

## **Christ and Christian Faith are Universal, Unbound to Man-Made Frontiers**

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**Introduction.** When I was invited to present a short lecture at this meeting, I was told that we would discuss the question, whether the EuroMaidan had brought a Church union closer. This is an interesting and complicated issue. It is very much connected to the way in which we understand the dynamics between Christ – faith, Church, believers – on the one hand, and the culture, the secular world in which Christians find themselves embedded on the other. In a nutshell, here, the dialectics of *Christ and culture* come into play.

**Christ in Culture.** Thinking about this question – did the EuroMaidan push a possible Church union forward? – I remembered reading an article of a Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest in the Swiss review *Religion in der Gesellschaft in Ost und West*. It was about the Kyivan Rus' and Church in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, I misplaced that volume, so I cannot quote it, but, I remember clearly the impression it made upon me. The great emphasis that the author put on the Ukrainian aspect of Christianity in Ukraine made me think: "Hey, the Church of Christ did not start in the 9th century on the territory of present-day Ukraine. Definitely not, it started somewhere in or around the year 30, in Jerusalem."

If we speak about a Ukrainian Church or about Church union in Ukraine, we have to bear in mind that the notion "Ukrainian" emphasises merely a specific, non-essential aspect of the Church of Christ. In fact, it refers to a group of people (Christians, believers and non-believers) with more or less the same common cultural background. This adjective denotes a style, a fashion, a manner, a way of doing.

In Church, "Ukrainian" refers to specific practices, language, a type of music, art, devotions, objects, church architecture and so on. They are the historically grown attributes that externalise the Church of Christ – they are important but inadequate and always open to discussion and change.

**Thinking about this,** I could not escape the impression that Churches and ecclesiastical communities that do not belong to the Orthodox tradition have been excluded somehow from this post-Maidan unification process. Of course, I have no doubt that the Churches of the Orthodox tradition look at them as sisters and brothers in Christ, but they are still not part of it. Therefore, let me ask you. Is it legitimate to brush them aside, when speaking about a deeper meaning of the EuroMaidan? Where do the non-dominant confessions fit in the religious-national picture? And if they don't fit in, why don't they? Is it their lack of Ukrainianess? Are they excluded merely for pragmatic or for more fundamental reasons?

**Christ above Culture.** I now want to turn my attention to our question: "did the EuroMaidan advance a possible Church union?" While I have no doubt whatsoever that there was a place for the Churches at EuroMaidan and I am proud to have a prominent priest of the EuroMaidan, Father Mykhailo Dymyd, as a co-speaker, I find it rather complicated to discuss what the EuroMaidan did to promote Church union.

Of course, it is not difficult to imagine, for example, that the EuroMaidan experience had an enormous motivational and captivating effect on many people, in many strands of life, Churches and believers included. I felt a great deal of excitement myself. Who could have expected the EuroMaidan to happen in the first place?

However, and this is a more serious matter, if I try to answer our question – did the EuroMaidan bring a Church union closer? – from a non-practical perspective, I mean, from the theological perspective, my sight gets rather blurred. Here, I fail to see how the EuroMaidan could have pushed Church unity further ahead.

On the theological level things have remained the same. If we speak about Church union or ecumenism as theologians, we have to move a little bit away from the excitement and emotion. We need to ask ourselves questions, which we would have asked ourselves before the EuroMaidan and which we will be asking ourselves tomorrow as well. What does Christ want from us? What does He ask us to do? What does He want us to be?

Well, the answers are simple and clear, but far from uncomplicated. The divine will wants us to be sisters and brothers in Christ. Christ wants us to become a light in this world, i.e., to evangelise by actively contributing to the reform *in capite et in membris* of society, by contributing to a just and fair society in which the human person prospers to the fullest. By the way, here again the Ukrainianess of Ukrainian society is accidental, not essential. Justice and fairness inspired by Christianity go way beyond the national man-made frontiers and aim at the universal.

These rather simple, perhaps disappointing answers, give rise to many new questions, which are not so easy to answer at all...

When does a Church really deserve the label "Church"? What are the characteristics of a true Church? How elastic can our Christian love and patience be with partners, who take ecumenism rather lightly? Must we forgive seventy times seven those who act out of opportunistic motives or who seemingly don't care a bit about Church unity? And how to curtail believers, who fall short of Church rules and regulations?

**Light in the world.** Furthermore, the mission and duty to become messengers of light in a world of darkness requires a sincere and minute scrutiny of what the secular Ukraine might look like and of the role of the Churches in it. And here, the Churches must not refrain from self-criticism. First and foremost, because the Churches themselves have by no means escaped the evils of Ukrainian society, e.g. corruption, tax evasion, selling of religious offices, abuse of means, money, power and so on. How will the Churches reform themselves? And are they really willing to do so?

If we want to discuss the secular, the role of the Churches or Church union, insight and discernment are needed. This is a (never-ending) process of finding truth and this is the common journey that the French Father Hyacinth mentioned in his address on Tuesday 30 September, when he discussed the ecumenical thoughts of Pope Francis. When we journey together, from A to Z via B, C, D, E, F and so on, we are creating unity in diversity...

As such the EuroMaidan did not give answers to these questions – it merely puts a question mark over the future of Ukraine. The experience of the EuroMaidan, in my opinion, might provide that extra bit of inspiration to sincerely walk the path towards Church union and to examine and imagine the future of Ukraine and the role of the Churches in it – more concretely: to move beyond restricting Christ to questions of Ukrainianess, to engage in self-criticism, purification and a common search for truth.

**Caution.** We should advance with extreme caution, if we want to elevate ephemeral historical events, important they may be, to the level of divine intervention. This is, by the way, why I insisted on the Church of Christ in Ukrainian attire: assuming a one-on-one overlap of Christ and culture is a heresy.

There is a real challenge here. Taking inspiration from the little book *Christ and Culture* (1951) by the American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, I want to define this challenge as follows. A Church which has a great affinity with national culture and which wants to define itself as a national Church should critically evaluate these claims and create adequate space and opportunities within its body to subject those affinities and definitions to critical evaluation.

If Churches fail to take a critical stance in this respect, they will compromise themselves greatly, rather sooner than later. As did the Christian Churches during WW1 and WW2 – Professor Graham Ward reminded us thereof just a few days ago– and as the Russian Orthodox Church is doing right now.

After all, let us not delude ourselves. This is a real risk for all Churches, for all believers and for all men. Always and in all circumstances, we are the same people **with the same** defects as those who came before us and our human nature is suffering from the same.

### **In short**

1. Christ and Christian faith are universal, unbound to man-made frontiers.
2. They are treasures confided to us.
3. We cannot mould these treasures according to our free will.
4. Christian faith was reshaped not invented in Ukraine. Christ and culture may happily meet and mix, but the first maintains **His** precedence over the latter.
5. Consequently, the adjective “Ukrainian” emphasises merely a specific, non-essential aspect of the Church of Christ.
6. The future of the Church of Christ in Ukraine and the future of Ukraine as a nation are not blueprints, which Churches or politicians can take from a drawer and then implement. The future is a hazardous journey, where unity and diversity are being recreated in an endless process. Here insight and discernment are needed.
7. Churches must subject their own prepositions to critical evaluation over and over again.