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PROTESTANTS AND THE UKRAINIAN GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH: IN SEARCH OF INCLUSIVE SOLUTIONS

Mykhailo Cherenkov

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Post-Soviet Protestants, having gotten used to living in coexistence with an atheistic society over the course of 70 years, have discovered something new in the years since Ukraine gained independence—Orthodox tradition. It did not happen at once, but the first attempts have been made at reclassifying the relationship between Protestants and Orthodox as other, not foreign. However, the Orthodox other is not the only other. In dialogue with the official Orthodox Church, it is easy to lose sight of the diversity within Orthodoxy (Orthodox churches are “other” to each other), and also the coexistence in the same cultural arena of Catholic and Greek Catholic churches. The disunity of the Orthodox Church and its internal diversity should be especially interesting to Protestants, because it creates the opportunity for a confessional census. Put simply, when there are multiple “others,” then there is room for the Protestants as well. Diversity is a fact, which, when considered, sheds light on precedents and also rights.

Ukrainian Protestantism is a synthesis of Western and Eastern Christian traditions. Therefore, its main “other” is not Orthodoxy, but Catholicism, and the closest by tradition is Greek Catholicism. Notably, the ties between Protestants and Catholics and Uniates (Greek Rite Catholics) are well understood and are emphasized by the Russian Orthodox Church, but

Protestants were not much aware of these ties until two recent events. First, the “Ekman affair” created a stir—when the leader of the Word of Life neo-Pentecostal movement, a movement widespread in Ukraine, converted to Catholicism. And second, new opportunities for ties between the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) arose thanks to the Maidan protests in Kiev (November 2013-February 2014). For a majority of Protestants, both of these events were their first encounter with and discovery of the “other,” and drew their attention to co-existing traditions, what sets these traditions apart, and how these traditions fit with their own tradition.

In recent years, a significant migration has been identified between confessions and a steady growth of “just Christians,” a majority of whom can be identified as “seekers.” These tendencies reflect a real demand for open dialogue between traditions that is mutually interesting and fulfilling.

Protestants and Uniates are united by a series of characteristics, such as the superiority of the Western theological tradition, openness to the cultural inheritance of Eastern Christianity, and their experience of a “catacomb” existence during Soviet times. Both Protestants and Greek Catholics, during both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, found themselves in the minority, not fitting into the socio-cultural homogenization of their society. Protestants stood out for their democracy, individualism, and autonomy. Greek-Catholics stood out for their nationalism, strong ethnic culture, and internal cultural and theological heterogeneity. This diversity of persevering minorities presented a direct threat to the Soviet project, because they were oppositional and uncontrollable. Both communities had ingrained in their nature, and expressed outwardly, the archetypal protest of diversity against monotony, inclusivity against exclusivity, individual choice against imposed collective choice. And at that time, the characteristics of the imperial Orthodox culture were different: a

focus on homogeneity, suppression of diversity, and a collectivist interpretation of individual rights.¹

After Ukraine gained independence, the Greek Catholics and the Protestants gained an opportunity for full-fledged church life—no longer relegated to a regional or marginal status. Both groups, thanks to their synthetic Western-Eastern natures, fit well in the European-oriented trajectory of Ukraine, which would preserve the national character and memory of the best traditions of Eastern Christianity. This raises questions of the prospects for development of a Protestant-Uniate dialogue and its social and ecumenical potential. The following theses will be devoted to consideration of this question. Prospects for dialogue and cooperation are viewed through an analysis of the synthetic nature of Ukrainian Protestantism and Greek Catholicism as Western-Eastern churches, with similar experience of a “catacomb” existence as minority sects, an active pro-European position, and participation in the Ukrainian “Revolution of Dignity.”

Ukrainian Protestantism and Greek Catholicism are both, in their history and their theological character, synthetic West-East projects. The conscious internal diversity of each of these traditions can serve as the foundation for mutual acceptance, recognition in each other of similarities and connection. However, external dialogue will not be successful without reflection on each of their own complex identities. We must admit that despite the seeming obviousness, dialogue between Protestant and Greek Catholic traditions will be difficult for the churches to accept. Preservation of the internal diversity can only be accomplished through theological meta-reflective efforts.

¹ On the fate of religious minorities in the context of Russian and Soviet history see Vitaly V. Proshak. *From Civil Spring to Democratic Summer. Constitution, Human Rights and Freedom of Religion in Eurasia*. (Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2014). “According to researchers, it was this resistance (Plurality vs. Homogeneity, Inclusiveness vs. Exclusiveness, Individual vs. Collective) that determined the identity of religious groups, and also the government’s and society’s attitudes towards them” (p. 170).

Thus, Baptist researcher Constantine Prokhorov came to the conclusion that, “Not in the least denying the significance of the ‘foreign factor’ in the formation of the early Russian Evangelical-Baptist communities, it is important to see their heterogeneity, including both westward-looking and national tendencies, and to balance examples of the direct or mediated adoptions of European Protestant ideas with a certain self-reliance on the part of the ‘counter streams.’”² He gives an example from the story of the “conversion” of Ratushny and Tsymbal, who later went on to become legendary Ukrainian stundists. M.T. Ratushny, remembering his youth, wrote to a Mennonite, G.I. Fast, in St. Petersburg in 1893, noting, “I had started to ask Germans (because I knew that the Russian people do not know about God and His law)... how I might be saved... I met an old man, a German who had repented, and he said to me: ‘Buy a Bible and read it...’ In 1857 I bought a Bible and began to read it, but I understood nothing of what I read. I applied to the old man who had advised me to buy the Bible, and he instructed me.”³ In 1869, Efim Tsymbal asked the German Mennonite Abram Unger to baptize him according to his faith. Prokhorov emphasizes the fact that “it is significant that Tsymbal did not finally become a member of any German church, but, in spite of pressure from the authorities, founded a number of independent Ukrainian Stundo-Baptist congregations.”⁴

In other words, Ukrainian Protestantism arose at the crossroads between various influences, and does not fully identify with any single one of them, instead holding onto all of them and expressing them in a relevant way in the national culture.

Here is how a Greek Catholic characterizes the internal dialogic nature of his own tradition: “The Greek Catholic Church needs to be viewed in the context of Church history as a natural development towards unity. Being fully immersed in one’s own tradition keeps one

² Constantine Prokhorov. “Between the West and East. Notes on the Origin of the Eangelical Movement in Russia.” *Theological Reflections*. (#13. 2012): 102.

³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

from seeing things clearly. The Orthodox Church sees the world through the lens of its own experience and the Catholic Church does likewise. Only the Uniate, as a sort of church metaposition, gives the opportunity to see both traditions from a distance, which is why it is more productive. All signs point to the fact that Greek Catholics as a church act with the strength of a new attitude towards church tradition (not to be confused with Tradition), new methods of perception and are a project of authentic expression of Orthodox tradition in the context of the Universal church.”⁵ It seems that the words of Igor Manannikov can be paraphrased like this: Inasmuch as the Greek Catholic Church can be seen as an expression of the Orthodox tradition in the context of the Catholic Church, it can also be seen as an expression of the Catholic tradition in a national (Ukrainian) context.

Ukrainian religious scholars note in their research that it is not enough to assign Greek Catholicism a Western vector; with no connection to Eastern tradition there is a break in its identity, a Catholicizing. Thus, in the nineteenth century, during the aggressive expansion of Orthodoxy from the East, the West also had an assimilating influence: “Hundreds of thousands of uniates did not join the Russian Orthodox Church, and therefore found themselves for decades in a marginal, in-between condition, while after the manifesto of religious tolerance in 1905 there was no massive religious conversion in these lands—hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian uniates moved to the Roman Catholic Church. Gradually in her ranks they began to lose their indigenous national identity. In other words, Catholicizing was followed in most cases by their becoming more Polish.”⁶

The conditions, nature, and method of preserving Greek Catholicism can be called a connection of Eastern and Western traditions, their adoption and expression in one another. Without reception of “Orthodoxy” (not the Moscow patriarchate, but the global tradition),

⁵ Igor Manannikov. “Greek Catholicism in Russia as a Hypothesis.” http://www.religare.ru/2_23871.html

⁶ Nadia Stokolos, and Ruslana Sheretyuk. *Church Drama*. (Rivne, Ukraine: PP DM, 2012). 245.

Greek Catholicism loses its uniqueness, the synthesis falls apart and Greek Catholics have no reason to not become just Catholics.

The same can be said for Ukrainian Protestants. Without accepting Ukrainian culture and Orthodox tradition as their foundation, Ukrainian Protestants would be simply Protestants in Ukraine, i.e., outsiders, Westerners, not-quite-Catholics. It is no coincidence that Protestants and Catholics are still viewed by the Ukrainian people as expressions of the same “Latin heresy.” With no connection with “Orthodoxy,” in most regions of Ukraine, they are out of place.

Because Ukraine itself is a synthetic creation, lying between Europe and Eurasia, the West and the East, Ukrainian churches must contain within themselves this duality, this synthesis. What sets the Protestants and Greek Catholics apart is that they consider Western culture their main tradition without rejecting Eastern tradition, preserving even in their name a global scale, consistency, and the possibility of unity.

Before his conversion to Catholicism, Ulf Ekman, bishop of the neo-Pentecostal Word of Life movement, had questions about the temporary and complimentary character of Protestant “revivals,” and their connection to the tree of Catholic tradition: “Should not revival movements join something bigger for the preservation of their uniqueness...?”⁷ “Every movement has one message—not all fullness—and anointing for fulfilling a single concrete task—not all at once. Every movement has its own time but is not eternal. In John’s [the Baptizer] joyous meeting with Jesus there is a prophetic meaning: a meeting of the whole with a part, a meeting of the general and the concrete enriches both sides. Revival, personified by John and his ministry, is something necessary and important, and ideally

⁷ Ulf Ekman. *Spiritual Roots*. (Moscow: Golden Pages, 2012), 357.

leading to the enrichment and deepening of Christian experience in the entire Body of Christ.”⁸

In search of inclusive identity, Ukrainian Protestants are restoring the cultural-theological connection with European Protestantism, and through that, with the Catholic tradition to which European Protestantism traces its roots. At the same time, Protestants embrace (as in, make their own, as much as possible) the Orthodox tradition, which has remained the national religion in Ukraine. Greek Catholicism is a response to these two interests—it is a concrete expression of both Catholic and Orthodox tradition in Ukrainian culture. Therefore, by appealing at the same time to both Catholicism and Orthodoxy, Protestants come face to face with them in the shape of Greek Catholicism as a close, related “other.” It is possible that German or Russian Protestants can appeal directly to, respectively, Catholic or Orthodox tradition, but for Ukrainian Protestants, this appeal is mediated by the Greek Catholic tradition.

In search of a common ground, Ukrainian Protestants and Greek Catholics can appeal not only to structural similarity, but also to common history. The “catacomb” experience and ministry as minority “sects” must be seen as a unifying factor, providing common ground in the developing Protestant-Uniate dialogue. As Protestant writer, Elena Panych, wrote, “Nothing gives such a feeling of unity as the overlap of cultural and human experience...but in the Soviet state even these important factors...were second in importance to the shared experience of persecution, which believers experienced, and which gave them a feeling of not only spiritual unity, but a unity of fate.”⁹

There are dozens of stories passed down through oral history of joint services, prayers, and mutual support during Soviet repression. The sect status and marginality of the

⁸ Ibid., 359-360.

⁹ Elena Panych. “Sect or Church?” *Theological Reflections*. (“Special Edition. Bible. Theology. Church.” 2013): 274.

Protestants, and the regionalism and nationalism of the Greek Catholics, were due to the nonconformity of the active church minority. There were also attempts at fitting into the existing order, like the well-known loyalism of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians–Baptists and the self-liquidation of Greek Catholics, and their apparent union with the Orthodox Church. But even within the general Soviet order, the Church kept its otherness, at least as a “Church within the Church.” According to Natalia Shlikhta, even orthodoxized former Greek Catholics remained different within the new community: “Demonstrating for show Orthodox and Soviet loyalty, these Greek Catholics constructed a new or, as David Thompson defined it, short-lived identity, which helped them keep their own religious and national identity.”¹⁰ This otherness of the Greek Catholics became more radical in underground communities: “Taking into account the unbreakable connection between ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Soviet,’ refusing an ‘Orthodox identity’ put into question in the eyes of both Western Ukrainians and Soviet leadership their political loyalty. Emerging from the historical and ecclesiological inheritance of the UGCC, the self-identification of its members can be more correctly characterized as ‘sect,’ than ‘church’... It was more difficult for Greek Catholics than for Orthodox to resolve the conflict between Christian faith and loyalty, which was anti-religious in its essence.”¹¹

Both Protestants and Greek Catholics had an opportunity of demarginalization and restoration of their regular church practice after Ukrainian independence, but it turned out that in an “Orthodox” society, they were still perceived as inferior forms of Christianity. The Maidan protests created a new opportunity for nation-wide recognition, and also an unexpectedly rich and free experience of Protestant-Uniate unity. Religious scholars talked about the birth of a “civil Church” on the Maidan, in which confessional differences were set

¹⁰ Natalia Shlikhta. *The Church of Survivors. Soviet Ukraine, mid 1940s–early 1970-s.* (Kharkiv: AKTA, 2011), 303.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

aside for the sake of joint Christian service to society.¹² Back at the beginning of the “Revolution of Dignity,” on December 15, 2013, at the initiative of the Ukrainian Catholic University, there was a round table on “Theology in the Context of Maidan,” which included representatives of the Greek Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as Ukrainian Protestants who supported the national protest and offered a theological justification for it. Two days later, Protestants held an inter-church discussion “Maidan and the Church: A Christian’s Civil Responsibility.” These two events were the beginning of a church campaign of mass support for Maidan. They demonstrated a new understanding of the Church, unity, freedom, and responsibility. The main actors on the Maidan were not priests and Levites, but good Samaritans of various confessions, and the force that united them, recognized by Protestants, was the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

After Maidan, the confessional map of Ukraine began to change steadily. It was no longer under pressure from politicians (as with the project “One Local Orthodox Church”), but under the influence of the expectations of civil society and as a result of the activities of regular lay people. After Maidan, it was the pro-Russian churches that turned out to be sects, while pro-Ukrainian churches received recognition. It seems clear that inter-church dialogue will have an effect on self-understanding in Ukrainian society, bringing recognition that it is not only Orthodox, and it will affect the community’s perception of the Church through its various forms, and also how it is seen by “dwellers” and “seekers,” Christians near the church and unchurched.

It must be admitted that both Ukrainian Protestants and Greek Catholics kept away from ecumenical processes; even in relation to close neighbors in the Christian world, they remained closed and self-reliant. This made the publication of a document from the World Council of Churches on the importance of ecumenical dialogue in the Christian magazine,

¹² Oksana Gorkusha and Lyudmila Filipovich. “Born on the Maidan—The Civil Church of Ukraine” (http://risu.org.ua/ua/index/studios/studies_of_religions/56419/).

Theological Reflections (2014), even more noteworthy. The document, “The Church: Towards a Common Vision,” was published in 2013 and was the result of the multi-year work of the “Faith and Church Order” commission. In the document, Catholicity refers not simply to geographic reach but also to the manifold variety of local churches and their participation in the fullness of faith and life that unites them in the one *koinonia*.¹³ It is noteworthy that the last chapter, “The Church: In the World and for the World,” reveals a more ecumenical perspective than the others, because *koinonia* means openness to one another and the world, which involves not only confessing a single faith and serving together, but also sharing common moral values. Churches will be able to show the world only that which they share in Christ and consider through a process of mutual questioning and affirmation. That is why the future of ecumenical dialogue is in simultaneous service of the mission and unity of the Church, therefore it is important to find opportunities for joint responses to social issues and joint work in presenting the values of God’s Kingdom.¹⁴

The emphasis on the significance of practical ecumenism in the form of a shared social position is by no means a coincidence. The Ukrainian experience shows that unity is reached not through theological discussions but is given in response to synchronized Christian participation in extreme moments of history. The socio-political statement of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO)—a consultative advisory body which unites the main confessions of the country and in which decisions are made on the basis of consensus—became a precedent for such a shared position. The position of the AUCCRO served as a point of reference for the self-determination of entire churches and for civil choices for Christians during the “Orange Revolution” and later the “Revolution of Dignity.”

¹³ “The Church: Towards a Common Vision.” *Theological Reflections*. (“Special Issue on Contemporary Ecclesiology,” 2014): 185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 201-202.

Protestant-Uniate dialogue has significant social potential and religious inclusivity can be a factor in social plurality and dynamics. Pastor Sergey Tymchenko uses the word “synergy” when speaking of the results of Maidan for Protestants and their status as “other”: “One issue Ukrainian and Russian evangelicals need to consider is their attitude to “the other”... Interestingly, when evangelicals lose unity, they sometimes find more in common with believers of other confessions, particularly in the Slavic context with Orthodox and Eastern-Rite [Greek] Catholics who have similar socio-political perspectives. In the future, this phenomenon may lead to the development of a more complimentary, synergetic relationship among Ukrainian Christians of different confessions.”¹⁵

Orthodox theologian and director of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies, Antoine Arjakovsky, emphasizes the special role of the Church in the “Revolution of Dignity,” and the socio-political significance of this ecumenical movement: “The Churches are playing a decisive role in the Ukrainian revolution. This is apparent from the prominence in Independence Square of dozens of priests and pastors from different religious confessions who have been there every day for three months, offering to gather ecumenically with the faithful in prayer.”¹⁶ Thinking of possible repercussions of this kind of ecumenism, he puts forward a solution called the Church of Kiev: “It is a matter of an original ecclesiological construction proper to the Ukrainian space, as there existed until the end of the sixteenth century.” According to this idea, the Church can exist in communication with both the Greek and Latin worlds.¹⁷ Moreover, Arjakovsky offers to transfer the model of inner-church East-West dialogism to the outward sphere of state-church geopolitics, as a means of free and non-conflicting orientation between Europe and Russia.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sergiy Tymchenko. “The Current and Possible Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on Ukrainian Protestants.” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*. (Summer 2014. Vol. 22, No.3): 22-23.

¹⁶ Arjakovsky, Antoine. “The Role of the Churches in the Ukrainian Revolution.” *ABC Religion and Ethics*. (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/03/06/3958163.htm>)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Not only Protestantism¹⁹ but also Greek Catholicism ties Ukraine to Europe. As Ukrainian religious scholars write, “In Brest a new ‘window to Europe’ has opened wide.”²⁰ It must be admitted that in the past century, both of these windows have remained practically unused by society. Today, the European choice of Ukraine and the “Revolution of Dignity” create a demand for “Church windows” to Europe.

It is worth noting that in conditions of church crisis and the emerging “unchurched Christianity,” not only the social, but also the ecumenical potential of Protestant-Uniate relations is taking on special significance. Protestant-oriented Catholic Sergey Gradirovsky expressed in his questions the complex dialectic of church, inter-church, and non-church images of modern Christianity: “Is my movement authentic and without deceit, if I, while moving towards the Church, move away from the confessional aspects of the Church? How can I trust the ecclesiological lines of the Apostle’s Creed, to clearly, and not conditionally and symbolically, see and truly experience the ‘one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church?’”²¹

In light of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I will risk expressing the thought that the greatest Reformation, having overcome the divisive reformation, can become a unifying reformation. If in 2017, Protestants and Catholics can once again unite, this new meeting may change both, creating an unimaginable dynamic for the whole Body of Christ, recreating the universal Church in the unity of her diversity. Such an opportunity is being seriously considered—in dialogue with churches and in the personal choices of “already dwellers” of various traditions and “still seekers.” It is very much possible that the reforming closeness between the Protestants and Catholics, between Ukrainian Evangelical Protestants and Greek Catholics, will take place not on the level of theological commissions and leaders, but on the level of the every day choices of millions of “Christians of tradition,” and “just

¹⁹ I wrote in more detail on the connecting, mediatory, and transcultural role of Protestantism in my monograph, *The European Reformation and Ukrainian Evangelical Protestantism* (Kiev, 2008).

²⁰ Stokolos and Sheretyuk. *Church Drama*. 246.

²¹ Sergey Gradirovsky. “Church Archaeology.” *The Church Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. Reports from an International Theological Conference, DCU, April 25-27, 2013*. (Cherkassy: Colloquium, 2014). 42.

Christians.” An example of this is Ulf Ekman, who made a personal choice in favor of joining with the Catholic tradition, while at the same time not rejecting the spiritual blessings of Protestantism and his experience of it. By his decision, he took a step towards a common future, when “‘A Christianity of personal repentance’ and ‘a Christianity of education and tradition’—elements that were unexpected and had long-term perspective—fulfill each other. Personal and collective will in due course come together and take on their true meaning. A space will form for the free activity of the spirit and for a living and deep liturgy of services and prayer. Then individual initiatives will combine with hierarchical spiritual leadership...Internal life and social activity will mutually complete each other. Missions work and meditation will be interwoven.” Such was his description of the meeting of the two traditions within his personal life.²² It is notable that the Protestant leader did not lead his whole denomination down this path. Thereby, he addressed his gesture not so much to the hierarchy of various confessions as to regular believers and their personal choices. I think that “seekers” liked this. And not only “seekers”—thousands of members of Ukrainian “Word of Life” churches supported Ekman’s choice, while not leaving their churches. This means that they accepted the truth of Catholicism (deep roots, discovery of the mystic dimensions of Christian life, the beauty of the liturgy, etc.), while remaining Protestants. In a certain way, they could be called Roman Protestants, i.e., Protestants returning to dialogue with Rome, within the space of catholicity.

In the same way, thousands of Protestants who experienced Maidan made a personal choice to recognize the Greek Catholics as their brothers. Many pastors recognized Cardinal Lyubomir Guzar and Archbishop Svyatoslav Shevchuk as heroes of our time. Protestants and Greek Catholics were united by Evangelical values of freedom and truth, and also by active patriotism. Ukrainian Orthodox (Kiev patriarchate) believers and Roman Catholics showed

²² Ekman, *Spiritual Roots*. 366-367.

their solidarity with them. The connection between living individuals revealed a connection between the traditions of the East and West, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, as well as with “in-between,” complex, inclusive churches—Greek Catholics and the Protestants.

Clearly in the modern world, the meaning of individual choice in favor of inclusive identity and inter-church Christianity will grow, and church leaders won’t be able to control it. While before lay people asked the churches themselves (i.e., the clergy) questions about dialogue and unity among churches, now everything has changed. “Seekers” don’t ask questions, and if they do, then they answer them themselves. Church leaders have changed from answer-givers to observers. The initiative has passed to ordinary Christians. Now they are no longer asking standard questions, like, “Can we pray together with Protestants?” or “Are there born again believers among the Greek Catholics?” But rather people are asking questions seeking to understand the meaning and consequences of that which has *already* taken place: “How does understanding of the Church change, taking into account that church walls have *already* become transparent, and that a connection can be felt between several traditions at once, that the spiritual experience of unity *already* does not fit into a standard confessional framework, and the spiritual search is leading further and Christianity can be better understood not as living in a home, but as a pilgrimage?”

At the same time that Protestantism reveals its spiritual roots, depth, and history, Greek Catholicism is becoming Evangelical. Here, they can serve one another, and most importantly, our contemporaries. Simplicity and depth, the Gospel and tradition are interesting and effective together, not separately. Their dialogue is the path to unity in the Church in the diversity of her relevant concrete historical forms. Thus, Ukrainian Protestants and Greek Catholics are predestined to converge not only by historical fate and structural similarity, but by national context and cultural demand, and also the theological-ecclesiological mystery of God’s Plan for the Church and its mission in the world.

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