

MORAL GUARDIAN OR KENOTIC SERVANT? A THEOLOGICAL VIEW ON THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY IN UKRAINE

by Heleen Zorgdrager

Dr. Heleen Zorgdrager is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, and delegated lecturer at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies, Ukrainian Catholic University, L'viv. She was earlier on the staff of Kerk in Actie, service and mission arm of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, with responsibilities for relations with churches in eastern Europe. This article is based on a paper presented during the 5th Ecumenical Social Week in L'viv, at an academic conference on "The Future of Democracy in Ukraine, Sept. 24-25, 2012.

Since the change of power in Ukraine in 2009, the development of democracy is under threat. Under the administration of Viktor Yanukovich, corruption has taken on alarming proportions, and freedom of speech and media is increasingly curtailed. Ukraine's former prime minister and leading opposition figure Yulia Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years in prison, in a politically motivated trial in October 2011. From behind bars she stated: 'Yanukovich is fully in control. There is no separation of the legislative, executive and judicial powers in the country. He wants to be the tsar of the country and establish a dictatorship.'¹ Two other ministers of the former government are imprisoned as well, found guilty by the court of abuse of office. Many people feel disappointed and frustrated after the hopes that were raised during the Orange Revolution in 2004.

With these events in mind, the question arises: how are the churches in Ukraine responding to the crisis in the country? More specifically I would like to focus on the role of churches in building and empowering civil society in post-communist Ukraine. Civil society here is understood as the 'third sector', distinct from state and market, referring essentially to the so-called intermediary institutions and associations in which people voluntarily participate and that give voice to various sectors of society and enrich public participation in democracies. As for the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, building a strong, conscious and critical civil society is generally considered as vitally important for successful democratic development.

Since 2005 I have been blessed to teach Ecumenical Theology at the dynamic Ukrainian Catholic University in the beautiful town of L'viv (Lvov). From that unique position I would like to share some observations and thoughts. I offer these for further ecumenical debate, as someone who feels personally engaged with the developments in Ukraine.

This article presents three models which have appeared in contemporary theology for depicting the relationships of church and state. I will argue that the third model is the most appropriate in a modern democracy. Secondly, I will bring the theory into critical dialogue with practice by discussing and evaluating some concrete cases of Ukrainian church interventions in society and politics in the light of the theories presented. In a final "perspectives" section, I will offer some proposals on how churches could be most fruitful, in my view, with regard to empowering civil society.

Given the Ukrainian situation of confessional pluralism, I will speak consequently about

¹ Yulia Tymoshenko in her 'Appeal to parliamentarians and leaders of democratic countries, international organizations that work to strengthen freedom, and to all Ukrainians of the world' on September 21, 2012. Source: www.kyivpost.com

the churches in the plural. It is typical for Ukraine that the confessional and religious landscape is marked by diversity. There is not one clear majority church, like in most neighboring countries.² The Orthodox Church on the territory of Ukraine is divided, because of controversies with regard to belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church and the desire for a national Ukrainian Church. Alongside the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate there is the - not canonically recognized - Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the - not canonically recognized - Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church. A further major church is the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, in particular in the west of the country. Protestant churches (Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, evangelical and charismatic groups) are relatively small: however, on the whole they are growing the fastest, and are spread all over the country. From the other religions Islam, mainly concentrated in the south of Ukraine among the Crimean Tatar population, and Jewish religion, with communities in the larger cities, should be mentioned³

Three Models

What should be the role of church institutions in an emerging, still very unstable and threatened democracy such as Ukraine? What is the role of the churches in relation to other agents in civil society, such as political parties, NGOs, media, labor unions, citizen advocacy organizations, women and youth organizations, educational institutions, etc.? Contemporary theology offers us different options for the role of churches in a modern plural state.

1. Among theologians, there are still adherents of the **theocratic model**. The assumption behind this model is that Christian faith necessarily has a totalitarian pretention, namely to establish the rule of God in all domains of life. The law of God is believed to be beneficial and good for all people. The church should work for the Christianization of the culture in the perspective of a new theocratic order. The church, knowing about the revelation of God and having access to the true moral principles, has to guide the people to the right ideas about the development of human personality and social organization. We find this model, for instance, in circles of fundamentalist Protestants and in the social doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴ It is also the underlying principle of the so-called Byzantine model of 'symphony' between church and state.

2. A second model is the church as a '**contrast community**.' This model is presented by Stanley Hauerwas, the influential Methodist theologian from the USA. In the book *Resident Aliens* (1989)⁵ he proposes the model of the church as an entity critically opposed to modern society. Hauerwas emphasizes the strangeness of the Gospel. Christians are not called to establish God's Kingdom on earth; they are citizens of a heavenly nation, 'resident aliens'. The church community's primary task is to sanctify the lives of the believers. Let the church be truly a church, without any political agenda of its own, is the advice of Hauerwas. As a 'contrast community' the Christian community shall witness to the Gospel in a critical opposition to modern culture. Hauerwas himself is a pacifist and deeply critical of American-Christian patriotism. The 'contrast community'

² See Myroslav Marynovych, 'Religious plurality and diversity in their application to Ukraine', in eds. Miklos Tomka and Andriy Yurash, *Challenges of Religious Plurality for Eastern and Central Europe* (Lviv, 2006), 28-32.

³ Some figures: Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (20.4 % of the population); Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (30.1%); Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (1.5%); Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (7.8 %); Protestants (nearly 1 %). Source: Survey Conducted on Church Membership in Ukraine, 29.01.2007, <http://old.risu.org.ua/eng/news/article;13940/> (accessed on October 10, 2012).

⁴ Expressed in the documents 'Social teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church' (2000) and 'Basic Teaching on Dignity, Freedom and Rights of Human Beings' (2008).

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 1989); see also *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael D. Cartwright (Duke University Press, 2001).

is a kind of prophetic sign. The church appears in his vision as a 'city on top of the hill that cannot remain hidden' (Matthew 5, 14). However, critics believe that Hauerwas' ecclesiology is more like building a castle in the air.

3. A third model is represented by a modern revision of the so-called **Two Kingdom doctrine** of St Augustine and Martin Luther. The Two Kingdom doctrine in its classical form distinguishes between the heavenly and the earthly kingdom. The separate domains of the church and the world entail different responsibilities. The church is not called to realize the *civitas dei*, the city of God, on Earth. That is solely the work of God. Church and world meet each other in the 'interface' of the state. In the state we cooperate for the sake of the common good. The Christian is called to accept his/her responsibility as a citizen of the state, and to act accordingly to promote peace in the world and the common good, without an (open or more hidden) theocratic agenda.

The Dutch theologian Gerrit de Kruijf has modernized the Two Kingdom doctrine for the role of the church in a democratic, plural society. He calls his model '**thinking twice**'.⁶ As Christians we should always think twice about any issue in political life: one time on the basis of our own principles of faith, and one time on the basis of the minimal level of necessary consensus with others in the state. In the church community we learn to be good Christians. In the democratic political arena, however, the church should not impose its religious and moral norms on others as that would make the church a totalitarian institution.

This position is not just pragmatic. De Kruijf gives a strong theological argument: the Christian ethos calls for peaceful coexistence with others and working for the common good. The church does this in the awareness that it is not the church's task to realize the *civitas dei*, for it is God who promises: 'I shall make all things new.' In this eschatological perspective, the church shall not hold any political form, or its own moral and religious worldviews as being the absolute truth. The basic confession of the church that *Jesus Christ* is the way, the truth and the life (John 14, 6) is a permanent correction of the church's own beliefs about the way, the truth and the life. Therefore it is the task of the church to pray without ceasing and to give thanks for all things.

Certainly, in political matters, the church keeps in mind 'the things that are above'. And it believes in the universal scope of these 'things above', namely that the Gospel proclaims good news for all people. But the church cannot impose on others to share the same faith. The participation of the Christian community in a democratic state does not consist in boldly promoting Christian positions, but in seeking consensus for the sake of peace and the common good.

Thus the ethical question for the Christian community in a democracy is: *on what can we agree while maintaining respect for the religious convictions of others?* It is not the role of the church to dominate the moral debate with a religious principle; neither shall some general secular principle dominate the debate. "The point for moral discourse must not be some master principle, but whatever 'shared understanding' – whatever shared particular beliefs – can be located among the interlocutors."⁷

The German theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Graf⁸ puts it firmly: in the religious landscape there is not a kind of bird's eye view exceeding the different positions. No clerical institution

⁶ Gerrit de Kruijf, *Waakzaam en nuchter. Over christelijke ethiek in een democratie* (Baarn: ten Have, 1994). ['Watchful and Sober. On Christian Ethics in a Democracy'] English publications by Gerrit de Kruijf are "The Christian in the Crowded Public Square. The Hidden Tension between Prophecy and Democracy," in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (Washington, 1991) 21-42; "The Challenge of a Public Theology," in M.E. Brinkman, ed. *Theology between Church, University, and Society*, STAR 6 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 139-148.

⁷ M.J. Perry, *Morality, Politics, and Law* (New York/Oxford, 1988).

⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Moses Vermächtnis. Über göttliche und menschliche Gesetze* (München: Verlag C.H.Beck, 2006); *Missbrauchte Götter. Zum Menschenbilderstreit in der Moderne* (München, Verlag C.H.Beck, 2009).

should pretend to have such a bird's eye view from which to decide authoritatively on questions of truth. The Law of God exists in a plurality of interpretations. No one can claim to have the monopoly on the Law of God. This applies to the Christian community as well. There is not one Christendom but many 'micro-Christendoms' in the modern age, displaying a diversity of moral attitudes (Peter Brown).⁹ What is most important is that we learn, inside and outside the church, the art of coping with our differences.

The model of 'thinking twice' is in line with Charles Taylor, the Canadian, Roman Catholic philosopher who advocates in his book *A Secular Age*¹⁰ a new approach towards secularism. Secularism, properly understood, is the principle that there is no single ideology or single religious view which covers everything. We have to respect them all. Taylor is committed to the idea of tolerance towards religions and worldviews, and to the idea of human beings as contesting agents, always situated in conflict and thereby deserving of individual rights. The mission of Christians in the world today is "not rushing out and saying listen to me, but living it," and to become as fully Christian as possible and the best citizens possible.¹¹

Practices

What can we learn from these cases about the opportunities for, and limitations of, the role of churches with regard to politics and civil society? Here are four practical cases, drawn from contemporary Ukraine, to illustrate and discuss the models above.

In the run up to the elections for the Verkhovna Rada (National Parliament) on October 28, 2012, I was pleased to read that major churches in Ukraine called on priests and bishops to **abstain from any agitation and participation in the election campaign**. They called on lay people to vote freely according to their conscience. This is a convincing example of how churches can respect the democratic procedures, and honor the secular, neutral character of a pluralist state. There are exceptions to the rule, however. For example, the press recently reported that patriarch Filaret, head of the Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, had stated that his church advises its parishioners to vote for parties and candidates "defending Ukrainian interests", which means first of all the Ukrainian language. The patriarch noted that "our principle is non-interference in politics," however, the UOC-KP "cares about the way that Ukraine is going to go."¹² This clear voting advice goes against the principle of autonomy of the political domain and against the idea that Christians bear their own, inalienable responsibility as citizens of the state.

A second example nicely shows how churches can support civil society without imposing itself authoritatively into the social-political landscape, but instead by **strengthening the role of the lay people** in the life and mission of the church. Empowering lay men and women is a core piece of the program 'The Vibrant Parish - A Place to Encounter the Living Christ,' which was

⁹ For example, Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. 2nd ed. The Making of Europe. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003; or Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 Ad*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. Recognizing Brown as highly respected historian of Christian antiquity, reviewer Garry Wills (*New York Review of Books*, Oct. 11, 2012, 43-45 underlined how Brown models a more carefully differentiated treatment of the 'Christendom', where its primary myths "have by now evaporated". Seeking to bear witness, not to control or dominate, was essentially the centuries long stance of oriental and eastern Orthodoxy, even if forgotten by key leaders at times.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Interview with Charles Taylor on the website of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (www.risu.org.ua), July 9, 2012, during his visit to the Ukrainian Catholic University in L'viv. 'Charles Taylor: "There is no Single Religion or Ideology which Covers Everybody."' The Ukrainian translation of his book *A Secular Age* will appear next year in the publishing house Duh-i-Litera in Kyiv.

¹² News report on www.ris.org.ua, September 17, 2012.

initiated by Patriarch Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church and approved by the Bishop's Synod in 2011. I cannot emphasize enough how the empowerment and spiritual formation of lay people is an appropriate response to the challenges of living as a Christian community in a plural society. This project aims at making the believers responsible, capable, democratic citizens, in the sense of Charles Taylor, who can take up their responsibilities as professionals in society. Lay people are the social capital of churches. The project will inevitably have further consequences. Churches shall have to respect diversity also within its own walls, promoting transparency in government and the participation of all members in decision making and in shaping the moral debate. By doing so, churches will offer a shining example to other institutions.

As a third example from Ukraine today, I point to the fact that Ukrainian churches are returning in an impressive way to **social ministry**. The annual Ecumenical Social Weeks in L'viv and its Round Tables in other cities¹³ testify of the revitalization of the social ministry in prisons, orphanages, among alcoholics and drug addicts, and among the poor and marginalized people of society. This revitalization should be greatly welcomed. One key question, however, arises from the model of 'thinking twice': Does the church's practice of social ministry always respect the fine line between, on the one hand, 'assistance to those who are in need, unconditionally' and, on the other hand, the eagerness to evangelize and recruit new members for the church? Social ministry carried out honestly with respect for those who are in desperate conditions, and in trustful cooperation with other actors in civil society, should never be driven by the agenda of 'conversion.' We have to reflect anew and profoundly on the ethics of witnessing.

My fourth case is the recent discussion about the '**National Expert Committee on the Protection of Public Morality**' (NEC). The National Parliament discussed Bill 10447, which envisages the liquidation of the National Expert Committee (NEC). Churches were furiously against this bill. The heads of the Ukrainian churches (gathered in AUCCRO – All Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations) stressed the necessity of preserving the 'National Expert Committee on the Protection of Public Morality.' Churches work closely with the NEC, based on a Memorandum of Cooperation signed on December 16, 2008.¹⁴ The Yanukovich government had planned to install instead a government-appointed 'National Commission for Protecting Public Morality', which would have much wider powers than the current NEC. For instance, it could close Internet sites or social networks without any court order if they are considered to harm public morality.

Specialists in legal matters, however, had already profoundly criticized the now valid Law on the Protection of Public Morality (2004), which is the legislative framework for the NEC. The Council of Europe considers this law to be a "disproportionate interference of public officials in freedom of expression."¹⁵ To my surprise, there are no signs that church leaders ever considered this to be a problem. In his letter of appeal to the President of Ukraine (December 14, 2010), his Beatitude Lubomyr (Husar), the former head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, wrote quite positively that by 'joint efforts' the NEC and the Council of Churches "implemented several measures that enjoyed considerable social support that helped establish the proper level of morality

¹³ Information about the Ecumenical Social Weeks in Ukraine, see <http://esweek.org.ua>

¹⁴ See the 'Letter of His Beatitude Lubomyr Husar to President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich,' December 14, 2010. This letter can be found at: <http://www.ugcc.org.ua/1547.0.html?&L=2>

¹⁵ "Make freedom of expression a reality, Mr. President." A Report on Press Freedom in Ukraine, 1-3 April 2012,' under the authority of WAN-IFRA, p. 6. This is the report of a recent mission on Press Freedom in Ukraine, conducted by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). It states that 'voluntary self-regulation [by journalist associations] is preferable to the alternative, which is either no regulation or a state regulator.'

in the society and promoted interdenominational and interethnic accord and understanding."¹⁶

I looked for concrete measures which churches and the NEC had implemented. Their efforts do not address corruption, racism, or xenophobia, things which are considered by human rights reports as real dangers in Ukrainian society.¹⁷ The examples that I found were: the criminal case against the artist-activist and blogger Alexander Volodarsky (2009), the shutting down of the exhibition 'Apocalypse and Renaissance at the Chocolate House' in Kyiv (June 2012), and the criminal case against the editorial staff of a newspaper for the gay community ('Gay Ua'). All these interventions were a form of cultural censorship, which used the judiciary system as an instrument for political purposes. The principle of freedom of expression was violated, without allowing any public debate on the issues.

I observed a similar attitude in April this year when the heads of churches, in a personal meeting, called on president Yanukovich to use his powers to prohibit the Gay Pride parade in Kyiv.¹⁸ (In the same meeting, by the way, they urged the President to pardon Yulia Tymoshenko and to liberate her from further punishment.) It should be noted that the LGBT community had already received official permission from the authorities for the demonstration. Thus, the churches were trying to overrule democratic procedures. In the end, the Gay Pride march could not take place. About 140 persons, who had registered in advance for the parade in order to secure a safe and peaceful demonstration, were hindered from going on the streets on May 20, 2012, because of severe aggression and violence by religious and nationalist groups. The concern and indignation of the churches appeared to be quite selective; afterwards, I never heard any condemnation by the heads of churches of the violence and threats used against those who wanted to peacefully demonstrate for their civil rights on that day.¹⁹

I do not present this example to make the point that the Ukrainian churches should change their teaching on homosexuality. What they teach is, with all respect, up to them. The issue at stake, I would like to stress, is that churches in all cases ought to be truly committed to the democratic rules of the game. Churches are transgressing the ethical boundaries when they apply undemocratic methods and strategies to impose their ideas of a Christian ethos on society.²⁰ In a democratic society, churches are agents among others, and bring in their beliefs as others do. Public morality in a democracy can only be shaped by a discourse that is transparent, public and inclusive.

¹⁶ See note 9.

¹⁷ See for instance the report 'Hate Crimes' by the Kharkiv Human Rights Group, June 15, 2012, and '2011 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', published by the US Department of State.

¹⁸ News report on www.risu.org.ua, April 11, 2012: 'Heads of Churches Call on President to Prevent Actions of Propaganda of Homosexuality in Kyiv.'

¹⁹ I agree with Andrew Sorokowski, expert and column writer for the website of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (www.risu.org.ua, column on May 20, 2012), who poses: 'It must be remembered that in Ukraine, the main challenge with regard to homosexuals and other sexual non-conformists is to protect them from violence as well as from discrimination in education, jobs, and civil rights. Parades and other forms of expression in their defense should be not only tolerated, but welcomed and supported.'

²⁰ Allow me here to point to a possible inner tension in the moral teaching of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church as it is expressed in its moral catechism: *Life in Christ* (L'viv, 2004). In section 275 we find a clear recognition of the autonomy of the political domain; the church should not interfere in political matters. But in the next section, 276, which continues the reflection on church and state, an exception is made for moral and religious matters. 'The church is obliged to speak, to instruct, to express its opinion, to *decide also* on matters concerning morals' [italics by the author of this article]. It provides an opening to bypass democratic procedures for the sake of promoting the church's view of morality in society. This happened, for example, also in the 'Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Ukraine,' signed by Patriarch Sviatoslav on April 19, 2012, in which the Greek-Catholic and Roman-Catholic bishops call directly upon the government of Ukraine to make abortion illegal. Their main argument: 'No human law can contradict a divine law of God.' Source: <http://www.lifesitenews.com/resources/eliminating-abortion-pro-life-letter-from-the-catholic-bishops-of-ukraine>

Perspectives

In conclusion, I see a great role for churches in empowering and facilitating the moral deliberation process in civil society. In this process, of course, churches disclose the rich spiritual and moral traditions in which they are rooted. Churches, however, can never prescribe the law to adult, modern citizens; they are far more successful when they encourage and empower (through catechesis, pastoral ministry, and social teaching) the faithful to think and act as free, responsible, moral subjects.

By engaging in the public debate with many contesting views, and in the dynamics of political power, society will arrive at the minimal consensus that is attainable in the given situation. This will result in law-making, which is always a temporary compromise. It may not look ideal, but I want to argue with De Kruijf and with Taylor that such a practice is better, even more Christian, than a patronizing church imposing its views on the whole society. There is and should remain a difference between the church as an educator and as a patron.

The Christian community, in Ukraine and in my country, the Netherlands, is warmly invited to affirm life and to promote social cohesion. Let us do this by respecting the democratic procedures that allow us to live together with many others as a nation, as a society. Instead of acting as a moral guardian, the church may take on with grace and beauty the role of kenotic servant. We have a great example to follow: Jesus Christ.

'The Son of Man did not come to be a slave master, but a slave who will give his life to rescue many people' (Matthew 20:28).