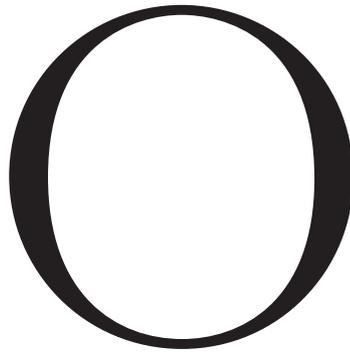


CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN UKRAINE

John P. Burgess explains the role of churches in the Ukrainian search for national identity.



n a summer afternoon at the southern tip of the Crimean Peninsula, I shield my face from the blazing sun as I watch archaeologists dig amid the ruins of the ancient Greek city of Chersonesos. Soon I retreat beneath the canopy of a reconstructed rotunda and unexpectedly encounter the remains of a baptistery. It is, perhaps, the very one into which Prince Vladimir of Rus stepped in the year 988. I pause in amazement, gaze at the deep, dark waters of the Black Sea, close my eyes, and silently pay homage to the birthplace of Russian civilization.

On March 18, 2014, another “Prince Vladimir” laid claim to this site. Calling Crimea an inseparable part of Russia, President Vladimir Putin

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declared that Vladimir the Great's "spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus." For Russians, said Putin, Crimea is "holy."

Thousands of Orthodox believers from Russia make pilgrimage to Chersonesos every year. Until Russia's annexation of Crimea, so, too, did thousands of Ukrainian Catholics and Orthodox, who revere Vladimir as Prince Volodymyr. The year 988 unites all of them, and yet, as I have learned, they interpret this legacy in vastly different ways.

I am a North American Protestant theologian who has closely followed the rebirth of the Christian churches in this part of the world, and I've come to realize that the current struggle over Crimea and Ukraine cannot be reduced to standard oppositions of West versus East, Europe versus Russia. Something deeper is at stake, something about the central moral values that will define this part of the world in the twenty-first century. The future of Ukraine depends on more than a viable political settlement. Ukraine desperately needs churches that commit themselves to overcoming historical animosities and to advancing the spiritual freedom and unity on which a just political order ultimately depends.

Crowds began gathering on the Maidan, Kyiv's Independence Square, in late November 2013 after President Viktor Yanukovich retreated from signing an agreement with the European Union that would have deepened trade relations and opened the way for greater political and military cooperation. Every Sunday afternoon in December, huge crowds, sometimes more than half a million in number, gathered to protest Yanukovich's abrupt submission to Russian interests. The Maidan soon turned into an exuberant "happening," like Woodstock's free love in 1969 and Leipzig's "Wir sind das Volk" in 1989. It became a public festival at which complete strangers suddenly began dreaming with each other about the future of their society.

Drawing together Ukrainians of all ages and backgrounds—old women on puny state pensions and tech-savvy teenagers still in high school, university intellectuals and street-wise factory workers, Ukrainian-speakers and Russian-speakers—the Maidan soon became a self-organizing civil society. Thousands began camping out on the square, despite freezing temperatures. Others occupied nearby government buildings as places to sleep and to set up a central administration. Over time, the Maidan turned into a self-sufficient settlement with its own garbage service, artists' colony, and security force.

The "happening" swept up the churches, as well. A small tent with icons became the Maidan chapel. Every morning and evening, clergy of different Orthodox and Catholic churches led prayers for peace on the huge stage protesters had erected on the square. Members of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches manned medical stations and distributed warm meals.

When street fighting broke out in late January, a no-man's-land briefly appeared. Protesters stood on one side, behind massive barricades of burning tires and concrete rubble. On the other side, police and security forces waited with clubs and body-length protective shields. The hundred yards in between were littered with cobblestones that protesters had torn up from the streets and hurled at the police.

On January 21, three bearded, robed monks from Kyiv's Monastery of the Caves, one of Russian Orthodoxy's most holy sites, unexpectedly stepped into this embattled zone. Bearing a large cross, an icon, and a censer, they chanted ancient prayers and slowly walked toward the protesters, pleading for peace.

It was not the first time that church leaders had stepped between the protesters and the police, but it would be the last. Soon thereafter Yanukovich ordered police and security forces to remove the barricades and clear the square, and protesters fought back. Some threw Molotov cocktails, while others hurled rocks from self-constructed catapults. Still others fired guns. The Maidan had turned into a popular revolution.

All of Ukraine's churches had called for peaceful resolution of the conflict. But the Ukrainian Catholic Church, the Eastern-rite church that has been under the authority of Rome since the late sixteenth century, and two nationally oriented, noncanonical Orthodox churches had also been working actively to remove Yanukovich from office. The Ukrainian Catholic Bishop Borys Gudziak and professors and students from the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv played an especially important role. Myroslav Marynovych, a vice-rector, quoted King George VI's words to the British people in 1939: "We have been forced into a conflict, for which we are called . . . to meet the challenge of a principle which, if it were to prevail, would be fatal to any civilized order in the world." One of his colleagues, Bohdan Solchanyk, would be killed in the clashes.

St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral serves the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyivan Patriarchate, a breakaway from the Moscow Patriarchate. Only a

few meters from the Maidan, the cathedral opened its doors to demonstrators fleeing the police. Dozens of people slept at night on the cold floor in front of the iconostasis. An adjacent room served as a temporary morgue. Leaders of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, also independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, offered assistance to the demonstrators as well.

In contrast, representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (the dominant branch of Orthodoxy in Ukraine and under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church) called on the churches not to take a political position. The Moscow Patriarchate had long supported Yanukovich. But as the Maidan protests intensified, it recognized that the political tide had decisively shifted and began to ask Ukrainians to listen to all sides of society and reject violence.

When Yanukovich fled the country and a provisional government was formed, Metropolitan Anthony of Boryspil and Brovary of the Moscow Patriarchate led the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations in declaring “support for the legitimate government of Ukraine.” The council called on the new government to “restore constitutional order and affirm citizens’ political, economic and other fundamental rights and freedoms” and to assert “the territorial integrity of Ukraine, whose independence is a gift from God and is valued by our entire nation, which is why we have no right to allow for its separation, as this would be a sin before God and future generations.”

These churches in Ukraine all trace their beginnings to Vladimir’s conversion, use the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, venerate icons and relics, and observe seasons of fasting and feasting. Vladimir is said to have accepted Orthodoxy because of the transfigured world that its adherents glimpse in worship. As his representatives are reported to have said after attending a liturgy in Constantinople, “we no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth.” His spiritual descendants continue to assert that human relationships, and therefore political arrangements, should reflect the harmony and beauty that God offers the world in Christ.

But Ukraine—the very word means “borderlands”—has never had stable borders. Its flat topography has left it vulnerable to invading armies from the time of the medieval Mongols to the Poles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Nazi Germans in the twentieth. Recurring fractures in Ukrainian nationhood have resulted in deep ecclesiastical divisions.

After Vladimir’s baptism, Orthodox believers in what is now Ukraine looked to Constantinople and its patriarch for spiritual authority. After Constantinople fell in 1453, Ukrainian Orthodoxy became part of the Russian Church, which declared Moscow to be the Third Rome, now entrusted with defending Christian civilization in the East. In 1596, Lithuanian-Polish domination of western Ukraine, as well as calls for reform in the Orthodox Church, led to the Union of Brest, which aligned many Ukrainians with Catholic Rome while allowing them to retain their traditional forms of Orthodox worship and practice. After World War II, Stalin forced these “Greek Catholics” to join the Russian Orthodox Church. Some were martyred when they resisted.

The rise of Gorbachev in the 1980s and the collapse of communism in the 1990s led to the creation of an independent Ukrainian state. With independence came new political resentments and religious fissures. Many Russians continued to see Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian Federation as one political and cultural entity that had been artificially dismantled, a position that Gorbachev and even political dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn took. Those Ukrainians, however, who emphasized their unique language and cultural traditions welcomed independence as an opportunity to construct a new national identity.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church recovered its legal status, leading to bitter fights with the Russian Orthodox Church over historical injustices and control of parishes and monasteries. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church also reemerged from the underground. Although not recognized by canonical autocephalous Orthodox churches, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church had broken off from the Moscow Patriarchate soon after the Bolshevik Revolution, a development encouraged both by the communists and by the ecumenical patriarch, who hoped that the Soviets would save him from the Turks.

In 1992, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate declared its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church. After the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005, a previous uprising against Yanukovich that had prevented his accession to the presidency after rigged elections, the Kyivan Patriarchate courted the favor of the new Western-oriented government. Since the Maidan, the Kyivan Patriarchate Church has aspired to become the dominant church in a Ukraine that most clearly rejects Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. Some disaffected Moscow Patriarchate priests and parishioners have come into its fold.

The religious loyalties of Ukrainians are unevenly distributed and in many cases difficult to determine precisely. The Ukrainian Catholic Church has approximately 3,600 parishes, primarily in western Ukraine, and claims the allegiance of about 10 percent of Ukrainians. The Autocephalous Ukrainian Church has 1,200 parishes, also primarily in the west, and claims another 10 percent of the population. The other two Orthodox churches represent perhaps half or more of the population. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate has nearly five thousand parishes, many of which are located in Kyiv and central Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate has more than 12,000 parishes and is especially strong in the south and east.

Despite the greater number of parishes in the Moscow Patriarchate, many polls suggest that the Kyivan Patriarchate has more members, but Orthodox churches keep no membership rolls, and many Ukrainians could not tell you the difference among any of the Eastern churches. Two percent of Ukrainians belong to Catholic churches that use the Latin rite, and another 2 percent are Protestant. Baptist churches are very active, and Kyiv has a charismatic mega-church. Ukraine has the reputation of being the Bible Belt of the former Soviet Union, and even Orthodox participation is much higher than in Russia.

The Moscow Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church has its own complicated dynamics. On the one hand, Moscow has given the Ukrainian Church a good deal of autonomy. Its Metropolitan is elected by the Ukrainian bishops rather than appointed by the patriarch. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church is deeply concerned about retaining the loyalty of its Ukrainian members. More than one-third of its parishes and nearly half of its monasteries are in Ukraine.

The Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine have always been pulled between Ukraine and Russia, as the 1992 schism showed. After failing in 1990 to be elected patriarch of the entire Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan of Kyiv and All-Ukraine Filaret (Denysenko) supported the establishment of an autocephalous Ukrainian church and became its patriarch in 1995. Although most of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine remained under Moscow, one faction favored the eventual establishment of a Ukrainian church that would unite all three Ukrainian Orthodox churches. The other faction fought to keep the Ukrainian Church close to the Russian Orthodox Church.

With Filaret's turn to schism, Vladimir (Sabodan) became Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that remained under the Moscow Patriarchate. Vladimir skillfully succeeded in keeping his Church's two factions together, but as he grew elderly and began suffering from Parkinson's, internal church tensions reached a breaking point. In early 2012, a number of young supporters of the Ukrainian faction were silenced and removed from their positions. Then, in the midst of the popular revolution in February, the Ukrainian bishops judged Vladimir too ill to continue and elected Onufri, a figure associated with the pro-Moscow faction, as a temporary replacement. In August, he was confirmed as Vladimir's successor.

The political crisis that we're witnessing in Ukraine is nothing less than a battle for national identity, and Ukrainians, like their Orthodox and Catholic neighbors in Russia and Poland, regard religious affiliation as essential to their self-understanding. The fight for Crimea and Ukraine reflects three competing visions of the Church. Each undergirds a fundamentally different notion of Ukrainian national identity.

According to Orthodox theology, the Church is a living organism. The Church is truly the Church only as each member is united by Christ to the others. This unity is not merely a spiritual ideal. It becomes an earthly reality as the Holy Spirit guides the Church in rightly praying, celebrating the Eucharist, guarding church tradition, and uniting believers in love and service. And because this unity must be as fully embodied in the world as was God in Jesus Christ, it must be a visible unity.

The Catholic Church holds a similar ecclesiology. For Orthodoxy, however, church unity has become closely tied to ethnic and national identity. While Orthodoxy has rejected the idea that the Church in any specific location should include only members of a particular culture or nation, it has asserted that the Church can so penetrate the inner moral and spiritual life of a people that all of them in some sense belong to the Church. After Prince Vladimir was baptized, he returned to Kyiv and had his warriors baptized en masse in the Dnieper River. Historically, the Russian Church helped unite Muscovy against Tatars and Poles, and centuries later supported the Soviet Union against Hitler. Orthodoxy became an essential part of Eastern Slavic identity, whether a particular person was a believer or not. The Russian Orthodox Church asserts that this remains true today.

This integrative way of thinking about Church, state, and society has also been common among many Protestants and Catholics over the centuries.

But in the West, the modern era has seen a clash between secular authority and the Church's mission. As a result, we now emphasize the distinction between Church and state, as well as the difference between Christ and culture. So as Westerners we're inclined to worry that Orthodoxy is inevitably compromised by ethnic or national interests.

Orthodox leaders think otherwise. They typically argue that Protestant and Catholic churches define the Church according to human criteria rather than the unity of the Spirit. As nineteenth-century Russian Slavophile Aleksei Komyakov put it, Protestantism falls into endless ecclesiastical divisions because each individual becomes judge of right and wrong, rather than seeking truth in the one Church that has preceded and will follow all of us. He also accused Catholicism of investing ultimate authority in one human, the pope, rather than in the divinely created Church. The Orthodox insist that only the Church in its mystical yet visible wholeness (*sobornost*) is truly the Church.

Influenced by this theology of the Church, the Moscow Patriarchate sees the Eastern Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians—as one people united by Vladimir's one baptism. From this point of view, Russian Orthodoxy continues to be integral to Ukrainian identity. Moreover, this Russian Orthodox civilization—what Patriarch Kirill, head of the Moscow Patriarchate, has called “Russkiy Mir,” the “Russian World”—offers a necessary and important alternative to Western European and North American secularism and individualism. And in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (especially under Yanukovich), the Orthodox Church has worked closely with government officials to expand the Church's presence in society, especially in such spheres as education and social work.

Critics dismiss the Russian Church's commitment to unity as a naked power move—or an effort to toady up to Putin and the ruling elite in today's Russia. They often point out that if the Moscow Patriarchate loses Ukraine, and especially if Ukraine goes back to Constantinople, its pretensions to power and influence among the other Orthodox churches will be severely compromised.

These cynical judgments are no doubt true in part. Our motives are always mixed. But these worldly interpretations aren't fully accurate and fail to do justice to the theological traditions that profoundly influence Orthodox thinking. The Russian Orthodox Church is theologically right to insist that Christian unity must transcend political divisions. And today the Moscow Patriarchate sees itself guiding the only

church in Ukraine that is actively resisting the temptations of a narrow Ukrainian nationalism.

Moreover, from a Russian Orthodox point of view, all the other large churches in Ukraine have violated church unity. At best, their existence is tragic; at worst, schismatic. The creation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the sixteenth century took Orthodox believers away from Moscow and subjected them to Rome. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church came into being only because the Bolsheviks wanted to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church by dividing it and therefore destroying it from within. The Kyivan Patriarchate exploited Ukrainian nationalism, and therefore anti-Russian sentiment, in order to break from Moscow.

The experience of persecution under communism has taught the Moscow Patriarchate to value visible unity at almost any price. After the death of Patriarch Tikhon in 1925, Metropolitan Sergi (Stragorodski) illegitimately assumed patriarchal powers. The man who should have succeeded Tikhon, Metropolitan Kirill (Smirnov), was outraged by Sergi's willingness to subject the Church to a godless state in a futile effort to save the Church as a public institution. In protest, Kirill denied the validity of the Eucharist celebrated by Sergi and his supporters. Another Tikhon loyalist, Metropolitan Agafangel (Preobrazhenski), ordered his priests to disobey mandates of Sergi that violated Christian conscience. Sergi responded by denouncing both men, thereby encouraging the secret police to arrest them, send them into exile, and subject them to physical and psychological torture.

Nevertheless, neither Kirill nor Agafangel broke the unity of the Church or organized a movement to remove Sergi from office. Moreover, Kirill later repented of breaking Eucharistic fellowship. In short, Kirill and Agafangel expressed their opposition within the bounds of what they understood to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church has canonized not Sergi, but rather Kirill and Agafangel. The message is clear: The Church must remain one, and divisions only weaken it and the people and nation whom it serves.

To the other Ukrainian churches, the question of church unity looks different. The Kyivan Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church argue that Orthodox believers have always been allowed to organize themselves along national lines. An autocephalous Ukrainian Church does not violate church unity; on the contrary, the autocephalous Orthodox churches cultivate an intensive fellowship among themselves.

From this perspective, the Moscow Patriarchate is not interested in saving Ukrainians from a nationalistic agenda, but rather is seeking to subject them to Russian imperialistic pretensions. An independent Ukrainian Orthodoxy can help the Ukrainian people reclaim their unique language and national traditions over and against a Russia that has often tried to eliminate Ukrainian identity or reduce it to a variety of Russian identity (as when Russians commonly assert that “the Ukrainian language is just a Russian village dialect”). For this kind of nationalistic Orthodoxy, to be Ukrainian means *not* to be Russian.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church, more than the three Orthodox churches, has been influenced by the experience of Western Christians and thus takes a different view of the relationship of the Church to the ethnos or nation. Although historically it has not always resisted associating itself with Polish national interests, the Ukrainian Catholic Church today has vigorously embraced the Catholic social teaching begun under Leo XIII and developed over the last two centuries. Ukrainian Catholics played a leading role on the Maidan because they wished to align Ukraine with a European humanism deeply shaped by historic Christian commitments to human dignity and flourishing—the project of Jacques Maritain and others in the mid-twentieth century. Ukrainian Catholics see themselves as taking up the unique gifts of Orthodox worship and spirituality into a broader Catholic moral vision of divine justice for all humanity.

For the Ukrainian Catholic Church, political structures defined by the rule of law and a constitutional commitment to human rights best guarantee human well-being. By this way of thinking, the same values that inspired Polish Catholicism and Pope John Paul II to resist communist dictatorship should now shape a new democratic Ukraine. Of course, cynical Russian Orthodox believers accuse Rome, Europe, and Ukrainian Catholics of hiding their own power plays behind beautiful theological words.

I am an observer, not a participant, in Ukraine’s struggle to define its future. I am a Western Protestant, not an Eastern Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic. Nevertheless, I must report that each of these positions makes a compelling theological witness to me as a Protestant. The Orthodox attention to ethnic identity and unity could have been affirmed by the greatest Protestant theologian of the past century, Karl Barth. He asserted that every people might have a particular charism or gift that God commands it to protect and share. And the Orthodox concern for visible Christian unity is represented nowhere better than by Rome, which asks Christians

everywhere—and especially Protestants—not to rest content with an invisible and therefore thin and spectral unity of the Church.

But the Ukrainian churches have also failed at key points. Some Ukrainian Catholic and Kyivan Patriarchate leaders see nothing in the Russian Orthodox Church but corruption and political machinations. Fr. David Nazar, the top Jesuit in Ukraine, has accused Kirill of being little more than Putin’s puppet. From the Russian side, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev), head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department of External Church Relations, has attributed Ukraine’s civil strife to the “uniates” (a derogatory term for Ukrainian Catholics) who refuse to acknowledge the validity of political perspectives other than their own—and even foment violent revolution on the Maidan and suppress political and religious dissent in eastern Ukraine.

Each of the Ukrainian churches has claimed to rise above the political fray, while accusing the others of pushing a self-interested political agenda. And each has sought to cast itself as the one true Church, calling for all the others to unite behind it alone, a move that in the present circumstances can only seem threatening to the potential losers.

Orthodox and Catholics are right to insist on a visible unity of the Church. Soviet persecution should have taught them, however, that this unity can never rest on institutional arrangements alone. Sergi’s effort to save the Russian Church as a public institution failed miserably. His endless compromises did nothing to halt Bolshevik persecution. Only his opponents, represented by Kirill and Agafangel, understood that the Church’s unity depends on a Christian freedom and unity not bound to any political ideology or state agenda. The Church is truly the Church only as it serves the Gospel and sets forth a vision of heaven on earth.

This is not to say that institutional arrangements do not matter. Kirill and Agafangel made a profound witness to visible unity by remaining in the Church even when it had gone astray. The prospect for institutional church unity in Ukraine is remote, true, but a different kind of visible unity is possible. The churches can unite in a shared commitment to overcome historic animosities and to work for national reconciliation.

One proving ground will be Crimea, where churches of the Kyivan and Moscow Patriarchates stand side by side. If the Russian government tries to use the coercive power of law to unite them under the Moscow Patriarchate, will the Russian Orthodox

Church vigorously protest and insist on the right of Kyivan Patriarchate parishes to exist, even though it regards them as schismatic? Or will it gladly allow the power of the state to do the work of the Holy Spirit? Early signs have been troubling, as when a Moscow Patriarchate priest tried to take possession of a Kyivan Patriarchate church on a naval base that the Ukrainians abandoned. And a further question arises about how well the new Crimea will tolerate Muslim Tatars and Ukrainian Jews.

The other test will be in the new Ukraine. Leaders of other churches failed to protest when Ukrainian border officials in early May refused entry to Metropolitan Hilarion. Will the Ukrainian Catholic Church, the Kyivan Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church now say no, loudly and clearly, to a petition asking the Ukrainian Rada (Parliament) to outlaw Moscow Patriarchate churches because they represent the “Russian enemy”? Will they allow Moscow Patriarchate parishes to continue their work, or will they try to force them into a new Ukrainian national church?

Despite the pain that the churches in Ukraine have inflicted on each other, they must avoid the temptations of zero-sum-game ecclesiastical competition. Their shared experience of martyrdom under the Soviets should remind them that a national politics favoring one church over another can quickly turn against all of them. Moreover, Ukraine desperately needs a united Christian witness to the country’s historic Christian values if it is to overcome its profoundly

poisoned political and economic life. In the words of the Ukrainian Council of Churches, “We note, in particular, the urgent need for a decisive, consistent and systematic fight against corruption, which eats away at our society and violates the tenets of our religion.”

At issue in Ukraine is national identity. Yes, the country must settle how it will relate to Russia, its larger and sometimes menacing neighbor and brother. But it must also face the even more fundamental challenge of determining how Christianity can renew a society that since the collapse of communism has languished not only economically but also spiritually. Two events inspire hope. When Putin prepared to announce the annexation of Crimea, he invited government, military, business, civic, and religious leaders to a lavish reception at the Kremlin. They were supposed to demonstrate their support, and indeed many Russians were euphoric. But a key public figure was missing. Patriarch Kirill did not attend—as if to say, Orthodox unity is not to be reduced to Russian unity.

Ukraine’s newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, has also made important symbolic gestures. Poroshenko belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate and has not spoken of leaving it. And while (in contrast to Yanukovych in 2010) he did not ask Patriarch Kirill’s blessing on his inauguration, he did step soon afterwards into Kyiv’s ancient St. Sophia Cathedral, a site claimed and revered by all of Ukraine’s historic churches. There he lit candles and prayed. 

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