

## **East European Missions Perestroika and Orthodox-Evangelical Tensions**

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In November 1986 the new secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, gave a typical, hard line speech in Tashkent on the harmful influence of religion and the need for renewed vigilance against it. However, just a year and a half later, in April 1988, Gorbachev agreed to a public meeting with Patriarch Pimen. On this occasion an avowed atheist, Gorbachev, extolled the patriotic and moral virtues fostered by the Russian Orthodox Church through a thousand years!

This rapid reversal on religion by a Communist head of state had no precedent. Yet the Soviet relaxation of restrictions on freedom of conscience, which this televised encounter symbolized, proved to be but a small foretaste of wholly unanticipated, cataclysmic developments that soon would rock the globe, namely, the collapse in 1989 of every Soviet bloc state in Eastern Europe, and in 1991 the demise of the Soviet Communist Party and of the Soviet Union itself.

In turn, the world of East European missions has been transformed in the wake of these extraordinary political upheavals. Five developments in particular deserve consideration:

1. mission restructuring;
2. mission expansion;
- 3.-4. greater and more effective mission cooperation coexisting with a proliferation of mission mavericks and their miscues; and
5. mission specialization.

### 1. Restructuring

In the independently minded world of evangelical missions a certain amount of flux is always to be expected in the form of personnel and programmatic realignments, mergers, splits, relocations, and redefinitions of goals. But as the Soviet Union struggled with perestroika (restructuring), the world of East European missions underwent major restructuring itself. Times of great flux hardly are conducive to doing things as they always have been done. As a consequence many ministries caught up in the extraordinary new opportunities experienced unexpected turbulence adjusting to the times. Two major East European ministries, for example, suffered serious internal schism in part because of debates over how much of their operation, personnel, and administration should be located in-country. Also, some portion of donors, consciously or unconsciously, have contributed to missions focused on Communist lands out of a desire to undermine evil empires. Such support is evaporating very quickly. It appears that this political reaction has contributed to the post-Soviet financial struggles of British-based Keston Institute, for years a leading center for the study of religion in Communist countries.

## 2. Expansion

While recent administrative restructuring and refocus have proven difficult, particularly for older East European ministries, the sudden removal of political barriers has precipitated a dramatic increase in the number of missions. As a consequence of glasnost (greater openness) East European ministries rose from approximately 150 in 1982, to 206 in 1986, to 311 in 1989, to 691 in 1993, to over 750 today. In addition, quite a few ministries with worldwide programs have made substantial shifts in their allocation of personnel and resources to former Soviet bloc countries. Since 1987 such has been the case for the United Bible Societies, Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, Navigators, World Vision, and Youth With A Mission, to name a few. Such shifts in priorities partly explain the more prominent profile of Protestants in the East-and growing opposition to them. In addition, the reallocation of ministry resources to former Soviet bloc states is producing anxiety in Two Thirds World missions as their portion of funding declines.

The collapse of Marxist governments has also prompted restructuring and expansion in Evangelical churches as well. Presumably for administrative convenience and control Stalin forced the merger of Protestant denominations in the U.S.S.R. and superimposed a top-down, centralized command structure. That has now collapsed in the former Soviet Union due to centrifugal ethnic, regional, and theological forces. In the place of one all-union Protestant denomination in 1986, 29 now function in the 15 post-Soviet republics. (See Appendix.) And the number is likely to increase.

One of the most dramatic and unexpected developments among Evangelicals in the Soviet Union in the wake of glasnost has been the explosion of independent, grassroots mission enterprises outside existing church structures. Younger Christians especially took the initiative to establish parachurch organizations focusing on a host of causes: evangelism; Christian publishing; compassion ministries in hospitals, orphanages, prisons, and soup kitchens; and professional associations for Christian lawyers, doctors, artists, and entrepreneurs. To date sociologist Sharon Linzey has identified 2,458 such groups in the former Soviet Union. Even if half this number comprise quite modest, semi-autonomous mission committees of single churches, the other half include a striking number of quite sizeable efforts. For example, three groups founded in 1988-89, *Svet Evangeliya* (Light of the Gospel) in Rovno, the Latvian Christian Mission in Riga, and the *Vozmozhnost'* (Possibility) Mission in Donetsk, alone support 540 full- and part-time workers in evangelism, publishing, and charitable concerns.

The outreach of these indigenous groups and that of Western parachurch ministries such as Campus Crusade, Navigators, InterVarsity, and the CoMission, fosters the formation of autonomous churches that in many cases are not joining the formerly all encompassing Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. These new church fellowships appeal to "new converts who are put off on the one hand by Orthodox hierarchs and priests whose democratic credentials many do not trust, and on the other hand by Baptist legalism and lack of cultural sophistication."

## 3. and 4. Greater Cooperation and More Mavericks

Observers of ministry trends in former Soviet bloc countries have had to deal with the paradox of a growing number of unusually productive missions partnerships coexisting with a host of poorly prepared mission mavericks making disturbing miscues at nearly every turn. As regards cooperation, the world of Protestant East European missions, notorious for lone rangers and secretiveness, managed to take glasnost to heart quickly. For example, in 1987-89 alone, various cooperative agreements to expedite Bible deliveries involved at least 28 separate denominations, missions, and Bible societies. And public East European ministry meetings to facilitate networking, information sharing, and cooperation numbered at least 16 in 1990-91. More recent collaborative efforts include the formation of seven new national evangelical alliances and eleven new Bible societies in former East bloc states; the CoMission involving 85 agencies in a program of Christian ethics and outreach in post-Soviet public schools; the Alliance for Saturation Church Planting (AD 2000, World Team, Slavic Gospel Association, DAWN, and United World Mission); Albanian Encouragement Project involving 65 groups; Russian Ministries' multi-mission Project 250 to train indigenous evangelists (RM, TEAM, CB International, World Team); and a cooperative Russian theological textbook project for the benefit of over 50 new Protestant seminaries and Bible institutes (RM, Overseas Council for Theological Education and Missions, the Maclellan Foundation, and the Institute for East-West Christian Studies).

Unfortunately, the entrance of literally hundreds of new missions into former Soviet bloc countries simultaneously has confounded the prospects for meaningful cooperation. The more independently minded new players tend to advance pre-packaged programs that take little account of the cultural context. Too often a wild West, free spirit, lone ranger approach to preaching ends in what might be called hit and run evangelism with its neglect of discipling for new believers and its inattention to genuine partnerships with existing churches.

Gross cultural insensitivity on the part of too many Western and Korean ministries stems in no small measure from inadequate or nonexistent country-specific orientation: little or no study of the region's history, literature, and language. Ministry orientation frequently focuses on what might be called generic preparation, that is, the cultivation of skills and outlooks applicable to any cross cultural experience from Papua New Guinea to Poland, to the neglect of an adequate entre to the specific country of destination. Many Russians as a consequence take deep offense at Western witnesses who all too often display a profound ignorance of the Orthodox Church, of literary giants such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and of landmarks of Russian history as fundamental as the conversion of Rus, the emancipation of the serfs, or the Revolutions of 1917. They also observe Western missionaries who champion in one and the same breath Christ crucified, market economics, and Western democracy. Such missionary miscues, which result at least in part from inadequate preparation, not only undermine Christian witness, but fuel the growing red-brown (Communist-nationalist) antagonism toward any Western influence in Russia.

## 5. Specialization

Recognizing post-Communist missions miscues, and recalling the region's longstanding tradition of state churches identified with particular nationalities, one can more readily explain the genesis of various legislative measures to curb Western missionary activity. But the fact of ill-advised and ill-informed Christian witness is only part of the explanation for reaction. Communists, nationalists, and the hierarchs of former state churches also oppose Evangelical missionaries because they just as often are warm, winsome, and loving as they are brash, brazen, and culturally clueless. Opposition, then, is as much a function of what Evangelicals are doing right as it is of what they are doing wrong. It may be argued that so many ministries are having such a beneficial effect, in so many places, in so many ways, that Evangelical detractors cannot tolerate it. As a result they seek to restrict freedom of conscience by erecting political barriers to "non-traditional" faiths.

In the meantime large numbers of Western ministries are making an impact for the good in former Soviet bloc countries through all manner of specialized assistance: a) facilitating in-country radio broadcasting, publishing, and film and video production; b) partnering with nationals to provide Sunday school to seminary level training; and c) sharing expertise in marriage, family, youth, prison, alcohol, and drug counseling; d) and introducing sports, camping, and drama ministries, to name just a sampling of the burgeoning kaleidoscope of Western Evangelical endeavors.

That many Orthodox see such efforts as pernicious rather than praiseworthy necessitates a deeper look at Orthodox-Evangelical interaction. "When we say 'the Church' we always mean the Orthodox Church and no other," reported one respondent in a mid-1980s poll conducted in the Soviet Union by Russian emigre Eugene Grosman. "It has been established by Christ, and has had no deviations, neither left nor right. All the rest are false churches or sects that went astray." In the same survey Russian Evangelicals typically voiced opinions just as intolerant, dismissing Orthodoxy as "a dead Church" with "drunkards" for priests. "They know how to cross themselves, and nothing else....Worshipping those icons, lighting the candles, praying for the dead, it's all idolatry." In the Russian Empire and in the Soviet era most grassroots Protestants and Orthodox rarely moved beyond such negative stereotypical images of each other. And it is no different today-arguably worse-as more and more Western ministries work in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. These days, the mutual tolerance and respect among Western Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox, built up painfully over centuries, frequently evaporates in a flash in the cauldron of ethnic and confessional strife now raging from the Balkans to the Baltics to Siberia.

Most Western Protestants give little if any thought to Orthodoxy, not out of hostility, but out of ignorance. In the United States, approximately three million Orthodox equal better-known Mormons numerically, but have a marginal impact upon American society. Some U.S. Orthodox fear that nominalism may explain much of their invisibility. Also, northern urban industrial cultural ghettos hide many Orthodox from view.

Evangelicals' unfamiliarity with Orthodoxy also stems in part from a lack of appropriate literature. In contrast to an abundance of contemporary Orthodox writing in the West

concerning Protestantism, a scarcity exists of contemporary Evangelical perspectives on Orthodoxy. Perhaps the fact that Orthodoxy in the West has had to contend with a far larger Protestant presence explains its attention to what sets it apart from Reformation churches.

In contrast, Protestants have focused attention on Orthodoxy only sporadically.

- ⌚ ▪ In the sixteenth century, Anglicans saw Orthodox as natural allies against papal claims to church leadership.
- ⌚ ▪ Calvinists and Anglicans profoundly influenced Patriarch Cyril Lukaris (1572-1638), although his Protestant leanings scandalized the Orthodox world and led to his condemnation as a heretic.
- ⌚ ▪ John Wesley had a deep and abiding appreciation for Eastern church fathers.
- ⌚ ▪ Various mainline Protestant denominations conduct ongoing bilateral theological dialogues with the Orthodox.
- ⌚ ▪ Individual Protestant scholars such as Jaroslav Pelikan and James Stamoolis have written their share of perceptive academic studies of Orthodox history and theology.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Protestants, from the sixteenth century on, have had little contact with, or understanding of, Eastern Orthodoxy. Underscoring the point, a 1991 handbook of United States higher education reproduced outlines of 16 courses treating Christian-Marxist relations, 17 on liberation theology, but less than a half dozen with a major focus on Orthodoxy.

In the post World War II period the most significant exception to the rule of minimal Protestant-Orthodox interaction has been their encounter in the ecumenical movement. There the Orthodox have been steadfast and often lonely champions of what Evangelicals would consider basic Christian beliefs. Interestingly, unlike Protestantism and Catholicism, Orthodoxy has never produced any sizeable movement within its ranks that takes a skeptical view of the reliability of Scripture or questions the divinity, miracles, or resurrection of Jesus Christ or challenges historic Christian social teachings, such as the sinfulness of sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage. If the Achilles heel of Orthodoxy, historically, has been its tendency to align itself with, or capitulate to, secular power, its strength has been its tenacious preservation of the faith once received. For that reason it would appear that Evangelical Christians have more in common theologically with Orthodox believers than with mainline Protestants.

However, this common ground counts for very little as Evangelicals make their way into territory Orthodox consider to be their exclusive domain. Here the key question is: east of the old iron curtain are Evangelicals interlopers? Many Orthodox Christians, for example, believe that Protestants have no place in Russia. In particular, they see recent evangelical activity from abroad as an unwelcome and offensive intrusion into a spiritual landscape

nourished by a thousand years of Byzantine Christianity. Western missionaries working in countries with long-standing Orthodox traditions definitely need to apply themselves to a study of history and culture in order to understand this heritage. However, even as Evangelicals come to appreciate Orthodoxy, the exceptional achievements of Russian culture, and the remarkable perseverance of a long-suffering people, they should not feel that they need to apologize for sharing the good news in a Russia minus Marx. One major reason is demographic: Evangelicals are motivated by Russia's huge nonbelieving population. Recent survey data suggest that as many as 69 percent of Russian men and 46 percent of Russian women do not identify themselves as religious believers. Thus, Evangelicals have ample room to minister to millions of Russians who are spiritually adrift, without ever engaging in proselytizing, that is, specifically targeting adherents of one church in an attempt to lure them into another.

Western Evangelicals naturally want to support a movement of some three million indigenous Protestants whose origins in the Russian Empire now date back well over a century. What Russian Orthodox must decide is whether or not they prefer a democratic to an authoritarian government, keeping in mind that true democracies by definition include tolerance for minorities and minority opinions. It has been said that how a majority treats its most despised minority is the best test of its commitment to democracy and human rights. Vaclav Havel has said this about Czech treatment-or mistreatment-of Gypsies. Today the question must be posed: does the majority faith in Russia-Orthodoxy-have sufficient confidence in itself to tolerate religious dissent? Or must it repeat history and retreat to dependence upon the state to provide it with a legislative advantage, if not a monopoly? Based on Europe's sad experience with state churches, it would appear that nothing could be more deadening to Orthodox spiritual vitality than artificial, secular supports propping up a privileged church.

When survey researchers asked Russians, "Do you or do you not agree with the opinion that members of the Orthodox Church should have advantages compared to atheists and people of other religious beliefs?," 66 percent of respondents favored equal legal status for all faiths. In fact, Russians, whom scholars often have characterized as historically conditioned conformists, now favor far more diversity than some Western champions of Russian culture. Ironically, Western criticism of evangelical outreach in Russia often comes from quarters which advocate cultural and religious pluralism for the West, but apparently not for the East.

For two thousands years Christians of all confessions have struggled with the tension between respecting other cultures and sharing the gospel across cultures. As early as the first century church (Acts 15) Christ's disciples debated whether or not to require circumcision of gentile Christians. In the nineteenth century, closer to the present, and closer to the issue at hand, Professor Nicholas Il'minski (1822-91) of the Kazan Theological Academy labored quite effectively to foster Orthodox missions that treated non-Slavic peoples with respect. His advocacy for the Divine Liturgy and Orthodox popular schooling in the languages of the Volga Tatars and the peoples of Siberia and Central Asia had considerable success and had a major impact on tsarist policy in the late nineteenth century.

As this issue of appropriate witness relates to current Orthodox-Evangelical tensions, defenders of the Eastern Church deplore Evangelical activity in Russia today seeing it as a spiritual affront. However, are Orthodox justified in their desire to exclude Western Evangelical ministries from the former Soviet Union on territorial grounds? Before conceding that Russia should be spared non-Orthodox influences, imagine how comfortable Orthodox themselves would be if the argument were taken to its logical conclusion. For instance, if a faith's legitimacy were to depend upon its being longstanding or first in a particular location, then what justification did Prince Vladimir have in suppressing an ancient pagan pantheon in favor of Orthodox Christianity? And what justification did Orthodox missionaries in Siberia have in competing with native shamans, thereby interfering with the region's traditional religion?

Many Christians historically have argued that the proclamation of the gospel among nonbelievers is legitimate, even if in the process it alters a native culture. But what should we make of the argument that one Christian confession's witness in a territory already the home of another Christian confession is illegitimate? If one were to accept that a majority Christian confession by rights should have territorial prerogatives, then, for example:

1. Saints Cyril and Methodius should not have begun their work in Moravia where missionaries from Rome were already in evidence;
2. Orthodox conversions among Estonian and Latvian Lutherans in the 18th and 19th centuries should not have occurred; and
3. Orthodox have been interlopers in every U.S. state except Alaska, and should not be mailing unsolicited packets of information on Orthodoxy to Episcopalian priests across the country.

Opponents of Western Protestant outreach in Russia sometimes argue as follows: Protestants should either help Orthodoxy recoup and recover, or stand aside and allow it time to regain its strength, rather than take spiritual advantage of its present weakened condition. Consequently, we are told, Orthodox should have either first or exclusive access to the Russian people.

Evangelicals, however, see a state church status for Orthodoxy as a tsarist throwback that a clear majority of Russians have said they do not want. One wonders in all sadness how realistic the current prospects are for an Orthodox institutional and spiritual rejuvenation, given the fact that the present leadership, in place thanks to the Soviet Council of Religious Affairs and the KGB, has yet to undergo anything approaching perestroika (restructuring).

Despite Soviet domination of the church in the twentieth century, Orthodoxy is, and probably will remain, the preeminent cultural and religious reality in Russia. Still, Protestantism can render Orthodoxy a service in the same way that the Reformation stimulated reform within Roman Catholicism. In tsarist Russia Protestant growth in a given region often helped

reenergize the Orthodox out of a complacency born of being a state church.

### Conclusion

The cultural faux pas in Evangelical missions to former Soviet bloc countries bring to mind the grievous errors committed in Protestant missions to China prior to 1949. Yet Arthur Glasser's thought-provoking summary of China missions lessons highlights the promise as well as the peril in a way that fits former East bloc missions as well:

It is amazing what Western missionaries were able to accomplish in China. And this in spite of themselves....They made every conceivable mistake in methodology. And yet, due to their diligence, their capacity for sacrifice and the grace of God, they planted the church in all the provinces of China.

Similarly, in Europe minus Marx many Evangelical missionaries are having a powerful impact for good and for the Gospel, despite frequently inadequate preparation, harmful cultural baggage, and faulty notions of how best to proceed. One particular ministry to the former Soviet Union that has blundered in with a) unrealistic, stratospheric statistical predictions of what its impact will be; b) with a missionary force embarrassingly ignorant of Russia Orthodoxy, Russian culture, and the Russian language; and c) with top heavy administrative costs that ought to cause careful Christian stewards to blush. Nevertheless, the self-denial, the sincerity, and the genuine love this ministry's ill-prepared but caring missionary servants bring to their work with ordinary Russians is having an extraordinary impact in terms of spiritually transformed lives. Whatever the missionary miscues, in many Russian minds they count for less than their own yearning for truth, for spiritual assurance, and for godly solace in a world now best characterized as unpredictable, avaricious, impoverished, and despairing.

Certainly no Christian outreach should be satisfied with any effort that is less than excellent, completely forthright, and transparent, as befits servants of the King. Yet, the Scriptures, missions history, and current experience suggest that God manages to use even weak and flawed vessels for His purposes.

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## APPENDIX

### PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

#### I. CHURCHES PRESENT SINCE 1917 (REGARDLESS OF OFFICIAL STATUS)

Evangelical Christian-Baptist

Lutheran

Mennonite

Pentecostal

Seventh-day Adventist

## II. CHURCHES IN LANDS ANNEXED IN WORLD WAR II

Hungarian Reformed (Transcarpathia)

Methodist (Now Active Outside Estonia)

## III. REEMERGING CHURCHES

Armenian Evangelical and Baptist

Brethren

Church of Christ

Evangelical Christian

Molokane

The Salvation Army

United Pentecostal

## IV. NEW CHURCHES

Christian and Missionary Alliance

Christian Life Centers

Christian Reformed

Church of God, Anderson

Church of the Nazarene

Estonian Christian Church

Evangelical Covenant

Evangelical Free

Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod

Nazarene

New Apostolic

Pentecostal Holiness

Presbyterian

Wesleyan

Word of Life

V. UNAFFILIATED CHURCHES (FOUNDED BY WESTERN AND INDIGENOUS  
PARACHURCH MISSIONS)

END NOTES

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