

Orthodoxy and the Future of Secularism After the Maidan

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Analysis

In many ways the undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine has triggered seismic shifts in the religious landscape in the two countries. Although united by a common Eastern Christian faith tradition, Russia and Ukraine are increasingly separated by the same. After more than twenty years of an independent Ukrainian state that has adopted its own legislative policies toward religious institutions and the means of regulating the exchange of peoples, goods and ideas, a growing number of differences in terms of cultural values and political orientations are now manifest between the two countries.

These changes contributed to sharp, popular protests that erupted on 21 November 2013 and became initially known as the “Revolution of Dignity.” What role did religion play in shaping the form these protests took? And how are religious institutions themselves likely to be affected by the aftermath of the Maidan protests in which they constituted a formidable presence? The events on the Maidan led to a long series of unforeseen consequences, including the ouster of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and the onset of an undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine, which has already cost thousands of lives and redrawn the borders of both states.

As an overarching framework, here I ask why the issue of church-state relations is always so prominent in discussions of Orthodoxy. I suggest that rather than religion per se, the domain likely to be most affected by the Maidan might well be how secularism, as a political principle, will be put into practice in the future. I draw on the experiences of other states’ use of secularism to grapple with a diversity of values, views and lifestyles, manifest in regional variation, to rethink issues of religious authority and political legitimacy.

In two key respects, the Eastern Orthodox tradition is distinct from other Christian traditions, notably Catholicism and Protestantism. First, it

positions the spatial boundaries of believers in relationship to a particular state. As a result of this prominence of the state, there is comparatively less tension between categories of the religious and the secular as modes of being and modes of governing in Eastern Christian societies. Scholars who have engaged secularization theoretically have generally bypassed consideration of Eastern Christian societies for this reason. (Asad 2003, Casanova 2006, Taylor 2007).

A second related difference that is pertinent to this discussion is that, as a faith tradition, Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe is organized on a nation-state model. State churches by and large serve a particular nation as in the case of, for example, the Greek Orthodox Church, Serbian Orthodox Church, Bulgarian Orthodox Church and so on. Aspiring to more closely integrate politically with Europe and the European Union, many Ukrainians, in a parallel endeavor, also envision the recognition of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church to match their independent state. Although the boundaries of Ukraine have been redrawn as a result of this crisis, after more than two decades of independence, it is clear that the Ukrainian state is unlikely to disappear. Therefore, the demands of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which were continuing unabated before this conflict erupted, have since gained new impetus and urgency.

Such an initiative automatically affects the Russian Orthodox Church, which in Ukraine goes by the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. It is currently the largest of all Orthodox Churches in Ukraine in terms of properties. These efforts to create an independent, canonically recognized Ukrainian Orthodox Church have met with a competing vision. The Russian Orthodox Church, positioning Russia as following

a “third way,” has articulated its own spatial correlation linking its believers to each other in an alternate configuration. The Russian World refers to the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church that includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, echoing the imperial domain that united Great Russians, Little Russians and White Russians, as these three groups were known, under the tsarist empire. The “Russian World” is not a post-national understanding of shared cultural space. It is a term that claims to take inspiration from ancient Rus’ and rests on a specific historical precedent of an imperial past. The term recognizes the legacy of this past, but in doing so offers a divine vision of the past that can be encountered and experienced as sacred in the present. At the same time, the Russian World underscores a model of political organization that spans, overrides and subsumes multiple states and nations as naturally conflated and preordained by history.

The Russian World refers to a “civilizational model” characterized by a unique cultural, social and historical landscape that is most vividly characterized by distinctive (and supposedly superior) spiritual and moral values. What is more, the choice of the Russian World and its moral order stands opposed to the West. In contrast to the “spirituality” of the Russian World, the West offers a shared moral order that embraces forms of citizenship and “Europeanness” hinging on universal discourses of human rights as shared values, a means of belonging and a meaningful common identification. (Stoeckl 2014)

For Ukrainians, the choice is quite stark: should they pursue attempts to create a “Ukrainianized” form of Orthodoxy, which then, in contrast, makes the Russian World project and its forms of Orthodox leadership and practice seem “imperial” or “imperializing”? Or is the

vision of a Russian World a means to create universality, political neutrality and compassion among peoples? The rationale here is that by lifting religion above politics and specific state structures, faith is freed from the inevitably fallen qualities of political compromise, thereby allowing an institution and its faithful to pursue a more pure form of harmonious piety.

Importantly, both positions represent an attempt to use Orthodoxy to define a particular space politically, which has ramifications for lived religious practices as well as for the relationships between religious organizations and states in this part of the world. In both instances, - a nationalized form of Orthodoxy and “Christian patriotism” or a supranational confessional tradition that sits at the seat of another state’s power- bespeaks reestablishing the supremacy of Orthodoxy as a guiding force in social and political life, albeit with different spatial and political dimensions. This fork in the road existed even prior to the Maidan protests. The armed conflict that erupted in Eastern Ukraine only intensifies the passion behind the commitments to one position over the other and exacerbates the ramifications of each option.

The recourse to religion on the part of both the Ukrainian and Russian states bespeaks the need to legitimate political authority with a religious aura. Attempts to save a populace from “sin, error and evil” usher forth a politics of redemption that inevitably brings theology along. Modern states, and especially ones that aspire to govern through means that are not purely authoritarian, need some way to forge consensus and trust so that perceptions of justice will be met and some degree of compliance with the law will ensue. On what basis should political authority rest?

ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENCE

In many ways, the discussions of church-state relations and how they should be structured are really issues of secularism. Secularism as a political principle is a means to accommodate difference all the while shoring up a sense of commonality that makes the exercise of state power possible. The real challenge as a result of the Maidan, I argue, has less to do with the state regulation of religious institutions or church-state relations per se and more to do with how to democratically integrate and accept difference.

The Orthodox Church in Russia derives a good bit of its power and position from the strong state to which it is allied. This strong state has similarly contributed to thwarting the robust development of civil society in Russia. Therefore the historic triad of God-Tsar-Nation has been remade into strong state-weak Church-weak civil society. Although this is one model, it has limited application in Ukraine because the dynamics have developed differently. (Wanner 2012) The Ukrainian state has been weak, unable to satisfy and provide for its citizenry. It reached a nadir under Yanukovich. Clergy and religious institutions of all persuasions, albeit not to the same degree, came to the Maidan to side with the people against the state and its inadequate governance. In Ukraine the weakness of the state - and the questionable levels of legitimacy it has had - gave way to greater respect for and more vigorous levels of participation in religious life. Thus, most recently, the weak Ukrainian state has bred comparatively stronger religious institutions and a more vocal and active civil society.

In order for people to deliberately form a common will to act together to pursue a common purpose, as was done on the Maidan, there must be commitment. Commitment presup-

poses trust that individuals and groups recognize themselves to be part of a political process in which they will be listened to and in which their views matter. Without such a mutual commitment, this trust will be eroded. (Taylor 2011: 43)

The commitment between the Ukrainian state authorities and the people they were supposed to serve was razor thin, leading to an evaporation of trust between the citizenry and authorities. This loss of trust and widespread sense of betrayal, which was experienced throughout much of Ukraine, translated into newfound forms of solidarity among large sectors of the national population. A plethora of citizens found themselves on the main city square having experienced familiar forms of alienation, dissatisfaction, and even outrage at the hands of state officials. This humiliation and anger bubbled over and was emphatically expressed as a popular will for change in the "Revolution of Dignity."

Augustine, among others, asserted that the Latin *ligare*, to bind, is the root meaning of the word religion and connotes its essence. Religion is what embodies the commitments that bind individuals to each other, to faith and to divine powers. The Maidan, like no other event, generated popular solidarity because it put in evidence the extent of shared normative understandings of moral order, authority and political legitimacy and the popular will to act to bring those understandings in alignment with reality.

Such solidarity and binding force were not universal, however. Orthodox societies, including Ukraine, have always been multi-confessional, albeit not to the degree that they are today because virtually every religious group embodies a plethora of transnational contacts, exchanges and influences. When this confessional diversity combines with a

full spectrum of attitudes that run the gamut from religious, to areligious to nonreligious the degree of diversity presents challenges in terms of binding citizens to each other in common cause and in forging the kind of trust that generates perceptions of political legitimacy. (Wanner 2014: 432-436)

Ultimately, the Maidan protests have bequeathed a central issue: how to accommodate the increasing diversity and fragmentation of the modern age and even of the modern nation-state, which often comes in the form of a diversity of opinions. For this reason, an important aspect of church-state relations is how secularism as a political principle is implemented. This, I expect, more than assuring ecumenical relations, will be the central challenge for religious institutions and for the new Ukrainian government.

Secularism has been mobilized in divergent ways in the US and in Europe and these experiences represent two models for implementing secularism to accommodate difference. In the United States, secularism was originally advanced as a political principle that could prevent one of the many rival Protestant confessions from gaining the upper hand and dominating or otherwise discriminating against other denominations. (Finke and Stark 2005) More recently, the principle of secularism has been applied to balance the needs and rights of religious, nonreligious and areligious people in such a way that the rights of all are equally guaranteed before the law. This is in many respects the challenge to be met in Ukraine.

This is very different from the European experience. José Casanova has suggested that in Europe a series of secularizations have occurred. This process involved a shift from a pronounced correlation between territory and confession, resulting in confessional states

that fostered a public sphere, which was for the most part neutral toward religion. As a by-product of this shift, confessional identities gradually ceased to hold meaning (2013: 38). The ultimate result of processes of secularization in Europe, therefore, involved de-confessionalizing state structures and dismantling a system of state churches.

This process never really occurred in Imperial Russia, nor even in the USSR, where the Russian Orthodox Church maintained a privileged, albeit vastly diminished, position vis-à-vis the state. In France, another imperial country with a similar history of a strong single church, secularism has been implemented differently. The state has attempted to control and manage religion as a means of minimizing the influence of clergy and the interference of religiously informed understandings of morality and legitimacy on political policy. The most recent manifestation of this impulse has been the policy of *laïcité*, which essentially tries to privatize religious expression by taking out of the public sphere all forms of religiosity, including material objects and symbols with religious meaning.

As John Rawls (1971) has pointed out, the process of secularizing a state is quite different from attempting to secularize a society and the two processes cannot be confused. A secular state does not mean a secular society. Whereas a democratic state claims neutrality before all religious institutions and communities, ostensibly refusing to favor one over others, religious institutions themselves remain free in a democracy to comment, propagate and otherwise try to influence the direction of state policies. Therefore, the longed for “neutrality” that a separation of church and state promises can appear quite illusive. As long as the use of a religious aura to cast the righteousness of state leaders and state power in

a virtuous light continues in Ukraine, by and large to compensate for a lack of trust and political legitimacy, true secularism will remain out of reach.

In his New Year's address to the nation, the new Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, in referring to the armed conflict to defend the Fatherland in eastern Ukraine, said, "The truth is on our side. God is with us." The Maidan protests provided a public forum in which to express religious sentiment. These events enhanced the perceptions of the beneficial contributions of clergy and religious organizations to Ukrainian society by virtue of their ability to create and maintain moral order. A new sense of the political is emerging in Ukraine that freely integrates religious conviction with political positions. If the early post-Soviet years focused on articulating a national identity that could hold this regionally diverse country together, after the Maidan, the task is to articulate a political identity that will spell out the values and norms by which a diverse group of Ukrainians agree to be governed. One of the key tasks the Maidan has given is how the new Ukrainian state will forge a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of its own people that will be grounded in a secular neutrality, and not by relying on the religious aura of righteousness of a particular faith tradition or confession to do so.

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