

**REFLECTIONS ON THE URGENCY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION - AFTER 20 YEARS**

by Walter Sawatsky

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In the years leading to the moral revolutions of 1989 that swept across eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the urgency of theological education, or of “leadership training” in more popular parlance, became a striking feature. In a presentation at a conference at Rice University in Texas (April 1993) I had declared that the future direction of the churches in the post-USSR, “will depend on the success of major new initiatives in theological education, from systematic Sunday School instruction ... through seminary and perhaps also university education.”¹⁶ Those were the heady days when new seminaries and academies for the Orthodox were being reopened, and new colleges, seminaries and “universities” were started by the Baptists and Pentecostals. To hear their leaders was to get the impression that each was better than the competition and had no problems.

For these short reflections I propose thinking along several periods of development - the beginnings of new schools (1990-93), the formation of an accrediting or self-regulating structure for the free church Protestant schools and some actions by the Orthodox Bishops council to clarify the task around 1994. The third phase might be to draw attention to a shift in thinking once the pent up need to catch up on theological education had abated in the late 1990s, and a younger generation with little church experience was contemplating a clergy career. Finally, a fourth phase concerns the drastic structural rethinking about schools that has been in process since about 2003 when the slippage started. The slippage I have in mind was triggered for Protestant schools in particular by another precipitous drop in funding from America as reaction to starting the war in Iraq, which coincided with a drop in student enrolments. That was when support for indigenous faculty became tenuous, even as more of the guest professors from abroad stopped coming so regularly. There was also a slippage in consensus on what must be deemed good and necessary theological education.

Twenty years after 1989 theological education is now a major point of anxiety in most of the confessional traditions. I can speak more knowledgeably about the Baptist and Pentecostal schools, less so on Uniate and Catholic schools, and least well about Orthodox schools. In part that is because there has been much less debate about Orthodox schools in the media, where it is worth wondering why that is so. Most of the material we have published in *REE* about religious education for Orthodox has concerned teaching religion in the public schools, and assessing how attitudes to the political world differed between university students from secular schools, and those in Orthodox schools.

¹⁶Walter Sawatsky, “Visions in Conflict: Starting Anew Through the Prism of Leadership Training” in Niels C. Nielson, jr. *Christianity After Communism: Social, Political, and Cultural Struggle in Russia*. (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1994) 113-136, p.120

Visions in Conflict - Were They Resolved?

At the beginning, I drew attention to what I called “visions in conflict”. For the Orthodox, for example, it was striking how quickly some restatement of the “Russian Idea” got formulated. In Berdaev’s understanding from a century earlier, there was something unique about Russia’s Christian mission. In the early 1990s there were references to the reformist ideas of the *Vekhi* group, but by 1994 that had largely disappeared. Instead, as a speaker at the annual Slavic Studies convention (Boston, November 2009) showed from a systematic survey of expressions of Russian nationalism and xenophobia, the Russian Idea had morphed into some idea of Russia as Third Rome, or into what he called the Third Temple, namely the preoccupation with occultic and apocalyptic visions whereby Russia’s destiny was to triumph over the evils coming from the West. A set of essays, largely written by philosophers who were reacting to the reaction against the results of Perestroika, utilized the Russian Idea more constructively and positively in articulating a search for a new Russian identity, thereby still focusing on the so called Russianness of the population within the Russian Federation at present.¹⁷ One important question they were asking was: “is Orthodoxy able to fill the current ideological void”, whereas Evgenii Rashkovskii, reflecting on the basic principles for a civil society, noted that Catholicism had “allowed for more freedom for civil society” and the fruit of the Protestant Reformation was “a more privatized sense of the covenant between God and man.”¹⁸ So the visions in conflict were present within the Orthodox clergy and intelligentsia itself, a bit too easily categorized as conservative and moderate or liberal.

There were priests from a reformist minority within Orthodoxy in prominent urban centers, like Alexander Men, or Alexander Borisov (organizer of a new Russian Bible society), or Grigory Chistiakov as Men’s successor in forming theological schools. The existing seminaries and even theological academies in Moscow (Zagorsk) and Kiev soon had printing presses that were circulating old books and tracts against the sects. The regular seminaries that then Father Hilarion Alfayev had in view when he critiqued the program, the curriculum, and the living standards of Orthodox seminaries, an outsider might describe as run by teachers and administrators with a minority complex, keenly aware of how low scholarly standards had become.¹⁹ So it is difficult to speak of a common vision for theological education in Orthodox schools over the past two decades.

Another conflict was the emergence in short order of four Orthodox jurisdictions in competition in Ukraine, of divisions within the church in Belarus. Very quickly too, the long suppressed Uniate Church laid claim to one third of ROC parishes in Ukraine. The Greek Catholic University of Lviv very quickly emerged as one of the better organized and financed schools - offering high quality scholarship for those training for the priesthood, but also a wide range of liberal arts disciplines in which a Catholic Christian perspective shaped things. The news service from one of its study centers soon became an important source of information on church life in Ukraine, reporting on all denominations. In part this was related to the fact that the institute on religion at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences had progressed toward a more inclusive and appreciative stance toward the plurality of Christian communities in Ukraine, issuing studies that informed on many issues of religion in society.

For Protestants, where by 1989 it was the Baptists and Pentecostals who represented the statistically important streams, compared to ethnic minority traditions of Lutherans and Reformed,

¹⁷ Wendy Hellman, ed. *The Russian Idea. In search of a New Identity*. (Bloomington IN: Slavica Publishers, 2004)

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p15.

¹⁹ Hilarion (Alfayev), “Orthodox Theological Education in Russia: Problems and Tasks”, delivered at a consultation in Belgrade in 1997, was published in *Souroz* and in *REE* in 1998, and was included in the author’s essays: Bishop Hilarion Alfayev, *Orthodox Witness Today*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006).

diversity of perspective was inherent in being Protestant. I described them as “a contradictory mix of mystical and rationalist visions of Christianity”²⁰ Nevertheless, as other observers have also noted since, “the more democratized the society has become since, the more suited the evangelical way of being church had come to be seen.”²¹ That is, the distance between clergy and laity was minimal, compared to the Orthodox world, and active laity soon became the theological leaders through the schools, since ordination was not a declared prerequisite for teaching in seminary. So in both Baptist and Pentecostal contexts, there was soon a tension over church leadership between the denominational leadership and the leadership of the schools, few of the latter subordinate to their denomination initially.

Other differences that quickly emerged concerned approaches to mission and evangelism, much of that articulated in terms of which western models to follow, or how to remain distinct from the western missions crowding the main cities and attracting media attention sufficiently to frighten Orthodox leaders. With the formation of separate national church structures, national differences in managing theological education also became a factor. Perhaps the most pronounced difference was the foreignness of the missionary teachers in the theological schools.

By 1993 I had realized that “Protestant pluralism appears to have come to stay.”²² Indeed in the initial post-Soviet years, both within the former USSR and observers from outside, often relying on Weberian analysis, had posited that denominational pluralism was a desirable end, given how much of society had been deeply secularized by the rationalism of Marxism, so the more rationalist Protestant traditions might be more suitable vehicles for finding the way to faith in modernity.

For the Roman Catholics, mostly outsiders from Poland, aside from the Catholic culture of Lithuania, it seemed appropriate to ponder whether they had the most reason to feel triumphant. In the classic delineation of churchly stances toward the communist states, the opposition to communism of Polish, Slovak and Mindzenty’s Hungarian Catholic churches, seemed to have won the day. I found myself as historian pointing out that “the entire modern history of Russian Orthodox efforts in theological education intersects at crucial points with the Roman educational approach.” But I was not alone in observing that “... the intent was invariably ambiguous, vacillating between fruitful borrowing or outright efforts to convert to Catholicism.”²³ A statement from the new joint commission on theological dialogue of 1993 even spoke of common work toward “the formation of priests”.²⁴

What Did They Think Was Needed? Leadership Training? Seminary, College or Secondary?

When the flurry of school formation started, what the initiators seemed to think was, that as many schools as possible were needed, and at all levels from secondary through college to seminary and university; or alternatively from correspondence training to pastors seminars meeting in week long sessions in some large hotel. Soon some sorting out of thinking emerged, to clarify what theological educators thought was need.

In 2004 the Ecumenical Theological Education program of the WCC appointed Father Vladimir Fedorov to a part-time role to foster theological education concerns in central and eastern Europe, including the area of his own church, the Russian Orthodox Church. Dr. Fedorov had been

²⁰ Sawatsky in Nielson. p 118

²¹ Ibid p119

²² Ibid. p120.

²³ Ibid p121.

²⁴ Ibid

teaching by then for 25 years at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, and had more recently founded a research center for missiology and ecumenism, in so doing published a major volume of writings by various authors to serve as text in seminaries to teach missiology, as recommended by the Bishops Sobor of 1994. When Fedorov spoke at a conference on theological education held in Prague in February 2005, he made two major points.²⁵ First he drew from a paper titled "Theological Education in Russian Orthodoxy 1917-1943" co-written by Alexander Bovkalo, vice-director of the library of the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg, which conveyed the depth of commitment to keeping theological education alive during that long period of severe testing, when the above noted range of approaches to theological education were all attempted. Secondly, Fedorov reviewed the varieties of efforts since 1943 to revive theological education in order to articulate what theological education in post-communist Russia must focus on, when it proceeds from the postulate that theological education is mission. Above all, the education must focus on "Christian culture" as "central theme in missiology", noting that this constituted a "new subject in Russia's religious institutions."²⁶ To do so required drawing on the rich literature of the social sciences that had shaped missiology in recent decades, and he also stressed how much active Orthodox laity must be involved in such theological education.

Bishop Hilarion Alfayev returned to his expectations of the theological schools in a paper delivered in 1999 in Italy.²⁷ There he couched his arguments in terms of expectations for Orthodox theology for the 21st century. Rare to what was being said in the post-Soviet Orthodox seminaries, he stressed the high value of the "rich legacy of Russian theological scholarship" of the late 19th century, which had been creatively continued by emigree theologians and philosophers. Indeed he identified at least five main theological streams emerging from Paris and later developed in America,²⁸ noting with satisfaction that now (1999) "their books are accessible to Russian readers", but are "not studied systematically in the theological schools."²⁹ Then followed wide ranging remarks calling for a new translation of the Bible as a cooperative project, the production of a Bible commentary series. He also called for more ecumenical dialogue, including at the grassroots level, with the remark that "even everyday ecumenism demands a theological basis".³⁰

Then followed a longer quote from then Metropolitan Kirill³¹ where Kirill had stated: "Today we face a unique opportunity to include all healthy theological forces in the process of reflection: theological schools, monasticism, hierarchy, clergy and individual theologians. The time has come for serious debate on the participation of the Orthodox church in the ecumenical movement... those engaging in it should be theologically educated, responsible and spiritually

²⁵ Vladimir Fedorov, "An Orthodox View on Theological Education as Mission" *Religion in Eastern Europe*, XXV, 3 (August 2005), 1-37. The paper contains numerous references to archival documents.

²⁶ Here quoting from an abbreviated chapter under the title "Orthodox View of Theological Education as Mission" in Peter F. Penner, ed. *Theological Education as Mission*, Schwarzenfeld DE: Neufeld Verlag, 2006, p.98.

²⁷ Hilarion Alfayev, *Orthodox Witness Today*, 125-145, having appeared in *Ecumenical Review* Vol. 52, no. 3, (2000), 309-25.

²⁸ Ibid. They were Florovsky's return to Patristics, Bulgakov's interweaving of Patristics with German idealism and Vladimir Soloviev's thought, exponents of liturgical revival such as Schmemmann and Afanassief, those drawing resources from Russian culture, history and literature, and fifth, the Russian religious philosophical school linked with Lossky and Zenkovsky. p130.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid p138

³¹ A decade later, in February 2009, Metropolitan Kirill became the new patriarch. He had been Hilarion's mentor and in March 2009, Bishop Hilarion succeeded Kirill in his position as Head of the Patriarchates Department of Foreign Relations, also elevated to Archbishop, and then in May 2010 to Metropolitan of Volokolamsk.

experienced persons.”³² From there Hilarion moved to a statement of the need for “a reform of the entire system of theological education in the Russian Orthodox church”, something which he noted “has been voiced for a long time.”³³ In May 2010 when Hilarion had become Metropolitan of Volokolamsk and head of the Department of International Relations, he issued a call to all students at seminaries and theological academies to pay more attention to learning foreign languages. “It is important that ministers of the church who serve abroad and represent our Patriarchate, know the language of the local population...[and] in order to witness to Orthodoxy, must know the religious culture of our country and be able to transmit that heritage correctly to persons of diverse origin.”³⁴

The Changing Student and Changing Constituency

A twenty year perspective on the theological education story causes us to underline two important realities. There were notable changes in the students who came to study. Secondly, the supporting constituency changed in several ways.

Some senior hierarchs, and some senior Protestant clergy were the primary organizers of the new schools. Among the evangelical Protestants, there was soon a program in place, using quarterly study modules, to enable the rectors to obtain masters degrees, whereas much of the basic teaching was done by visiting professors from the west, or by persons who had earlier taught in the Orthodox and Baptist seminaries. In both cases the course offerings were supplemented by persons with higher education who had converted to Christianity, and could retool for teaching theology. Most of the indigenous faculty that began teaching in the past decade emerged from the first or second cohort of theological students, that small part of them which showed academic promise and were able to secure scholarships of some sort to continue toward doctoral studies in the West. There were only a few students who came to the Orthodox seminaries, such as St. Vladimir’s and Holy Cross in America, and then returned. I suspect more managed to do graduate work in Britain, in addition to Bishop Hilarion completing a PhD with Kallistos Ware at Oxford, others did so by going to Catholic schools, or participating in programs at the Bossey Institute of the WCC. One who stands out was Alexei Bodrev, who did a PhD in Old Testament through Regent College in Britain, where the Baptist David Russell was his doctoral adviser. That world of western Christian thinking is obvious in the way the St. Andrews Theological Institute that Bodrev had led in Moscow, has shaped its emphases and programs. I will return to their translation and publication work shortly.

Generally speaking the first several cohorts of theological students began to exercise leadership at many levels in the Baptist and Pentecostal churches and their denominational programs. In the mid 1990s, a younger type of student became typical, someone who came to the seminary from secondary school, essentially obtaining the equivalent of a BA degree in Bible and Religion, to use the American parallel. These hoped for some career in ministry, but lacked the experience that shaped the careers of the earlier student cohorts. So it was this group who were less easily incorporated into pastoral ministry and were also accused of seeking to foster a different theology (a more Reformed doctrine tradition, compared to the more Arminian holiness orientation of the churches) they had learned from the American teachers.

A smaller part of some of the Protestant schools I visited included new converts, who came

³² Ibid. P139

³³ Ibid p140.

³⁴ *Europaica Bulletin* #179, May 18, 2010, p. 17, circulated by email from europaica@orthodoxeurope.org. Translated from the French by author.

with solid university level education and whose theological study now involved trying to think through the theology of the faith they had accepted. From this group there are slowly emerging a new group of scholars who have been working more deliberately with the historic roots of the Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal traditions in their research, and are on the way to articulating a contextually fitting theology. Some of these students have been meeting each other regularly at the twice annual gatherings of doctoral students at International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague (with the degree granted from the University of Wales), and as a result their combined scholarship is more linked to their denominations. Others, such as Andrei Puzynin, or an older man named Sergei Timchenko, both active in an adult theological education program in Kiev, studied at the University of London and at Alliance Seminary in Nyack, New York, respectively. In their case, this has led to a stronger sense of the cultural shaping of Evangelicalism and hence their effort at fostering an Evangelical community not as locked into sectarian mentalities learned due the isolation of the Soviet era, but more of an inter-evangelical mentality giving higher value to well educated members.

Over the past three years a new crisis has affected even the most respected of the Protestant schools. That has been the near total disappearance of the full-time student, living and being fed in dormitory facilities. The beautiful campuses built largely with largesse from the West, including many thousands of sweat hours by volunteers from America, are standing nearly empty. I am referring to the present situation of the Moscow Baptist Theological Seminary, or its sister in Odessa, or Donetsk Christian University. Its faculty are now bringing courses to the regions, short one or two week intensive sessions that take a teacher from Moscow to Omsk, to Novosibirsk to Irkutsk, before starting the schedule over again. Will this be a short lived dip before a student body returns? Will some drastically new models for theological education at many academic levels emerge? Will current indigenous faculty manage to complete their dissertations in this interval, presumably by finding a scholarship or other source of income to see them through?

From Dearth of Theological Resources to Very Impressive

It has been most impressive to observe the steady improvement in resources for theological education. When the schools started, they were often working with at most a few thousand books, and no journals, and too much was in English which students had barely started to learn. Over twenty years an organized program of translation of theological works for seminaries has been published and a functioning network of circulation of those books worked. The computer revolution also made possible new economies. The Euro-Asiatic Accrediting Association (EAAA) has produced about 5 CDs containing copies of rare books, so that when I now teach the history of Slavic Evangelicals, for example, it is easy to assign, even in far away Almaty Bible Institute in Kazakhstan, readings from the sources.

One way to measure the change in theological resources is to visit the Logos bookstore just off Nevsky Prospect, the major artery through the center of St. Petersburg. Initially opened in the basement of a property confiscated from the Lutherans in the 1930s, an ecumenical charity society began to sell popular and serious scholarly books on theology. It is now a handy way to notice the many guides to prayer and worship for Orthodox laity, other sections devoted to Evangelical and Protestant publications. Particularly striking are the long list of books in translation sponsored and published through St. Andrews Institute, an Orthodox theological school supported by an ecumenical circle of friends in Britain and USA. It includes books on theology and exegesis deemed important text book material in American seminaries. Where the EAAA linked Protestant schools had translated older histories of Christianity (from the 1960s and earlier) until finally a Russian

edition of the still popular two volume Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez appeared a half dozen years ago. The St. Andrews publication included the five volume The Christian Tradition, by Jaroslav Pelikan, probably still regarded as one of the most erudite histories of the development of doctrine over two thousand years. Always broad in his perspective, Pelikan's reception into the Orthodox church on the campus of St. Vladimir's Seminary (New York) in 1998, which he saw as a natural progression in his thinking, may have helped to add his writings to good Russian Orthodox libraries and schools.

Who Paid? Who Should Pay?

My final reflections concern the most problematic aspect of theological education - who paid? Who should pay? These are questions where the obvious answer most leaders gave, when they articulated what they would like to see happening, was that 'our churches need to provide the financial support, if theological education is to have a long term future.' Further, free education for students would also no longer be possible. Yet almost immediately in the early 1990s, patterns that seem to be irreversible came into play. Schools were sponsored by some organization from the West. That included campus, library, and food and lodging for students and faculty. Often the visiting professors contributed their services gratis, and a congregation, a denomination or a group of friends paid the travel costs.

Has there been some change in local funding of the schools? Indeed, among the better respected schools, its leaders have been able to foster a small but growing commitment by the churches, and asking students to pay a nominal tuition fee. One key problem worth naming here, however, is the reality that for both the Baptist and Pentecostal schools, notably in Russia and Ukraine, the denominational leadership has been singularly inattentive to the needs for theological education, preferring instead to focus on evangelism and mission projects that would increase their statistical importance. Some of that inattention could be accounted for by the insecurity of the leaders, popularly elected, who lacked theological training and relied too much on personal charisma.

Here too, Hilarion's vision is relevant for what it will take for a dynamic role in society by Russian Orthodoxy to become possible. His themes for a theology for the 21st century church are not that different from those of the Protestants. Whether the current generation of leadership will manage to direct the church leaders toward such goals remains to be seen. At least Hilarion himself now holds the second most influential position within the Russian Orthodox church, so there may be reason for optimism.