

Holodomor 1933–2008: Some Preliminary Principles for Theological Reflection on the Ukrainian Terror-Famine

At a time when the world faces the very real prospects of a renewed attempt by the leadership of a now oil-rich Russia to re-establish its empire, it is hardly surprising that so few in that country have deigned to recognize the genocidal intent or the genocidal effect of the Terror-Famine of 1933. Given the fact that so many in Ukraine were involved somehow in the machinery of the all-encompassing Soviet state and the Communist party, there is a certain measure of ambivalence even among portions of Ukraine's own population about whether one should condemn everything that was done under Soviet rule, and so there are those – admittedly a minority – who are reluctant to label the Terror-Famine a genocide. None of that is surprising, really, even seventy-five years later. The history and politics of that part of the world are that complex.

What is perhaps a bit more surprising is that there has been so little in the way of real theological reflection about the Holodomor. To be sure, there have been plenty of sermons at thousands of memorial prayer services, some of them moving, some of them cloying in their sentimentality, some revolting in their calls for revenge. It is the last category that probably came the closest to being theological or at least biblical, even if they never made it into New Testament discourse. These services, with their often uneven preaching, were accompanied over the years by hundreds of those ghastly modern “addresses to God” – prayers that start with references to the Lord's omniscience and then go on to remind Him of all the things that He just might need to be enlightened about, including the horrors of a genocide in which food was used as the ultimate weapon. There were also pastoral letters issued by the hierar-

chy of the various Ukrainian Churches on the mournful anniversaries of the Holodomor, but most of the time these simply – and understandably – called on the community to remember and to gather for prayer, and they admirably accomplished what they set out to do.

It behoves a people facing evil in such immense proportions as the Terror-Famine of 1933 to do some theological reflection. This is by no means an easy thing to do. God and such raw evil somehow do not belong together in the same thought. It rankles the soul. That is why the prosperity gospel is such a good sell time and time again. Deuteronomic justice is a lot simpler than the complexities of Job or the rest of Wisdom literature. If you are good, God will bless you; and if you are evil, God will punish you. It is all so very nice and clean, and it makes for such compelling advertising copy, but alas it has little to do with actual experience.

The Israelites caught on pretty early to the fact that God's blessings sometimes come in the guise of adversity and vice versa. A case in point is the story of Joseph being sold into slavery only to become the salvation of his people and, at the same time, of the Egyptians who unfortunately would be their eventual enslavers. It was from among their royal line that their further emancipator would hide in time. (If only one always had the leisure to take the long view!) Now it is important to note that the Ukrainians also were rather quick to recognize that seeming defeat may in fact be victory, *if* one's faith is right.

The story to remember here is also one of brothers and treachery, but the divine blessing is of an entirely different kind. In the first generation after the baptism of the Kyivans under St. Volodymyr the Great in 988, one of his sons, Sviatopolk, decided that some of his brothers needed to be eliminated because they were politically inexpedient, impediments to his accession to the most important throne of the realm, in Kyiv, the capital of Rus'. Boris and Hlib, as the chronicles tell us, could have resisted their brother's aggression, but did not, dispersing their military retainer so as

to avoid useless battle, and offering their brother no resistance. They were unceremoniously slain.

To a newly Christian populace these two princes became the very embodiment of what it meant to be disciples of Jesus. They so identified themselves with the King of Kings who could have defended himself but did not, going to the cross instead, that they too emptied themselves, achieving a newfound glory far beyond that of earthly princes. For soon afterwards the places of their innocent deaths became wonderworking sites of healing and their relics the first venerated in Rus'. Thus was born the category of Eastern Slavic saints known as Passion-Bearers, whose unique qualification is that they did not defend themselves, but died innocently. The nomenclature, of course, was simply a synonym for martyrs, but to qualify for the newly re-defined title of passion-bearer one did not have to be asked to deny one's faith in Christ as the martyr did. One simply had to refuse to defend oneself. The essence of martyrdom was still there, of course, since the Greek word *martus* means "witness." One could witness to what one believed by claiming to be one with Christ at a critical juncture when everything hinged on it; or one could demonstrate the same by identifying with the humbled and rejected Jesus who would not defend himself on Golgotha.

The point I am leading up to is that this kenotic spirituality, this recognition of something absolutely essential in the believer's identification with the humiliated Christ, is central to Kyivan Christianity. It is what has enabled the Ukrainian people to deal with the horrors of a history defined much more by defeat and humiliation than victory and glory over the last thousand years. Those that see only the gold domes and the opulent interiors of Ukrainian churches fail to realize that for the vast majority of Ukrainian believers this incredible beauty of the church and its liturgy has often been the one steadily beautiful thing in their intensely difficult lives. Critics may assail me for undervaluing Ukrainian folk culture or Ukrainian landscapes. I would simply counter that these have been overwhelmed by monstrous events, from the Mongol onslaught to the suc-