

Response to Alexander I. Negrov's - *Why Is There No Russian Protestant Theology?*

by Evgeni V. Pavlov

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When the title of an essay is as intriguing and controversial as the one by Alexander I. Negrov¹, it makes one wonder why there was almost no reaction to this very interesting and thought-provoking perspective on the situation in Postsoviet Russia. The issue of the existence or non-existence of so-called “Russian Protestant theology” raised by Negrov is very important. Though he does not propose to analyze thoroughly the history and the present state of Protestant theology in Russia, his “personal outcry” is an example of an attempt to articulate and comprehend the present theological situation. Since the article was published in February of 1997, it would be appropriate to review some of its propositions about the situation in Russian Protestant theology.

Alexander Negrov starts with the question whether “at the present time in Russia we have a Russian theology.” His answer, in brief, is: “No, we don’t have any Russian Protestant theology.” Therefore Negrov wants us to understand “why our theology is not yet formulated or systematized.” In order to do so Negrov analyses three areas of problems that prevented Russian Protestant theology from appearing and developing: *external* problems (the Communist regime, emergence of Russian liberal theology and popularization of Christianity both by Orthodoxy and Protestantism), *internal* problems (the lack of systematic “theological preaching” in the church, concentration on “forms, not on belief,” and failure to address theological errors²) and “the chief obstacle” (the

¹Alexander I. Negrov with Miriam Charter, “Why is there no Russian ‘Protestant’ theology in Russia? A personal outcry.” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 17 (February 1997): 1-11 See also: [http://cis.georgefox.edu/ree/html_articles/NEGROV.PRT.html]

²Negrov mentions a *fourth* problem (7-8) that is rooted in ecclesiology, but after careful reading it becomes apparent that this problem is the same as the already mentioned problem of the lack of “systematic theological preaching.”

lack of “idea” in post-Communist Russian Protestantism³). The main conclusion of the essay is that the situation is not hopeless and the main proposal is to develop “Russian Protestant theology.”

While the essay is written in a very personal and non-pretentious manner, the author makes several statements that not only hinder the communication of his main propositions, but make it almost impossible to agree with the presentation of the situation in Russian Protestant theology. In this response we will point out some of those misinterpretations and present our own understanding of the situation. In order to make this discussion productive and profitable, we will also point out the positive role of Negrov’s essay as an attempt to understand and interpret the present theological situation in Russia.

The *first*, and most regrettable problem of the essay is its inability to provide the reader with any plausible definition of theology. Negrov’s question about the existence of Russian Protestant theology is unanswerable from the very start, because he does not even attempt to explain what exactly is meant by theology. Only after one reads the essay several times does it appear that the author has in mind something very different from a usual understanding of theology as the attempt to interpret man, the world and God, to set out a *perspective* intended to illuminate one’s life. The understanding of theology presented in the essay is some sort of an *academic* theology, i.e. theology as combination of faculties, schools, books, and articles. Negrov’s concept of theology presupposes the existence of a “formulated and systematized” body of knowledge. The perception that an academic theology is *the* theology is very obvious in the essay, but the opinion that “our [Protestant] theology did not develop during seventy years” is an opinion that cannot and should not be accepted.

Theology as a perspective that influences the believer’s everyday life cannot be simply identified with academic theology as *highly specialized intellectual activity*. “Christian theology has to do with the meaning dimension of Christian practices, the

³The discussion of this “chief obstacle” is extensive but it does not quite address the issue. It is not very clear what Negrov means by “idea.” At some point he defines it as “faithfulness to God,” but later he uses the concept in some puzzling expressions like: “many Christians ceased to believe in ‘idea’ any more,” or “[the] ‘idea’ seemed to disappear... today’s Russians are a people without “idea.”

theological as part of all socially significant Christian action.”⁴ Was there a theology in the Protestant churches during the seventy years of the Communist regime? Of course there was, and there still is. The very fact of the existence of those Protestant churches that struggled against the regime but continued to profess themselves as Christian churches tells us that there was a certain set of theological affirmations about God and about human life in the light of this perception of God. Whatever may be the reasons for Negrov’s pessimism about the theological situation, they cannot be based on the reality of the present state of affairs in Russian Protestantism. His claim that the “church leaders in those years [of the Communist regime] did not have the courage or the enthusiasm to introduce theological education in Russia” (3) is simply not true. There always existed a strong and clear understanding of the need for theological education in the main Protestant denominations. For example, the Correspondent Bible Courses (*Zaochnie Bibleiskie Kursi*) that opened in Moscow in 1968 only became possible through the constant and very enthusiastic efforts of the leaders of the Baptist Union.⁵

Of course, we need to add that Negrov is right in pointing out the impossibility for a genuine Russian Protestant *academic* theology to appear during the time of the Soviet anti-religious regime. This type of theology needs certain institutional support, such as the availability of facilities, libraries, a student body, and a community of scholars. But his treatment of the *everyday theology* of Christians as non-significant or even non-existent shows the very grave misconception about the nature and tasks of theology. There is an undeniable connection between academic theology and the practice of Christian life in local churches. But we would be wrong to suppose that today when there is freedom to develop academic theology, this actual development will express itself in publishing books and articles, theological conferences and new Bible schools. Unfortunately, within Russian Protestantism there is the opinion that as soon as

⁴See the very interesting discussion of the relation between academic theology and “everyday theology” in Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology*. Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 65-92.

⁵The different kinds of Bible courses existed in the Baptist Union until 1929, so technically there were only 39 years of the complete impossibility of any kind of theological training. Even then the practice of personal discipleship or mentoring was widely accepted. (Based on the personal conversation of the author with Tamara Platova, Raisa Sidorova, Walter Mitzkevich).

seminaries are open and the first graduates are “sent out into the world,” we will experience a tremendous change in the theological life of our denominations. There are mutual expectations in the midst of both newly organized theological schools and local Protestant churches - academia expects to be accepted and encouraged in its difficult task of educating people for ministry while the church expects some results, some change in the overall theological situation. But unless the local community of believers sees the *need* for academic theology, unless the professors and lecturers realize their indebtedness to the everyday theology of Christian life, there will be nothing but complaints about the ineffectiveness and uselessness from both sides.

The *second* problem of the essay is its use of the expression “Russian Protestant Church” - what exactly is this church body? Unlike Roman Catholic or Orthodox Churches, neither Protestants in the West nor Protestant groups in the East can claim any sort of unity (either hierarchical or doctrinal) that would give them a right to refer to its denomination using the expression “Protestant Church.” It is possible, of course, to refer to Protestant *theology*, but only in a very wide and inclusive manner. What moves us to point out this mistake in Negrov’s essay is not simply this misuse of the phrase “Russian Protestant church,” but the historical reality: the essay undoubtedly refers to Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists while refusing to identify this body of Protestant believers directly. The very amorphous and general term allows Negrov to express his opinions, but never actually identify or explicitly name either the concrete example or the particular situation. The attempt to analyze the theological situation without making any references to any theological groups is doomed to be “a personal outcry” and nothing more.

There is no need to argue that Evangelical Christians-Baptists are the most influential Protestant group in Postsoviet Russia. But Negrov’s position on the theological situation in the Baptist churches is based not on the scrupulous analysis of the problem, but on the emotional and quite moving expectation that is represented in certain circles - expectation to see the immediate changes in both church and society only a few years after Bible schools, seminaries and other educational institutions were open. Unfortunately, this longing for quick results expresses itself either in militant opposition to any attempt to formulate theology (“*we* did not go to seminaries!”) or in “personal

outcries” of those who are desperate to change “the Protestant church” in a blink of an eye (“why is there no Russian Protestant theology?”). A tendency to dismiss the seventy years of Communist regime as a period of theological stagnation only leads us to conclude that we have to *create* “Russian Protestant theology” *ex nihilo* and this is simply not true. Protestants have a theological tradition that should not be dismissed as non-existent or rejected as not academic or not sophisticated enough to be a theology. The only way for Russian Protestants to succeed in the establishment of their theological position and presentation of it in the public sphere is to turn back to their roots, carefully reconsider its theological inheritance, reevaluate and revitalize what we have, and stop crying about what we do not yet have.

The *third* mistake, or rather misrepresentation, in Negrov’s essay is a quite primitive perception of the religious situation in Russia after the fall of Communism. Even though the Russian Orthodox Church seems to have become very influential and, as Negrov points out, is trying “to extend its influence into society,” studies show that the real *theological* influence of Orthodoxy is far more modest than its political and social influence.⁶ Theologically, Russian Orthodoxy has no advantage over Protestant theology. There is no need to be afraid of the growing Orthodox presence in the public sphere. Negrov seems to be very concerned that the name “Russian theology” might be used by those from “a liberal stream.” Why should that bother a Protestant theologian? Negrov is worried by the lack of opportunity for a Protestant theologian to express his/her ideas in the public realm through the publication of his/her books and articles or through reading lectures at conferences or symposiums. His presentation of the situation draws a very distorted picture of academic theological life in Russia. It looks like there are many theologians out there eager to publish books, write articles and present the results of their research for the judgement of a wider theological circle. But this is not quite the case.

⁶S. Filatov points this out very clearly: “In fact, the Orthodox church has been granted semi-official status... However, in the purely religious sphere the success of the Russian Orthodox Church has been far more modest. Surveys show that fewer than 5 per cent (according to some sources, only 2 per cent) of the population are practicing Orthodox believers.” See S. Filatov, “Protestantism in Postsoviet Russia: An Unacknowledged Triumph” in *Religion, State and Society* 28 no 1 (2000), 93. See also Lyudmila Vorontsova and Sergei Filatov, “Religiosity and Political Consciousness in Postsoviet Russia,” in *Religion, State and Society* 22 no 4 (1994): 397-402; Tony Carnes, “Modern Moscow: Its Religious and Moral Values,” in *Urban Mission* 13 (March 1996):29-41.

The personal experience of this writer indicates that publishers come and ask for a book to publish, editors ask for an article and there are plenty of opportunities to express an opinion in the public realm.

The other issue that Negrov raises with his complaint about those with “a liberal stream” is crucial for an understanding of the future of Russian theology - it is the issue of existent theological diversity and, as a result, theological *pluralism*. Negrov expresses very well the ambiguous stand that many conservative Protestant theologians seem to take - they want to be heard and accepted in the wider theological discussion, and they want to be invited to all sorts of theological conferences and public events, but, on the other side, they are not willing to listen and learn from the plurality of theological approaches, even as they intend to present their own position (“thus says the Word of God” theology, as Negrov nicely puts it). What will be the result of such an appearance in the public realm? The nature of (post)modern theological pluralism is such that there needs to be at least a consensus on what constitutes a truly Christian theology (as different, for example, from a philosophy of religion) before any attempt at theological dialogue might be conducted.

One very crucial characteristic of theology is its profound public nature. In other words, we don't have a theology unless we are ready and able to present it for critical discussion either in the church or in the wider public sphere of the secular society. A set of personal beliefs that is not critically evaluated but accepted on the basis of naive trust in the authority of the “presbyter-figure” is called superstition, not theology. Are we ready to face the critical evaluation of our theological position in the public sphere? A. Negrov and others must consider learning from “those from a liberal stream” or this public appearance will be simply an attack like those that are unfortunately very common in the interdenominational “dialogue.”

The purpose of this response to Alexander I. Negrov's essay is to bring to attention the important and certainly very critical issue of the definition of theology. Through analysis of Negrov arguments we have tried to point out some obvious misrepresentations of the actual situation in Russian Protestant theology. We have identified the difference between academic theology as highly specialized intellectual activity, and the everyday theology of Christians who profess their understanding of God

and humanity and act according to this understanding. We have tried to point out some of the mistakes that Negrov makes in presenting the situation in Russia, while trying to give him credit for some thought-provoking comments and insights. The formulation of any theological position, especially that of Russian Protestants, cannot be conducted in a vacuum and without critical discussion. With this response we intend not only to provide such a critical evaluation of the issues, but also to support the effort rather than discourage any further attempts at reflection on the present situation in Russian theology.