

RECENT RESEARCH ON EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET SOCIETIESⁱ

by Mark Elliott

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Two recent doctoral dissertations directly address the issue of Evangelical theological education in post-Soviet societies:

1. Charter, Miriam L. “Theological Education for New Protestant Churches of Russia: Indigenous Judgments on the Appropriateness of Educational Methods and Styles,” Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997; and
2. Bohn, David P. “The Perspectives on Theological Education Evident Among Evangelical Church Leaders in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Russia,” Ph.D., Trinity International University, 1997.

SIMILARITIES

Both dissertations were completed in 1997 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, now known as Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL, near Chicago. Dr. Ted Ward, a specialist in nonformal education, served as director for both theses. The authors, Miriam Charter and David Bohn both have extensive experience in the region, particularly East Central Europe, and both have worked for Biblical Education by Extension (BEE). Miriam Charter served with BEE from 1985 to 1992, primarily in Romania and Bulgaria, with more limited assignments in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. She was a missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Krasnodar, Russia, 1995-96, and currently is director of adult education at First Alliance Church, Calgary, Alberta. David Bohn, who lives near Vienna, Austria, has worked for BEE since 1983, with a particular focus on leadership training in Romaniaⁱⁱ.

ⁱ1 The present article is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Second Consultation on Theological Education and Leadership Development in Post-Communist Europe, Osijek, Croatia, 2 September 1998.

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Both dissertations rest squarely on findings derived from survey research: ethnographic interviews in Dr. Charter's thesis, and questionnaire responses and interviews in Dr. Bohn's thesis. Both draw heavily upon indigenous perspectives, but Dr. Charter does include Western respondents. In 1995-96 Miriam Charter interviewed 66 students and 20 faculty at three institutions of "new" Protestants: two Russian (St. Petersburg Christian University and Lampados Bible College) and one Ukrainian (Donetsk Christian University). In 1996-97 David Bohn administered 12-page questionnaires to, and conducted interviews with, 36 denominational and seminary leaders and influential pastors from five denominations (Baptist, Brethren, Congregational, Pentecostal, and Reformed) from four nations (Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia).

Given their BEE experience and the tutelage of nonformal advocate Dr. Ted Ward, it is not surprising that both see significant shortcomings in residential programs, favoring instead various alternatives to traditional degrees. What is surprising is the decision of both authors not to investigate nonformal efforts, such as BEE and the Pentecostal ICI University¹. In their defense, both might argue that nonformal programs are, for them, known quantities, whereas post-Soviet residential seminary education is undergoing rapid expansion and evolution and deserves closer scrutiny. In any case, authors have every right to set the limits of their own investigations. But I personally wish, for the sake of comprehensive coverage, that Miriam Charter had chosen to include a Pentecostal institution in her study of "new" Protestant institutions, and that David Bohn had included Ukraine in his study because of the continuing, dynamic growth of all churches in what William Fletcher once called the Soviet "Bible Belt."

CONTRASTS

In addition to their common ground, the two studies evidence significant contrasts in coverage:

1. in terms of **geography**: both researched Russia, but only Miriam Charter investigated a Ukrainian institution, while only David Bohn included Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania;
2. in terms of **denominations**: Miriam Charter examined exclusively institutions founded by "new" Protestants, churches legally recognized apart from the Soviet-sanctioned Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union since the 1960s (autonomous Baptists and Mennonites) or since the 1990s (Christian Missionary Union); in contrast, David Bohn researched exclusively schools founded by what are described as "historic denominations" which existed prior to the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989;
3. in terms of **respondents**: Miriam Charter interviewed predominantly students, while David Bohn interviewed exclusively leaders of denominations, seminaries, and prominent churches.

MAKING GENERALIZATIONS CAUTIOUSLY

Before exploring the wealth of findings in these thought-provoking studies, let me caution, as I am sure the authors would, that any generalizations drawn from their work, for the whole enterprise of post-Soviet Protestant theological education, require careful handling. Miriam Charter, in looking at three schools in Russia and Ukraine cannot speak directly of the other 13 former Soviet republics or East Central Europe, and she does not speak directly of the experience of the largest categories of schools: Evangelical Christian-Baptist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic. Similarly, David Bohn does not speak directly of experience outside Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia. And despite their recent

fieldwork, neither can be expected to be reporting today's circumstances. In fact, the dizzying pace of change often makes even last year's statistics and curriculum outdated. Still, Miriam Charter and David Bohn have given us a great deal of food for thought which can contribute to productive evaluation and reevaluation of every training program in the region.

RELATING TO THE WEST

In attempting to summarize and critique the massive amount of material in these two path-breaking works, I will organize my comments around the theme, "relating to the West." In broad strokes, let us keep in mind that East Central Europe and the Russian and Soviet empires have always assumed the West as the natural basis of comparison. The West has been hated and loved, but the frame of reference historically has always been the West, not the adjacent Near East, nor the Far East. Russians, for example, learned from Marx to despise Western capitalism, but Marxism itself is, as well, a Western construct. The nineteenth century Westernizer–Slavophile controversy in Russia also illustrates typically conflicting views of the West, but again, the Western orientation of the dispute is unmistakable. Thus, Miriam Charter rightly sees Nicholas Danilevsky and his 1871 love-hate polemic, *Russia and Europe*, as a telling harbinger of the dynamics to be found in new post-Soviet Evangelical seminaries, full at once of both fascination and fear of all things Western (iv, 195, 206, 241).

The centrality – and the ambivalence – of the relationship with the West can be seen in the priorities set by the Eurasian Accrediting Association of Evangelical Schools in October 1997 at its formal founding meeting near Moscow:

1. develop the Accrediting Association [so that students can study in country, rather than depend upon *Western* education];
2. increase national faculty [in order to decrease dependence upon *Western* faculty];
3. develop Russian theological texts by Russians [lessening dependence upon translations of *Western* texts];
4. increase cooperation between schools and churches [because schools will not survive without church support as *Western* financial support decreases]; and
5. become self-supporting [because *Western* funding cannot last at present levels and it means *Western* control]ⁱⁱ

In one way or another, all these goals are healthy; they all contribute to contextualization; and they all should be encouraged by Western Christiansⁱⁱⁱ

THE MIXED BLESSING OF WESTERN ASSISTANCE

In preparing a paper for the 1994 Oradea Consultation on Theological Education and Leadership Development, the phrase "mixed blessing" came to my mind to describe Western assistance for post-Soviet seminaries^{iv} Similarly, Miriam Charter (190, 243-44) and David Bohn (193-96, 309) report countless examples of respondents being of two minds over Western involvement. On the one hand, those interviewed typically believe the development of theological education would be impossible, or nearly impossible, without outside funding and organizational experience, translated textbooks, and Western professors with their knowledge, experience, and modeling of reflective, critical thinking^v One of David Bohn's respondents bluntly contends, "Without foreign people involved, no school could exist" (193). Those interviewed express a wide range of reservations, even hostility, concerning Western influence upon church leadership training. Fears include foreign control, a brain drain of the brightest to the West, denominational fragmentation, theological pluralism and liberalism, and in the former Soviet Union specifically, a pronounced wariness of Calvinism (Charter,

190, 240; Bohn, 96-98, 191, 306, 308-09). On Western miscues David Bohn quotes Fuller Seminary professor Miroslav Volf who maintains that the task of theological education is “not to import Jesus, like some exotic article from a foreign land. We must proclaim Jesus and, in obedience to his message of salvation, discover the Croatian or Slovakian, Hungarian, or Serbian face of Jesus.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ADMISSION POLICIES

Of all the problems addressed by these two dissertations, perhaps the most troubling to me personally concerns frequently lax seminary admission policies, the immediate impact they have on the composition of the student body, and the long-term impact they have on post-graduation performance. In many schools, especially in the former Soviet Union, students are very young, often only in their teens. Miriam Charter reports that Lampados Bible College accepts applicants with as little as ten years of public schooling who have been believers as little as two years. “It was not unusual to meet students who had begun their theological education at sixteen years of age” (119). Since many established pastors, often with large families, find it difficult or impossible to study in residential programs, young people, who often are new Christians, and who often have very little church experience, fill the classrooms of many seminaries. Despite an admission process that administrators consider adequate, seminarians interviewed by Miriam Charter themselves admitted, “the right students are not being trained in the schools” (118-19). David Bohn, likewise, discovered “careless admission of students to formal programs” in Russia, Romania, and Hungary (135, 146-47).

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Peter Kuzmic, “A Vision for Theological Education for Difficult Times,” *Religion, State and Society* 22 (June 1994), 239.

One Russian attributed indiscriminate admission policies to Western pressure to produce results: “All of the Western organizations have hard plans: how many people they need to graduate in a year. Sometimes they even take people off the street. Sometimes these people have no roots in the churches” (178). At a theological education consultation near Kyiv in September 1996 speakers noted “pressure mounting to enlarge student bodies” at least partly to justify each school’s existence in the eyes of Western benefactors.^{vi} In contrast, now that the demand for training that had built up over many decades is subsiding, competition for students has become so intense that some schools have closed. The number of Evangelical Christian-Baptist institutions in the former Soviet Union, for example, declined from 24 in 1996 to 17 today^{vii}

One Russian pastor reported not writing a letter of recommendation for an unworthy young person in his church, but the applicant was admitted to a theological institute anyway (Bohn, 179). In the same vein, Miriam Charter suggests that an “apparent scarcity of worthy recruits” fuels “the resultant competition for students” and low admission standards (228). One Moscow church planter contends that sometimes women are admitted to seminary programs only because “not enough men apply.”^{viii} It thus comes as no surprise that interviews frequently identified seminarians with “no burning commitment to ministry,” “no goals and no purpose whatever in being here,” “nothing better to do,” and “no calling” (Charter, 119, 115; Bohn, 135). One Russian reported, “We have people who decide to go to the theological institute only because they want to get away from the army” (Bohn, 170). At the same time, the provision of student stipends, a European and Soviet pattern, may encourage applicants without a clear calling, not to mention exacerbating the degree of dependence upon the West (Bohn, 250)^{ix} Other problematic student motives include “the desire to achieve social position” (Bohn, 132) and seminary study “as a stepping stone to emigration or study abroad” (Charter, 116), or to a profession with a secure salary (Charter, 117). Only a few students cited church planting as a goal, and few aspired to the pastorate, compared to the large number dreaming of a teaching career (Charter 115, 117, 230, 237; Bohn, 31).

Low admission standards have meant that many seminaries must give serious attention to basic spiritual formation: seminary students “are not formed leaders needing education, but people who need a lot of attention paid to them because they are new Christians” (Charter, 120). “They are born again. They have a new spirit. But morally there are many questions. We have to teach very strenuously Christian morality” (Bohn, 170). Students themselves suggested to Miriam Charter that “the priority in theological education today should go to those already ministering in the church, those having a deep sense of calling to the church, leadership skills, and giftedness which the church has already affirmed” (229).

Some may assume, at least with Miriam Charter’s study, that nonselective admissions in the seminaries of “new” Protestants does not apply to institutions of longstanding denominations. But Peter Konovalchik, president of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB), is disturbed, as well, by admission policies in his denomination’s schools. This past October at a Eurasian Accrediting Association meeting, he raised, in forceful terms, many of the same reservations for ECB schools as those noted above:

People (19 and 20 years old) go to seminaries who have not had a call of God, not those proven in their church service. Many have been members of churches only two or three years. Seminarians are separated from their churches and are not necessarily firm in the faith. Graduates have a problem: the church is not ready to receive them. Sixty percent do not become pastors because they are separated from their churches. What are we to do with graduates? Big money has been spent on them but they don't want to be pastors, but professors.

I am convinced that a teacher needs to be a pastor first. We need education that is connected with practice. If a person has knowledge but cannot pass it on (how to preach), he has nothing. We must stress homiletics. Each seminarian should at least lead a small group, but one rector told me they don't have time. A graduate does not even know how to lead a small group. Theory should not be separated from practice: This is the most important thing^x

SEMINARY–CHURCH RELATIONS

Rev. Konovalchik questions not only who is being educated, but he questions for what purpose. For many it would seem axiomatic that a major goal of seminary education would be to train church leadership; but Konovalchik identifies a seminary-church gap, some might even say chasm, that thwarts this aim. In addition to youthful inexperience and lack of calling already noted, the gap is widened in some instances by graduates who are full of theoretical knowledge and intellectual pride who balk at service in remote districts (Bohn, 133-34, 166-67; Charter, 120).

Mature persons who have proven themselves in ministry are sent by their church to a theological school to be trained as teachers. In addition to a general theological education, each future teacher pursues a specialization in one discipline, with a view to returning to a two-fold task: (1) pastoring or planting a new church (in which they function as a *teaching pastor*) and (2) teaching in a local theological school as a resource in one discipline (234).

At the same time, Dr. Charter calls for a “*preaching faculty*,” that is, seminary teachers who at the same time “serve in local churches” (223). But to succeed, she cautions, this scheme, now being tested in Moldova, “must draw on a committed group of churches because of the increased number of faculty members it requires” (233-34).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION?

Where admission policies lack coherence and a seminary-church gap looms large, the absence of a clear seminary mission statement may be to blame. Miriam Charter rightly notes:

Confusion exists as to what is the purpose of theological education in Russia today. Unfortunately, in some situations it seems only to exist for itself. In others there are stated intentions of the equipping of a clerical elite. Those groups specifically attached to church planting movements believe their educational interventions will result in the development of pastors and church planters for new churches. In the midst of this ambivalence, the question remains: is the intended outcome one of critiquing the faith (the development of theologians and scholars), the preparing of mature Christians (spiritual development of leaders), or the practical training of pastors, church workers, and church planters (227)?

Between 1990 and 1997 in the former Soviet Union over 100 Protestant seminaries and Bible schools opened, and dozens more emerged or reemerged in East Central Europe.^{xi} Understanding the dynamics involved is no simple task. To be sure, the pent-up demand of many decades and the sudden

collapse of communist proscriptions and restrictions in 1989-91 triggered an unprecedented wave of school openings. Unfortunately, energetic institution building evidenced more passion and enthusiasm than sober reflection on precisely what seminaries were to accomplish. From his respondents David Bohn concludes that confusion reigns “as to the primary task of theological education” (298). To clarify goals Miriam Charter has elaborated a series of fundamental questions that should prove helpful to everyone concerned (Western partners, seminary administrators, faculty, students, and churches).

1. Is the intended outcome, understood by the investing constituency, the same outcome the school administrators/students have in view?
2. Is the general constituency serviced by this institution already serviced by another school of similar type, within reasonable distance, thereby creating a competition for the same potential students?
3. What is the school’s declared purpose? What are its entrance requirements for new students? Do the type of students recruited possess the qualities needed by the type of Christian worker the schools claim to produce?
4. What type/level of education is proposed? Is the type of education proposed by this school a duplication of services offered by another, already existent school within reasonable distance, for which it would not theologically be a problem for students in churches to attend?
5. What are the school’s relationships with indigenous groups in the country? Does the school play a role in the agenda of an indigenous group of churches or is it primarily fulfilling the vision of a Western mission/organization whose business is the establishing of educational systems around the world (239-40)?

A workshop in each institution, including each of the school’s various constituencies, designed to identify and prioritize goals and expectations would not be a painless exercise, but it could be invaluable in building unity of purpose and in avoiding greater pain and even fatal divisions in the future. Theological education typically is the most expensive enterprise any Christian community ever undertakes. Trained faculty, instructional facilities, libraries, textbook development all take a great deal of time and money. Consequently, all concerned should be absolutely clear that they are of one mind as to the purpose or purposes of such an extraordinary effort.

EVALUATING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY OUTCOMES

In the West today, the mantra in educational evaluation is the word *outcomes*. Accrediting bodies and specialists in pedagogy are expecting educational enterprises at all levels to identify their goals and to document the attainment of those goals through the lives of their graduates. Miriam Charter fairly represents this current evaluative tool as she writes, “Investors, educators, and church leaders must think more strategically about what the intended outcome of their investment is, what kind of student should be admitted to the schools, and what kind of faculty appointed so as to achieve those outcomes” (227; see also 225, 259-60). It seems reasonable that surveying alumni is a helpful and workable way to measure success, because expectations for graduates and the actual vocations of graduates can be readily compared.

This summer St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU) faculty member Alexander Negrov shared with a group of East Europeans studying at Wheaton College the results of a survey of SPCU’s first 111 graduates.

St. Petersburg Christian University Graduates

<u>Vocation</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Pastor	6	5.41
Work in Church	36	32.43
Missionary	12	10.81
Church Planter	8	7.21
Pursuing Advanced degree	9	8.11
Teaching in Bible College	14	12.61
Director of Bible College	3	2.70
Other (not following Christ, not attending church, or emigrated abroad	23	20.70
TOTAL	111	100%

SPCU is to be commended for taking this measure of its own success and making the results known. It is noteworthy that 79 percent of graduates are in full-time Christian service, or are receiving further training to that end. At the same time, that nearly a third are “working in churches” could be a troubling finding if it is the case that congregations will not accept these graduates as pastors. It also would be instructive to compare the vocations of male and female graduates.

Another potentially troubling point could be the comparison of 5.5 percent of graduates serving as pastors with 21 percent teaching or pursuing advanced degrees. If particular donors gave primarily to assist the training of local pastors, the above outcomes could raise questions. However, assuming the preparation of seminary teachers is a stated goal, St. Petersburg Christian University already has achieved solid results. In any case, SPCU deserves credit for taking such an objective step to evaluate the results of its educational program. Furthermore, I suspect its level of success will compare very favorably with many other institutions, once comparative data become available^{xii}

CURRICULUM

A clear institutional mission statement should shape not only admission policies, but curriculum. We may or may not always agree with the priorities of those surveyed in these two dissertations, or even the conclusions drawn. But we all are indebted to Miriam Charter and David Bohn because of their careful attention to the perspectives of respondents. As noted earlier, Russians and Ukrainians interviewed by Miriam Charter made a strong case for careful mentoring of students who are young in age and young in faith. Schools would, of course, prefer to accept only applicants who are mature Christians, but candidates often lack that attribute. Thus, given current admission

policies, seminaries must address “the developmental need of many young Christians” who “do not have the spiritual formation needed to become effective servants of the Gospel” (204; see also 191, 193, 216). To this end, in addition to faculty mentoring and counseling, seminaries may need to require courses in ethics and define community standards very clearly to combat widespread cheating, which David Bohn’s respondents, among many others, have noted (93, 175, 177, 304)^{xiii}

Respondents also desire a strong curricular emphasis upon theology to clarify doctrine and denominational distinctives and to combat cults (Bohn, 137)^{xiv} In turn, sound theology must be communicated to believers, hence Miriam Charter’s stress upon strong preaching (237)^{xv}

One respondent referred to in David Bohn’s thesis speaks of the need to understand and relate to secular society (162). What Peter Kuzmic stressed on this point at Oradea in 1994 bears repeating: the absolute necessity of bridging “the Biblical world and the contemporary world,” in other words, “the task of contextualization: of remaining faithful to the Biblical Gospel, open to the Holy Spirit, but also of being open to learning in a continual dialogue with our society.” Kuzmic believes, therefore, that seminarians should study such subjects as psychology, philosophy, and sociology in order to be understood in the modern world. He would say the Gospel never changes, but the audience for it changes constantly. As German theologian Helmut Thielicke put it, “The Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.”^{xvi}

To prepare seminarians to engage nonbelievers, another task of the curriculum should be to encourage analytical thinking. Miriam Charter correctly notes that Soviet pedagogy stressed memorization and the uncritical acceptance of received wisdom. In contrast, some Western educators, Americans in particular, stress the importance of teaching students “to engage in independent, reflective thinking.” By this means, seminarians will more likely own their theology, rather than simply parrot it (243-44; see also 204, 214, 236). As Peter Penner of St. Petersburg Christian University has argued, graduates need “the ability to use knowledge independently in order to deal with concrete questions.”^{xvii}

One of David Bohn’s respondents wrote that in the communist system, “There was the atheistic view of the world and the Christian view of the world, and there is nothing in between these two views. We never thought that believers could have different ideas on the same topic” (238). Some even yearn for the “good old days” of communism, perceived as having been more predictable, without the constant bombardment of mind-boggling choices. David Bohn reports a Bulgarian respondent’s analogy, which many of us have heard repeatedly, that compares disoriented post-Soviet citizens to the Hebrew children who said they preferred the “security” of slavery in Egypt to the uncertainty of freedom in the Sinai (Bohn, 399-400). In contrast, one Romanian values Western teaching precisely because it encourages critical reflection and the ability “to evaluate and systematize information. My hope is that we will get information, we will get training, but even more I hope that we will be equipped how to select that which is good. There is a kind of maturity in rejecting some things and accepting others in theology” (Bohn, 197-98).

As noted, this question of choice, and what might be called discrimination in its positive sense, among ideas, rather than among people, is as likely to paralyze as to liberate people enduring communist withdrawal. Indeed, discernment, which the best theological education will cultivate, does

not come easy. What David Bohn calls “choice overload” (185) threatens new seminaries as much as it threatens seminarians; foreigners offer a “cafeteria” (249) or a “smorgasbord” (198) of ideas and projects:

After Communism fell, great numbers of mission agencies, churches, and individuals came offering many kinds of assistance. Nationals entered a state of choice shock. Opportunities that had taken decades to develop in the West were compressed, packaged, and offered. Initially almost all offers were accepted. Yet discretion is the better part of choice, and eventually nationals began to find a way to be selective (198-99).

Just as seminarians benefit from the skill of critical analysis (all ideas are not equally good or bad), so seminary leaders benefit from the same skill as they evaluate offers of help (all Western partners and programs are not equally good or bad). As one Hungarian Pentecostal put it, “We need to learn how to select and not accept everyone without judging” (Bohn, 199; see also 278; and Charter, 133).

PROS AND CONS OF NONFORMAL EDUCATION

Both dissertations argue that the best choice that East European educators can make is *not* to adopt the traditional residential Western approach to theological education, at least not without very serious adaptation. Miriam Charter writes,

The most redemptive role for Westerners in the inevitable partnership of East and West in the development of theological education must be one of encouragement intentionally encouraging educators not to allow the West, unchallenged, to replicate the educational models and styles that they have implemented in countries around the world (261).

Likewise, David Bohn equates reform in theological education with movement away from formal, residential programs and the implementation of one or another nonformal model. Slightly more than half of his respondents agreed with his survey item that stated, “Post-Communist countries are forfeiting a marvelous opportunity to initiate theological education reform” (120). As he envisions it, reform would involve a “multiple-step approach to ministry” proficiency involving “various educational experiences and ‘street’ competencies,” an approach that has worked well in Latin America and Mexico (297-98). Despite respondents’ stated support for reform, Dr. Bohn appears to be disappointed that, even though many have benefited directly from BEE, ECB, and other nonresidential programs, they “almost invariably [have] turned their focus to formal schooling, as if drawn by an irresistible force” (296)^{xviii} Drs. Bohn and Charter regret this trend because they see nonformal education as closer to the church, more practical, and meeting the needs of those already engaged in ministry for whom formal schooling is not an option, not to mention much less expensive (Bohn, 142-44; Charter, 218, 222). However, it should be pointed out that Alexander Romonyuk, head of BEE Ukraine, shared at a June 1998 conference that the full BEE program in the former Soviet Union now takes eight years to complete, that the drop-out rate is high, and that graduates do not receive recognized degrees. In addition, nonresidential programs typically lack the regular student-to-student and student-faculty interaction of a residential community that can so enhance student spiritual and academic development^{xix}

My own opinion is that theological education in communism's wake need not be cast in terms of formal versus nonformal. Both have their place and can be complimentary. Ukrainian Bible Training Center Association, which was founded by former BEE staff member Abraham Bible, and which uses BEE course materials, enrolled 6,921 students in spring 1998, with an additional 1,500 students enrolled in Russia. In addition, an array of other smaller denominational and parachurch programs provide nonresidential instruction^{xx}. The Pentecostal ICI University also supports numerous modular and church-based courses with hundreds of students. Especially for Russia and Ukraine, where distances are great and formal Protestant theological education is in its infancy, nonformal instruction will continue to be critically important for the foreseeable future. At the same time, strong, highly respected, accredited residential seminaries are fervently desired throughout East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. They are the priority, and notwithstanding the pedagogical preferences of some Westerners to the contrary, residential programs likely will continue to receive the bulk of the educational funding and effort for the foreseeable future.

A QUESTION OF RESPECT

On various occasions I have been in conversations with advocates of nonformal education who have argued that Western influence is responsible for the East European passion for formal programs. However, I would contend that, without any Western coaxing, post-Soviet Protestants desperately desire academically strong residential seminaries as one means of overcoming the perception that they are second class citizens and culturally marginal. David Bohn has his reservations, but he does report that his "respondents consistently think that an accredited degree increases the respect of society for evangelicals" (258).

Because of illness in my family I was not able to deliver in person my paper on the mixed blessing of Western assistance to theological education at the Oradea Conference in 1994. But from those in attendance I gather that many East Europeans were not convinced by various presentations warning of the shortcomings of accredited degree programs, as often as not, delivered paradoxically by persons with earned doctorates. From the perspective of 1998 I understand the East European position much better than I did. If among the tasks of theological education we Evangelicals have in mind to engage and transform society, we must understand society and have the communication and homiletic skills, as well as the knowledge, necessary to command public attention. This is a sophisticated and demanding assignment that I personally believe a resident community of faculty and students can better address than can the best nonformal program.

East European Evangelicals desire traditional accredited institutions to escape the sense of still being "outlaws," to gain a "sense of legitimacy," and "to shift the balance of power which now favors the Orthodox church" (Bohn, 253, 324). One Russian Baptist pastor declared he would not "waste his time" in an unaccredited institution: "An official degree is very important because if you don't have an official degree, you don't have any weight, you don't mean anything to anybody" (Bohn, 258).

Miriam Charter, who finds such an argument unconvincing, counters with the Russian faculty member who regrets "schools [that] succumb to the pressure from the West to raise academic levels, publish books, and aspire to Western accreditation standards, the practical motivation to prepare

people for Christian ministry is overshadowed by the pressure to simulate Western academic standards” (121-22). David Bohn, who is as skeptical as Miriam Charter is of the emphasis upon formal academic training, approvingly quotes nonformal advocate Michael Griffiths^{xxi} who calls “the desire for evangelical scholarship” an “insidious blight” and “virus” (35-36), and Regent College professor Paul Stevens, who equates it with an unbecoming “pride in degrees and publishing” (34; see also 65, 300).

Unquestionably, formal and nonformal programs and academic and practical emphases have their advantages and disadvantages. Often it is a question of balance. For example, academic rigor and recognized credentials can be a means of impacting society, but they also can contribute to un-Christlike vainglory. For Christian educators the promise and peril of learning are best kept in a healthy tension. As regards the place of intellect in Christian experience and in theological education, I like what seventeenth century Christian apologist and scientist Blaise Pascal concluded: “Two mistakes: to exclude reason, and to admit no argument but reason.”^{xxii}

ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS AND WESTERN DEPENDENCE

Everyone seems to agree that long-term dependence upon the West is not healthy for theological education in the East. Be that as it may, the consensus among East European educators in favor of strong academics, degree programs, and accreditation is bound to prolong and deepen dependency – *if* the West sustains the will to pay. Simply put, accrediting standards for facilities, trained faculty, and libraries, and equally essential textbook development, require tremendous financial investments, and, at present, only Western partners, and only some of them, have that kind of money^{xxiii}

At the first post-Soviet interdenominational gathering of Protestant theological educators in Moscow in February 1993, the need for textbooks was the most frequently voiced concern. In response, Overseas Council for Theological Education and Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries partnered to identify, locate, and print or reprint relevant titles for use in seminaries. This Bible Pulpit Series has made an invaluable contribution to the development of Protestant theological education in Russia. In the next phase of assistance, all parties concerned (donors, administrators, faculty, and students) recognize the need to encourage indigenous authors. Miriam Charter noted, “The urgency of developing indigenous writers in theology was voiced by nearly every respondent. One student remarked that the Orthodox Church views Protestants as a sect because ‘We don’t even have a theological text of our own. They don’t even want to argue with us’” (134; see also 125, 127, 132-36; Bohn, 106, 234-36).

Many new seminary libraries have relatively large English collections; many of the holdings in the mother tongue do not relate to theological education; and in traditionally Orthodox countries, Orthodox writers sometimes outnumber Protestant authors in the stacks. Miriam Charter reported, “It was not unusual to find a student who had an acceptable command of English, sitting in the library, surrounded by her classmates, translating for them, sentence by sentence, an English textbook required for a class (123)”^{xxiv}

Because of the heavy dependence upon Western professors and English texts, or texts translated from English, some respondents fear the emergence of an anglicized Slavic Protestant faith:

“A journalist came to my church recently. She commented that she had heard many English expressions in the [Russian] sermon not rich as it might have been, had it been delivered in good Russian” (Charter, 127). As a corrective, Dr. Charter makes a valuable recommendation to have schools offer “courses which have as a goal the writing of significant, biblically rich, contextualized books” in the indigenous language (238), although such offerings might best be reserved for advanced students.

Russian Bible school graduate and church planter Valeri Pryamilov, like many in Eastern Europe, believes the greatest need in theological education today — even more important than books — is well-trained indigenous faculty^{xxv} In light of accreditation requirements and the mixed blessing of Western assistance, no need appears to be more pressing — and more problematic — than faculty development. The conundrum in the post-Soviet era is that contextualized theological education requires trained indigenous faculty. But obtaining the necessary degrees, almost without exception, involves Westernization. If faculty who complete higher degrees abroad repatriate — by no means a safe assumption — they and their families invariably face traumatic economic and cultural readjustment back home^{xxvi} Other drawbacks to study abroad include the transmission of Western theological controversies from West to East and the cultural irrelevance of much of Western theological instruction for the post-Soviet context.

Dr. Graham Houghton, principal of India’s South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, in his Institute’s information brochure pointedly highlights three rationales for doctoral training in country: the brain drain via study abroad; cost effectiveness of study in country; and the “considerable lack of relevance about much that is studied in Western countries.”^{xxvii} David Bohn’s respondents commented on the dangers of study abroad at length and with considerable feeling. A seminary educator from Bulgaria stated, “My greatest hope is that people who are in the West will come back. I hope that those who return will not bring false or liberal teaching, or extreme desires” (168). And a Romanian pastor laments, “I must say I have seen very, very few situations where those who have been to the West have come back better. They put a lot of knowledge in their head. But when they come back, unfortunately, they have lost the power” (193; see also 95-97, 166, 168, 229-30, 306, 316-17; Charter, 116-17, 194, 241)^{xxviii}

Russian Evangelical Christian-Baptist leader Peter Konovalchik put it frankly, “A new convert went to England to study four years; he came back with new teaching that we don’t want.” Similarly, Moscow itself poses the threat of a brain drain for the rest of Russia. The majority of students in one Moscow Bible college are not from the capital and less than half of its graduates have returned to their homes. Some find jobs with Western missions, even as drivers, to avoid leaving the relatively easier life there. A Siberian Baptist asked Rev. Konovalchik, “Why should we send a student to Moscow? He won’t return.”^{xxix}

A very few select students who are especially capable and dedicated probably should study abroad in order ultimately to strengthen programs at home. Hopefully, then, larger numbers will not need to study abroad and be tempted by the lure of the West^{xxx} In two previous articles I suggested various means of minimizing Western residence^{xxxi} In the same vein, David Bohn makes the sensible recommendation that programs be developed that involve “a rhythm of study abroad and ministry at

home” (232)^{xxxii} In 1994 I also suggested that India might be considered as a location for doctoral study. Solidly Evangelical institutions there could train doctoral candidates from the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe at a fraction of the cost of a Western education. OMS International intends for selected Russian students to do doctoral work at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), in Bangalore, India, which employs eight PhDs and offers fully accredited doctor of philosophy and doctor of missiology degrees. Also, Russian and Ukrainian Pentecostals plan to train their advanced students at the M.A. level at Southern Asia Bible College, an Assemblies of God institution, also in Bangalore, India, and also with a substantial number of faculty with earned doctorates. Both schools are accredited by the Asia Theological Association. It would appear to be a reasonable assumption that students studying in Bangalore will be less tempted to remain abroad than those studying, for example, in Boston^{xxxiii} David Bohn notes that Bong Rin Ro, executive secretary of the Asia Theological Association, is another voice recommending theological education closer to home (61-62, 316).

THE PROSPECT FOR HIGHER DEGREES IN COUNTRY

Ideally, in the future, seminary faculty will be able to obtain advanced degrees in country, without having to study abroad. Building the necessary doctoral programs, however, will be so costly and so labor-intensive that interdenominational cooperation would seem to be imperative. Unfortunately, despite affirmations of the need for joint efforts, “when the practical suggestion is made to have only one or two cooperative, advanced-degree institutions in each country,” East European educators agree, but denominational leaders and influential pastors do not (Bohn, 107, 315-16; see also 187, 286, 317). “Until these two groups of opinion leaders see the need for cooperative efforts to provide quality education for higher degrees,” David Bohn probably is correct in concluding, “it seems unlikely that initiatives in this direction will succeed” (316). What is worse, insufficient interdenominational cooperation actually is compounded by increased Western denominational and parachurch support: “Denominations do not have a strong incentive to cooperate when each is able to cultivate its own sources of outside support” (Bohn, 310)^{xxxiv}

CONCLUSION

Discussions of *advanced* degrees and *quality* education always make me nervous. Why? Because they have to do not just with gaining knowledge, but with gaining respect. For Christian educators—indeed, for all Christians the question has to be asked: how important should it be to gain respect? And from whom should we seek respect? As noted earlier, we can be pleased when seminary graduates with accredited degrees have honed the skills that will provide them an entree with the unchurched. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that a perverse pride all too frequently accompanies learning. Only sore knees from much prayer can save a seminary graduate, and even more so a seminary professor with a new Ph.D., from insufferable arrogance.

For Christians in general, and for Christians in higher education in particular, there is a constant need to balance biblical teaching on the depravity and the dignity of humankind. Jeremiah (17:9) reminds us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” And our apparent cosmic insignificance is underscored by David in Psalm 8:3-4: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are

mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” Yet in one of the most profound paradoxes of Scripture, the same psalm boldly affirms that God has deigned to invest in us a status just below His own, “crowned with glory and honor,” and has made us ruler over all His creation (Psalm 8:5-8). My point is this: We have to constantly check our motives in all humility before the Lord as we strive for respect. Do we want it so that the Lord might be honored or so that we might be treated with greater deference? Or are noble and ignoble motives intertwined?

On various occasions in my years on the faculty at Wheaton College I have heard colleagues ponder what it would take for Wheaton to command the respect of the University of Chicago. Personally, this *respected* university is so thoroughly secularized that I would fear the day it would take Wheaton College seriously, because I would fear it would mean that Wheaton by that point had squandered its spiritual inheritance for a mess of porridge. I mention Wheaton only to illustrate that striving for respect is a predictable feature of higher education, including Christian, and that it will not end with accreditation. East European educators must anticipate that the pursuit of respect can be healthy or unhealthy, but in any case it will be unending. And whatever the advantages or disadvantages of becoming respected in the eyes of other institutions, accrediting bodies, secular society, or the West, we need constantly to remind ourselves that, as Paul writes, ultimately, we “study to show ourselves approved unto God” (II Timothy 2:15).

Appendix

Interdenominational Meetings on Post-Soviet Theological Education

Date	Location	Title	Sponsors/Hosts	Number attending
3 Sept. 1992	Wheaton, IL	A Consultation on Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union	Overseas Council for Theological Education; Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries; Institute for East-West Christian Studies	17 Westerners
11 February 1993	Moscow, Russia	Christian Leadership Training and Theological Conference (Conference on Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union)	Overseas Council; Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries; Institute for East-West Christian Studies	75, including 38 Westerners
16 April 1993	Wheaton, IL	Christian Higher Education in the Former Soviet Union: A Consultation	Institute for East-West Christian Studies	66, mostly Westerners
4-8 Oct. 1994	Oradea, Romania	Equipping for the Future: Consultation on Theological Education and Leadership Development in the Post-Communist World	Overseas Council	94, including 44 Westerners
20 May 1996	Wheaton, IL	Western Assistance for Post-	Institute for East-West Christian	22 Westerners

		Soviet Seminaries: A Consultation on Strategies	Studies; Overseas Council	
9-13 Sept. 1996	Kyiv, Ukraine	Consultation on Theological Education	Overseas Council; Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries	94 (64 from FSU, 30 foreigners)
13 Oct. 1997	Moscow, Russia	Consultation on Theological Education	Overseas Council; Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries; Eurasian Accrediting Association	Approximately 120, including 20 Westerners
4-5 May 1998	Kyiv, Ukraine	Seminar on Preparation of Accreditation Commissions	Eurasian Accrediting Association	25, including 2 Westerners
16-18 June 1998	St. Petersburg, Russia	Conference on Alternative Theological Education	St. Petersburg Christian University; Oxen Ministries; Study by Extension for All Nations (SEAN)	Approximately 40, including 12 Westerners
1-5 Sept. 1998	Osijek, Croatia	Equipping Kingdom Leaders for the 21st Century: Consultation of Theological Education on Leadership Development in the Post-Communist World	Council for Eastern European Theological. Education (CEETE); Overseas Council; International Fellowship of Missionary Theologians (INFEMIT)	80-100 from ECE; 20 INFEMIT leaders from around the world; 30 Westerners
19-23 October 1998	Donetsk, Ukraine	Administration, Governing, and Finance of Educational Institutions	Eurasian Accrediting Association	

Editor's Notes for Appendix:

1. In August 1990 Biblical Education by Extension hosted an interdenominational conference in Vienna, Austria. While not addressing specifically post-Soviet theological education, it did focus on pastoral training, and it did include participants from East Central Europe and the Soviet Union.
2. In October 1993 the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board sponsored a theological conference for Evangelical Christians-Baptists which explored the need for a seminary and Bible school accrediting association.

3. In October 1994 the organizing committee of the future Eurasian Accrediting Association, along with St. Petersburg Christian University and Odessa Theological Seminary, sponsored an academic conference on the history of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Russia in St. Petersburg. The approximately 50 participants included about five westerners.
4. The Smolensk Orthodox Seminary and the Synodal Education Committee of the Moscow Patriarchate sponsored an international conference on "Theological Education: Traditions and Development," 24-25 September 1997 in Smolensk. For a conference summary see "Church News" in the Russian Orthodox Church website: <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne311074.htm>.
5. The Eurasian Accrediting Association has sponsored two meetings on theological library development. A third is scheduled for 19-23 October 1998 in Chisinau (Kishinev), Moldova.

ENDNOTES

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- i. ICI formerly stood for International Correspondence Institute. For an examination of the experience of unregistered Russian Baptist pastors enrolled in BEE courses, see Wayne Kenney, "'A Conspiracy of Learning': Self-Directed Learning Among Protestant Russian Clergy Before 1987," Ed.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1995. A review appears in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 5 (Winter 1997), 13.
 - ii. Peter Mitskevich, "Christian Education in Eurasia," Eurasia Symposium '98, First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX, 19-21 February 1998, 11-12.
 - iii. Three of the four curricular priorities of Russians interviewed by Miriam Charter involved contextualization: the development of indigenous theology, indigenous preaching, indigenous writers, and pedagogical skills (235).
 - iv. See the Appendix for a listing of interdenominational meetings on post-Soviet theological education. Mark Elliott, "Theological Education After Communism: The Mixed Blessing of Western Assistance," *Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (Spring 1995), 67. For a Russian reprint, see: "Bogoslovskoe obrazovanie v postkommunisticheskii period: polozhitel'nye i otritsatel'nye storony zapadnoi pomoshchi," *Put bogopoznaniia*, no. 1 (1996): 17-25. Papers from the Oradea conference and papers written in response to it will be published in a forthcoming volume edited by Peter Kuzmic: *Equipping for the Future: Theological Education and Leadership Development in Post-Communist Europe*.
 - v. See also Igor Ki__, "Difficulties and Prospects at the Lutheran Theological Seminary [Bratislava, Slovakia]," *The Zion* 73 [November-December 1997], 11-13.
 - vi. Mark Elliott, "Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education: Come of Age?" *Asbury Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1998), forthcoming.
 - vii. Comment of Vladimir Ryaguzov, director, Evangelical Christian-Baptist Correspondence Institute, at the Conference on Alternative Theological Education, St. Petersburg, Russia, 16 June 1998. The author wishes to thank Matt Miller, Moscow-based Evangelical Free Church missionary, for sharing notes and documents from this meeting. On the fragility of many of the new private institutions of higher education in East Central Europe see Hans C. Giesecke, "The Rise of Private Higher Education in East Central Europe," unpublished paper, 6. See also Bohn, 47; 243; Charter, 121; Kuzmic, "Vision," 243.
 - viii. Author's interview with Valeri Pryamilov, Center for Evangelism, Moscow, 17 July 1998.
 - ix. *Ibid.*
 - x. Author's notes from Eurasian Accrediting Association meeting near Moscow, 13 October 1997.
 - xi. Alla Tikhonova, Association for Spiritual Renewal, Moscow, has compiled several editions of a directory of seminaries in the former Soviet Union. For a review of Protestant leadership training in tsarist, Soviet, and the early post-Soviet periods see Mark Elliott, "Protestant Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18 (January 1994), 14-22.

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- xii. Donetsk Christian University (DCU) graduated 366 students between 1991 and 1998. Seventy-five percent are in full-time Christian service; twenty percent “are involved in lay ministry in their local churches;” and the whereabouts of five percent of graduates is unknown. E-mail from Professor Ray Prigodich, Denver Seminary, sharing data from Aleksei Melnichuk, DCU, 19 August 1998.
- xiii. Steven R. Chapman, “Collectivism in the Russian World View and Its Implications for Christian Ministry,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 6 (Fall 1998), 13; Tom Hundley, “Poland Tolerates the Art of Academic Cheating,” *Chicago Tribune*, 6 December 1998, Section 1, p. 2.
- xiv. See also Mitskevich, “Christian Education,” 9.
- xv. Rev. Konovalchik made the same case for homiletics in the October 1997 Moscow meeting.
- xvi. Kuzmic, “Vision,” 242.
- xvii. Peter Penner, “Theologische Ausbildung—Eine Verpflichtende Mission: Faktoren zur Bestimmung von Leitlinien für Theologische Ausbildung in der GUS [Theological Education—An Engaging Mission: Factors for Defining Guidelines for Theological Education in the CIS],” Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Africa, 1998, Section 4.1.2.
- xviii. David Bohn notes that all the Romanian church leaders questioned “had significant exposure to the extension model,” but argues that extension education did not “touch in a significant way” Russian respondents who became leaders after the fall of communism (290). Granted, far more Romanian than Russian leaders had BEE courses, but I believe many, if not all, current Russian church leaders have had experience with some denominational extension programs.
- xix. Comments of Alexander Romonyuk, BEE Ukraine, and Johannes Lange, academic dean, St. Petersburg Christian University Conference on Alternative Theological Education, St. Petersburg, 16-18 June 1998.
- xx. Alexander Romonyuk, Conference on Alternative Theological Education, 16-18 June 1998; Richard Walsman, UBTC, phone conversation with Sharyl Corrado, 8 December 1998. For a case study of the ongoing development of one nonresidential program, see Hannes Furter and Michael Huggins, “Grass-Root TEE Development in Russia and Central Asia,” *TEE Journal*, forthcoming.
- xxi. David Bohn cites Henry Griffith, but the actual source of the quotes is his bibliography reference for Michael Griffiths.
- xxii. Blaise Pascal, *The Essential Pascal* (New York: New American Library, 1996), 200.
- xxiii. Sergei Sannikov, speaking for the Eurasian Accrediting Association in June 1998 at the St. Petersburg Alternative Theological Education Conference, stated that standards for evaluating programs would not be based on graduates, but on various aspects of the “academic process,” such as “hours in class, testing methods, pages read, organizational stability, organizational legality, office management, program leadership and administration, [and] student activities.” On the need for and the difficulty of realizing self-sufficiency, see also Penner, “Theologische Ausbildung,” Section 4.4.3.
- xxiv. Some East Europeans recommend a command of English for seminarians because of the wealth and diversity of theological literature in that language (Bohn, 240).
- xxv. Author’s interview with Valeri Pryamilov, 17 July 1998.
- xxvi. A Western denominational missions administrator who wishes to remain anonymous shared with the Institute for East-West Christian Studies in August 1998 that 85 percent of the seminarians from the former Soviet Union funded by his church for study in the West have not returned home. This “bright flight,” sadly, is not surprising, judging from earlier rates of non-return for other countries, which are comparable. See Elliott, “Mixed Blessing,” 69; and Jack Graves, “Plugging the Theological Brain Drain,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 28 (April 1992), 155.
- xxvii. *Introducing SAIACS*.
- xxviii. See also Danut Manastireanu, “Evangelical Denominations in Post-Communist Romania,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 6 (Spring 1998), 2.
- xxix. Author’s notes from meeting near Moscow, 13 October 1997; author’s interview with Valeri Pryamilov, 17 July 1998.
- xxx. See Wally C. Schoon, “The Lure of the West,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 4 (Spring 1996), 1-2.
- xxxi. Elliott, “Protestant Theological Education,” 16; and Elliott, “Mixed Blessing,” 71.
- xxxii. Russians studying at Concordia Theological Seminary (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod), Ft. Wayne, IN, return home for a full year’s ministerial practicum between their first and third year of study in

the West. This has reduced the problem of brain drain, “although some admit that it is hard to go back.” Sharyl Corrado’s notes based on a phone conversation with Jan Pillsbury, 5 October 1998.

xxxiii. Author’s conversation with Dr. J. B. Crouse, president, OMS International, 23 May 1998; author’s phone conversation with Rev. Jerry Parsley, field director for Eurasia, Division of Foreign Missions, Assemblies of God, Springfield, MO, 27 August 1998; John Higgins to Sharyl Corrado, 27 August 1998. Contact information for the schools follows: Dr. Graham Houghton, Principal, SAIACS, Box 7747, Kothanur, Bangalore 560 077, India; tel: 91-80-846-5235; fax: 91-80-846-5412; e-mail: saiacs@giasbg01.vsnl.net.in; website: <http://www.epinay.com/saiacs>; Dr. Ivan Satyavrata, Principal, Southern Asia Bible College, Kothanur, Bangalore 560 077, India; tel: 91-80-546-8651; fax: 91-80-557-5541.

xxxiv. In fact, in some cases, cooperation in theological education has declined in the post-communist era: David Bohn (10-11) notes the demise of a Protestant interdenominational seminary sponsored by the Council of Free Churches in Hungary, and the same can be said of a joint Protestant effort in Poland.