

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AND PROTESTANTS: DIALOGUE ON MISSIONS

by Fr. George Kochetkov

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We must address two issues: first, is there a common ground between Russian Orthodox and Protestants for accomplishing Christian work; second, is it possible to witness about Christ in Russia without proselytizing.

Both issues are pertinent because of the present divisiveness within Christ's Church in Russia. And both problems are very old. Throughout the centuries both questions have been answered negatively. Even now the vast majority of both Russian Orthodox and Protestant workers, if they are honest, oppose the idea of giving these issues a positive response. Issuing naive platitudes does not help us deal with the root issues of these problems. It seems most improbable that these problems will be resolved in the near future, but it is wise that we begin talking about them now.

Both questions require positive and negative answers at the same time. The first question can be answered in the positive because many Russian Orthodox and Protestants do acknowledge each other to be Christians. But the answer is also negative because there are a lot of Russian Orthodox believers who think that Russia can only be associated with a Russian Orthodox form of Christianity - that the very soil of Russia can breed only Russian Orthodoxy. And there are many Protestants who think that Russia's soil is waiting only for Western Protestant missions, that there currently is no Christianity in Russia at all, and that Russian Orthodoxy itself should not exist in Russia at all.

The second question can be answered positively: yes, we can witness about Christ in Russia without proselytizing, if the witness is about Christ Himself. The same question,

however, may be answered negatively: proselytism is inevitable in the present and future because we often attach the witness of Christ to the witness of ourselves.

We are obliged to answer this question negatively if we think not only about the underlying theory of mission, but also about its practice; when we think not only about Who is preached, but about who is preaching. The answers are negative because the spiritual state of many Christian workers is remiss. The answer is inevitably negative when the preacher is weak in faith and strong in pride. This we have seen too much of.

It appears that there are more negative answers than positive. But the positive answer would seem ideally to be more Christian. The common ground for all Christians is love and freedom, faith in God and faith in man. This is why our common ground consists of the Bible, Baptism and the Nicene Creed. This ground is our common resource, and it allows us to view each other as Christians, despite differences between us.

Differences between Christians are not merely technical, and they cannot be explained simply as an extension of cultural differences. In any case, there is such a thing as a common Christian culture in the world, and it embraces all the contradictions and differences between people as long as they are truly Christian. Some differences between Christians, however, are very deep indeed. And it is dangerous to try to ignore these differences, attempting not to notice the peculiarities of the other side. And when the other side is Russia, the differences are very great. These distinctions beg for seriousness and intelligence in dealing with them.

There are several ways of dealing with contradictions and differences. Christians really should use only one-way, that of tolerance. Each situation that reveals a new difference provides a means to unite or divide us. How we respond depends upon our will and the state of our internal disposition. Certainly we must choose tolerance. To be tolerant, we must speak in our communities about those things that can unite us, which help us understand each other: our common adherence to Christ. But we cannot deny the fact that reacting in a tolerant manner is difficult for both Russian Orthodox and Protestant believers.

You must realize that the Russian Orthodox for the most part do not really believe that Protestants are pure-minded and kind-hearted. They truly believe that Protestants are aggressive. This point of view uses as evidence the comparatively huge amounts of money that are at the disposal of the Protestants. The Russian Orthodox think that Protestants are aggressive because they build a lot of church buildings and publish and distribute hundreds of thousands of books.

There are perhaps a few Russian Orthodox who admit the possibility that some Protestants may be above criticism, but it is rationalized that these people never come to Russia.

The Russian Orthodox tradition is marked as a whole by inner contradictions and great diversity, and by the desire to consider itself as a monolith. It doesn't want to understand itself, with its Church traditions and Russian culture, to be diversified and pluralistic. Most Russians do not know anything about the present state of Christianity in the world. All they are sure of is that Russian Orthodoxy has preserved Christian doctrine in all its purity. That is why they too easily juxtapose themselves against all other Christian denominations with the all too often accompanying judgment that all the non-Orthodox groups emanate from Satan. They cannot imagine the possibility of different Christian traditions enriching each other.

The mystical unity of the Church universal is less important to most Russian Orthodox than the integrity of the rites and canons. But the mystical unity is that which is basic. Canons and rites may give us much help, but the Church's mystical unity on the contrary asks us for spiritual help, for making an effort. That is why the maximum amount of responsibility is urged by the mystical unity: it is more difficult. But a low level of responsibility means that an individual becomes accustomed to waiting for the help of others, to expect only help, and that only for themselves. They are not ready to offer help to anybody else.

Protestants, who are admittedly just as diversified as the Russian Orthodox Church, most often do not understand or value the Russian Orthodox tradition. They tend to identify the worst sides of Russian Orthodox life with the essence of Russian Orthodoxy. Sometimes they think about Russian Orthodoxy as one of the numerous Protestant confessions, as simply another denomination. This is a very dangerous position to take in Russia. While foreign confessions are equal among equals, Russian Orthodoxy is not of this type of confession. Russian Orthodoxy identifies itself with Eastern Orthodoxy, and due to this fact also tends to think of itself as the source of true Christianity. Scriptures came from the East, the Saints and Fathers are all Eastern, the Creed is from the East, the Ecumenical Councils were held in the East, and the martyrs died in the East. It is insulting to an Eastern Orthodox Christian to be merely considered as 'an equal among equals.' How can you equate a Church with centuries of holy tradition and suffering with a sect that was established only a fortnight ago?

The modern epoch of Russian history is anomalous to its earlier historical realities. Really, in one aspect it is unique. Russian people are obliged to restore Christianity from ground

zero because it was nearly completely destroyed by the Bolsheviks. The task is enormous, and this is one of the explanations for the fear that dominates many souls and hearts in Russia. In Georgia and Armenia, Christianity was not destroyed to such an extent, and consequently such a fear does not exist.

Most foreigners understand that they enter Russia not only with the Word of Scripture, but that they are entering a peculiar environment totally different from their own national culture. They also bring with themselves many problems that have not been resolved in their native countries. Russians understand this and do not appreciate these facts. They tend to think that foreigners do not belong here for that reason. They believe that Westerners should be ironing out their own difficult problems at home before hastily exporting their divisions elsewhere.

Because of persecution and obliteration, Christianity was nearly totally destroyed in Russia in its confessional form. But Christianity was preserved in its hidden form as a part of the culture. Westerners who come to Russia to 'spread the Gospel' rarely understand this. That is why you cannot begin preaching Christ in Russia 'from ground zero.' It is impossible and silly to oversimplify Christianity here, and to ignore the indigenous cultural heritage which is deeply intertwined with our understanding of Christianity. But many foreign missionaries do not understand this, or they think there are no deep issues to consider. They are only too glad to turn the weaknesses of the Russian people, along with their spiritual illiteracy - inevitable after seventy years of the communist-atheist oppression - to their own advantage.

Protestants have used the example of branches taken from Christ's metaphor, "I am the vine, you are the branches . . ." (Jn 15.5) to demonstrate that each confession is only a branch of the true Church. This example may work nicely in the West, but it doesn't work in Russia. It won't satisfy anybody. Russians look upon the Church as the unique Body of Christ, and it is impossible for the branches to grow on a human body.

In terms of immediate Church practices, it is necessary to stop the practice of rebaptizing former Protestants, a practice which is now spreading in the Russian Orthodox Church. Before the revolution this practice was unknown in Russia. Incidentally, before the revolution Protestants in Russia also thought that the Russian Orthodox baptism was quite valid. But now very often American Protestants are found rebaptizing those who have already been baptized according to the Russian Orthodox tradition. This practice is dangerous and an abomination. It is the most obvious and visible sign of the disrespect, disregard, and even loathing of different

Protestant denominations toward Russian Orthodoxy and the Body of Christ. Are we Russian Orthodox 'Christian' or not? Criticism of others must not lead to such hatred and disregard and its accompanying practice of rebaptizing.

Conversions, however, are inevitable if you are preaching. While you must help those whom you have converted, that doesn't mean that Protestants in Russia must inevitably build their own churches. It is preferable to choose a church or community that already exists in a concrete place, and let the convert go there. Certainly if Russian believers do want to organize their own communities and build their own new churches, this must be a free, and legally guaranteed act.¹

Russian Orthodox and Protestant believers can collaborate in fields such as evangelism, mission, catechism, humanitarian aid and charity, publishing and distributing books. The most difficult part of the problem is finding a common language with the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet it is most desirable to promote some contacts, or interaction, or networking to coordinate plans and actions. Most often this can be done only through humility and mutual repentance. Repentance will make Christians closer to Christ and to each other.

¹Of interest, the new law on religious freedom, which went into effect January 1, 1998, prevents this.

