

# The Responsibility of Churches During the Ukrainian Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

The churches in Ukraine already reacted in December 2011 to the burgeoning social crisis with a joint appeal for more solidarity and respect for the rule of law. According to the author, a Ukrainian "liberation theology" was then developed against the neo-feudal system. However, on the Euro-Maidan square the churches lack the courage to assume concrete political responsibility. They should have done more to prevent the violent escalation of the revolution.

The Churches of Ukraine lay claim to ideological leadership. By not interfering with politics and striving to avoid the carrying out of political legislation, churches are attempting to influence civil society, particularly in an intellectual sense. As a result, they are not thrusting a concrete set of actions on the people, but are proposing ideas and principles for discussion and possible acceptance. In other words, the churches in Ukraine are attempting to apply their "soft power," to put it in political terms.

Churches had anticipated a heated phase of crisis in Ukraine for several years. The final hope that a life in the opposition would teach Victor Yanukovich to be civilized were dispelled within the first year of his presidency. For the first time, towards the end of 2011, I heard a prediction from one of the leading Ukrainian church officials that a new Maidan awaits us, and that should ideologically prepare ourselves for it. His points were as follows:

First, one must not depend on the leadership of the churches, because the churches must remain outside of current politics and should not take on concrete responsibility for new leaders, ideas, forms of organized protest in society, or policy.

Second, it is also inexpedient to form a separate segment of Christian civil society and, what's more, a Christian party for the advancement of ideas and principles that are necessary to the churches. As he explained it, in Ukrainian

conventions, any separate civil or, moreover, political initiative will most likely be either critical of itself or criticized by external foes.

Third, it is both possible and necessary to reach out to civil society, especially to Ukraine's intellectual elite, in the hopes of a constructive response and the potential self-organization of society as a whole.

Proceeding along these notions, on the 1st of December, 2011, three churches (the UGCC, the UOC, and the UOC-KP) signed a general address in the Kiev-Mohyla Academy, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the referendum of Ukrainian independence. This address criticized this entire twenty-year path of Ukraine's development, which was referred to as a willful wandering about a desert, a self-prostration before idols of material enrichment for individual groups, and a lack of knowledge concerning an ascendance to the humanitarian ideals of a life worthy of the free people. We will notice that, most likely unconsciously, the Catholic theological model of liberation utilized in this address: an exodus from slavery in Egypt to a state of authentic freedom in a promised land. This orientation during the exodus is ensured by a recognition of God's authority over the history of the people and of the foundational spiritual values inherent in this freedom. They are more necessary to us during this exodus across the desert than the pillars of fire and smoke were to Israel. The authors of the address formulated an effectively specialized theology of

liberation, which differed in purpose, not towards a struggle with social inequality, but towards a struggle with the neo-feudal system in Ukraine, under which the rights and freedoms of the individual could not realistically be protected.

We will notice that the Soviet period is definitively characterized as a period of slavery for individuals and the people at large. There are temptations on the path from slavery to freedom: 1) the impossibility of achieving such a legal state and societal atmosphere, in which liberties would have been realized as a matter of course; 2) the pursuit of material wealth in general, dividing the people as a result of egoistical motives; 3) nostalgia for the relatively full slavery of the Soviet-Imperial "Egypt." So, as we see, this is a very contextual theology of liberation, especially if we are to remember that this free Ukraine is like a new Israel, and that the Russian Empire is like a new Egypt with regard to slavery, from which Ukraine should sever itself—this is an established motive of Ukrainian literature, which calls for social action. Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, and Lesya Ukrainka have naturally made use of this plot, and the main problem they have encountered is a misunderstanding between the national leaders who have prophesied this state of freedom and the nation itself, which, in spite of its love for freedom, is quickly throwing up its hands and preparing to give up in the face of difficulties.

But the fact that this theology of liberation is in keeping with the context of the Ukrainian cultural tradition is not even the main point here. The most important thing is that this is a liberal theology of liberation. There is not a single hint of struggle against capitalism in this initiative, but there is a struggle for capitalistic freedoms. Moreover, this condition of freedom is self-sufficient and doesn't even

require a basis in tradition. Even if the Ukrainian people had risen up yesterday and they, as well as their elite, were not disparate with regard to their ideals of freedom, the churches would still have thrust this exact ideal upon them. Freedom for society and the individual is required here and now; it legitimizes itself without the aid of tradition. Freedom, just like the Kingdom of God during the liturgy, comes from the manifestation of freedom—from the future, which we will not relinquish to slavery, but whose liberties we will defend against it.

Calls for a state of freedom, described in the "Address" of the churches (December 1st, 2011), are not only rife with liberalism, but are also minimalistic: first comes a respect for God's law and humanity and, consequently, a legal government. Second comes a respect for the dignity of each person as a model of God and, as a result, the person's rights. Third comes societal solidarity. It is interesting that, during this crisis, the conditions of the future have begun to manifest themselves with the appearance of unprecedented solidarity, a respect for the dignity of the other, and a legal government, which to this point has not been established. This solidarity is possible from below, but perhaps a legal government can only be put in place once there is a new authority from above. A respect for the other and his rights requires joint efforts from both society and the state.

On the 1st of December, 2011, the churches turned to civil society with the idea of their liberal theology of liberation, but ended up alienating themselves as a paradoxical model due to their sensibilities and assertions. As a result, the Ukrainian intelligentsia began a movement on the 1st of December in favor of the Charter of the free man. Christian and theological motives were done away with, as

was the discussion of solidarity and the necessity of a legal government. All that remained was a single struggle for human rights. Instead of a contextualization of ideals, an appeal came about for the replacement of these ideals with a pure and helpless liberalism, which had died in the West by the 1960s. To put it crudely, this is a liberalism which hung in the air and neither had a solid grasp on tradition nor the future. And so, for the first time, the churches dismissed their responsibilities, abandoned the ideological seed they had planted in society, and alienated themselves. They thought a bit about themselves in this instance as they did about the Lord God, who is willing to sew his seeds, but all responsibility rests upon us, upon the people as upon the soil, which must grow itself and must afterwards report before the church how much fruit it has borne—and, if nothing has flourished, then it is we who are guilty. The churches' desire to avoid guilt is the reason why the liberal Ukrainian theology of liberation has not developed and why they were not prepared for the crisis.

Note that this all originated with the churches, who had experienced the Maidan of 2004. Practically from the moment the protests began, the only successful motion was an agreement not to fight with one another during the proceedings, which says a lot about the scheme of the situation: the UGCC is the most radical, the UOC is for peace, and the UOC-KP is as it is inclined, but rests somewhere between the radicalism of the UGCC and the peacemaking attitude of the UOC. And, of course, the All-Ukrainian council of Churches and religious organizations as a whole is against the application of violence and the infringement on human rights while it supports a resolution of the crisis through a course of social dialogue. It is unsurprising that, in light of the churches' weak position during the first days of the

protest, they proved unnecessary. I joined the Maidan before students were attacked by Berkut. I met many priests and Christians—they were mostly wearing secular clothing—and none of them were allowed to use the microphone. Before the students were attacked, Maidan was generally postmodern, and God had no designated place in it from the organizers' point of view. Both God and churches, as well as political parties, were capable of dividing the movement; therefore Maidan was absent of both religiosity and party presence. Everything changed after the attack on the students that Saturday, when the people began to gather in Mikhailovsky square. At night, the UOC-KP sheltered wounded protesters in the Mikhailovsky monastery. But as a result, even closer to UOC-KP's dinner, no announcements could be decided upon regarding the situation, which had apparently become completely new. There had not only been a fear that everything had ended and we were already in a new Belarus or Uzbekistan. That morning, we were also recalling both Minsk and Andizhan as prototypes of what had come upon us. There was an apprehension that, if protests were to continue after blood had been spilled, they would lead to a division of the country that would work in Russia's benefit. And so, that morning, all we had was the feat of the Mikhailovsky monastery and Patriarch Svyatoslav's announcement of the unacceptability of such violence towards the people. The silence was laden with sorrow. At this moment, it was burningly felt that not only did we need the voice of the churches, but also help from God. This was an experience of human feebleness against the state machine and, in order to liberate ourselves from unconfidence, fear, and disbelief in the possibility of change, God was needed. Towards the middle of the day, the people all

began to converge on Mikhailovsky square in the thousands, and it became clear that the protests had been renewed and that it was up to the church to intercede before God and the state authorities. The UOC-KP put out an appeal and the UOC followed suit. And a prayer sprang up from the scene of Maidan.

This moment calls for a separate conceptualization. This prayer from Maidan had a more important unifying influence over the people—this was immediately apparent following the attack on the students. To begin with, there were both liberals and nationalists as Maidan. It was difficult to find a common patriotic ground because the nationalists only considered themselves to be authentic patriots. Religion was neutral territory, which neither the nationalists nor the liberals could claim as their own. Religion was the territory of the clergy, and this was the territory in which everyone was united, because even non-believers found these prayers to be helpful and appropriate. This prayer allowed the churches to be with the people, but simultaneously to avoid responsibility for the events taking place. December was a month of neglected possibilities on the part of the churches; they prayed and struggled for the preservation of a peaceful status in the protests, but offered nothing to the people in terms of guidance. They were afraid to step across the border between pastoral and political leadership and, as a result, did not take responsibility upon themselves for the fate of the people. A paradoxical situation was being laid down: the churches were calling for civil responsibility, but were themselves afraid to accept it. No one wanted to become the new father Gapon; everyone was afraid lead the faithful people by Filippov's example. These hesitations between Filippov's example and that of father Gapon is quite tragic. Let's be honest; not only did the

three political leaders—the liberal Yatsenyuk, the nationalist Tyagnibok, and the realist Klychko—not take leadership of the protests, but the church leaders also failed to. There were three temptations in this scenario: the desire to preserve the purity of the religious, a separation from the secular, and especially from current politics. This is an obvious mistake. In post-modern times, all demarcations of the modern times are annihilated and, most of all, this division of the sacred and the profane exists within the ideals of the Enlightenment. The borders are eroding, and this was apparent then. It was evident that Maidan had been sanctified as a liturgical gathering.

But, in light of the demonization of state authority and eschatological experience of the events that had taken place, both the protestors and the churches maintained political realism. Theologians criticized the overt sanctification of Maidan. The churches tried to approach the authorities then in place with respect and did everything they could to establish a social dialogue and to keep Yanukovich at his presidential post. The eschatological perception of events did not signify the necessity for sanctions, as we see in Duginism, according to which any methods of the holy war are justified in the final battle of good and evil. I would say that, in all eschatologism, the churches and believers at Maidan remembered that they were fighting for real rights and freedoms, and the only actions that were considered legitimate were those that did not annihilate or humiliate human dignity. But it seems to me, personally, that the UGCC and the UOC-KP should have headed the protest and approached the authorities with processions, and they should have proposed their ideal of a transformed Ukraine with the specification of the three principles outlined in the address of December 1st, 2011. This chance

was neglected, but even if the church had overcome the outdated notion of the division of the sacred and the profane, it would still be a heavy undertaking to assume responsibility for the fate of the protesting people. And this self-organization is capable of working miracles, but comes up against the problem of leadership. In light of weak political leadership in December, the fact is simply that we also had weak church leadership—everyone was afraid to take full responsibility.

Besides that, Ukrainian churches have a negative experience with confusion between the sacred and the political regarding Sunday Adelaja's leadership and they are deathly afraid of being compared to him. As Zhirinovskiy in Russia represents the formerly laid-out discreditation of the usual political state of things, so in Ukraine is Adelaja regarding the previously manifested discreditation of Christian political action. I think that, if there had not been a negative experience with Sunday, the churches would have resolved not only to pray on Maidan before the assembly, but also to go peacefully to the government district; or maybe they would not have resolved to do anything at all. Our churches have a clearly expressed deficit of productive thinking in general, particularly in the political sphere. Our churches are wonderful, but they are clueless as to how to build a future for themselves and the people.

And again, this negative influence contained the experience of pro-Russian "political Orthodoxy." The UOC compared of this phenomenon and, during these events, against the purity of their own Orthodoxy, attempting not to release the genie of political activism from those on Russia's side; and this was justified, but I do not understand why the UOC-KP and the UGCC didn't also bow out of this. Furthermore, on the 11th of December, when Berkut

attempted to purge Maidan, the Synod of the UGCC was already on the scene by nighttime at the very peak of the crisis. There was especially nothing to lose at this point, but all the same, the church made no decisions with regard to the protest.

In January, this passivity towards Maidan compounded the crisis, which in turn created a crisis of insufficient church presence. The state began to threaten the UGCC aloud with sanctions, and to threaten the other churches with hints. The churches concerned themselves with proving their peaceful intentions, the purity of their pastoral work at Maidan, and the protest against state intentions to persecute them. It was a neglected moment when most clergy occupied themselves solely with church holidays from December 7th to the 19th. No one organized an effective mass change in the monastery, although this could have been done. The minimization of church presence at Maidan was one of the reasons for the disappearance of Christian Gandhism and the beginning of a strong resistance against Grushevskiy. And again, when began to pelt the police with stones, the protests of the churches began. But the churches failed to propose any alternatives to aggressive attack or passive resistance at Maidan; there was simply no such charisma in this situation, unfortunately. Resistance in the neutral zone against Grushevskiy consisted at first of three monks from the Desyatynny monastery, and afterwards, a number of clergy that I could not comprehend, even though I myself took part in it. I know that this began with the self-willed action made by the monks, and that their act was not sanctioned by the pro-Russian head of their monastery. I know that the protestors requested to remain neutral, because they were weakened, and that believers in the neutral zone were effectively sheltering



the revolutionaries. But I do not understand why, at the same time that they were making an appeal for neutrality, they were throwing Molotov cocktails over our heads at the police. At seven o'clock on the evening of the first day, when the monks were almost murdered, I was disappointed by the irrational insanity which the resistance had degenerated into. If the hundreds of clergymen and monks in defense of the churches had not fled to the neutral zone, this would have changed history. But again—nothing was decided upon. The UOC is guilty here, because it could have commanded the church to go to the neutral zone as a whole, as opposed to only those in favor doing so. How bitterly they joked about neutrality and about us, full of monks who had devoted their lives to God but, in light of the crisis, had preferred to save themselves. And young men and women stood alongside the few servants who remained. In general, our churches found themselves at that point neither prepared for social leadership, nor for responsible and charismatic action.

On the other hand, the churches preserved a virtual neutrality and were able in a few respects to assume the role of mediator in negotiations of state authority and opposition leaders. At least in this respect, the churches conducted themselves responsibly. They did not preside over the confrontation, but sincerely empathized with all sides. I would say that this was a neutrality with empathy. And in the cabinet during negotiations, the churches were in their element, being used to this political situation, and were successful in this respect. Let it be remembered that, in 1993, the attempt towards mediation during Patriarch Aleksei's political crisis was unsuccessful. In February, the Ukrainian churches were successful, and it is no longer their fault that, after a couple of days, the political compromise had

already collapsed. To put it plainly, the former state authority was late with its most apparent concessions to the opposition, conducted itself brutally and confrontationally, and deceived the entire world community—this led to an unfortunate result.

How does this relate to today's crisis? As before, there is no adequate proactive position for the Ukrainian churches. We have collided with the fact that the ideology of the Russian world has turned into fascist ideology. This is admittedly more similar to Italian fascism than to the German variety, but the rebirth of fascist state ideology is a fact. The contribution from Orthodoxy to the birth of this version of fascism is also a fact; it will suffice to remember how close to fascism Patriarch Cyrill came during his speech about the Russian world on the 3rd of November, 2009. Under these conditions, the professed neutrality of the ROC, which is being imposed upon the UOC, is related to this fascism. Strangely, although the Ukrainian churches are not divided from Russia's imperial connotations in general, they are by no means pleased with this current form of fascism. And they are not protesting this fascism or against the use of Christianity (particularly of Orthodoxy) in this fascist ideology. I would compare imperialism with pneumonia and fascism with cancer. We are not saying that Russia no longer has pneumonia, but cancer. Instead, we are saying that, when your health improves, we will make peace with you. The Ukrainian churches made an announcement about this on the 6th of June, having assured that they have hopes for peace between the Ukrainian and Russian people in the future. Peace in the future would be wonderful, but Christian testimony of this criminal ideology, with which it is impossible to have a relationship while maintaining neutrality is what is necessary today, and this is nowhere to be found.

And so the Ukrainian churches are permanently flawed. They are afraid to pass a certain boundary and, as a result, they do too little. If Russia's problem is the fact that the ROC administers the alkali of burned-out ideologies instead of the salt of Christianity, then Ukraine's problem is the fact that they don't administer this salt to society in sufficient quantity. This could be the death of Ukraine and her churches if their relations with social leadership does not change and they do not take more responsibility for this nation and its people.

*Translated by Charlie Smith*

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