above-mentioned processes have the most serious consequences for the Protestant Church, its mission, and its structure. In the Eurasian world, Protestants are labeled as "foreign agents." "America," "NATO," "globalism," "democracy," "Europe," "Reformation," and "Protestantism" are placed in one category. Regardless of all of their attempts to show loyalty to Russia and Central Asia, Protestants are marginalized, both by the state and society (even more significantly).

And here once again emerges a familiar historic fork in the road for local Protestants: either one thinks of oneself and one's future in the context of Moscow Orthodoxy (and Eurasia), or maintains and cultivates a connection with the heritage of the Reformation (and Europe). Meanwhile, it is apparent that the first connection is stronger than the second. A historical memory works in favor of Orthodoxy (a memory that goes deeper than Protestantism, with roots going back to early Orthodoxy and even further to Slavic paganism), the cultural context (language, archetypes, models of thought and behavior, values), and political feasibility (maximum loyalty and minimum differentiation). And, in favor of Western traditions, there are theological principles (mostly unconscious), education (which affects only a few), and relationships with international Protestant networks (mainly of a formal nature).

The Orthodox-Eurasian path can tentatively be correlated with Russia, and the Protestant-European path with Ukraine. In the first place, no one is discussing the return of "Russian Protestants" to Orthodoxy; neither is anyone talking about the unconditional identification of Ukrainian Protestants with European principles. Instead, a differentiation of vector has come about: the choice of a referential culture on the basis of which one must examine his development. And here, set against a background of civilizational, political, and religious processes, the role of education is greatly strengthening. It is becoming more important for the Church and its mission. Education overcomes social marginalization and religious isolation. It serves as a channel for the exchange of theological and missionary ideas. This is why hope for the future is connected with the emergence of relationships between the Church, its mission, and education.

Maidan intensified demands for the correction of theology among Ukraine's Protestants regarding mission and social position, ecclesiology and ecumenism, national and Christian identity, and an understanding of connections between dogmatic and social practices. Maidan again presented Protestants with the familiar question of complex moral, civil, and theological choices between autonomy and worldly transfiguration, stability and freedom, the willingness to serve the people and fear of provoking the regime's wrath—a choice between loyalty and naiveté, and resistance and compliance.

In the tumult of Maidan, two old and dangerous Christian myths were put to the test—that of the neutrality of the church in situations of conflict, and that of "all power coming from God." Protestants witnessed the birth of Ukrainian Protestantism coming out of the crisis of post-Soviet Protestantism and a shift of leadership. A yearning has developed for "open" Christianity, healthy ecumenism, the experience of mutual struggle, Christian solidarity with the people, and a prophetic voice.

As it turns out, the Church is not always above

conflict, but may in fact reside within it. It may be that the Church is a part of Maidan, and Maidan a part of the Church. Protests of the society also affected the churches and divided them into a passive majority and an influential minority, conformists and radicals, "zealots" and "spiritual warriors." The division in the church traversed time and space. In this sense, the separation of Ukrainian Protestants from their Russian brothers is not only the consequence of state and political divisions, but also a severance from their final connection with the general Soviet past.

While contemplating the nature and consequences of Maidan, one must acknowledge the obvious fact that these events have divided the history of Ukrainian Protestants into "pre-Maidan" and "post-Maidan." Perhaps for the first time, Protestants have a possibility to participate in the process of national self-identification; to become a significant factor of interdenominational reform, as well as the Church's relationships with the state and society. Evidently, not everyone is taking advantage of this opportunity. As events following Maidan have shown, those who have preserved "neutrality" remain outside of time, chronologically and kairotically. Those who have chosen the anti-Maidan, "neutrality," and thus full loyalty to the powers that be have remained within the post-Soviet past. Those who have accepted Maidan as a calling and a gift, an experience of community and freedom, a chance to strengthen ties with people, and to revitalize their Christian vocation have received a place in the future and a chance to fight for one that is Ukrainian and Christian while still European and Protestant. In the post-Soviet Orthodox Ukraine, this final task will not be fulfilled without Protestants. Therefore, they have the right to consider themselves invited into the initiative of "rebooting" the entire triad of society, state, and the church, as well as the relationships therein.

Translated by Charlie Smith

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