

TENSIONS BETWEEN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND AMERICA SINCE 1989 - A REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

by Walter Sawatsky

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The relationship between Evangelical Christianity in America and the USSR was always strained and filled with ambiguities. In the first place, whereas Evangelicalism around the world is often seen as the fruit of the Anglo-American missionary activism of the past 150 years, that is not really the case for Evangelicals in Euro-Asia. Slavic evangelicalism emerged as a renewal movement, a grass roots Bible movement, out of the context of an Orthodoxy in crisis in the mid-nineteenth century. It quickly found its peers among similar movements in Germany and Britain that were new denominational expressions of Pietist renewal among west European Protestant and Catholic societies. But the Slavic evangelical movement spread more rapidly in the 20th century, before and after the Russian Revolution, similar now to the expansion of American Evangelicalism across its continent.

The idea flow from America to Russia was facilitated by Russian and other Slavic immigrants to America who began reverse missions to Russia. By 1929, virtually all such contacts had broken off. Resumption of relations after 1956 were first of all through the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) (whose headquarters had moved to Washington DC from Britain), some theological study by Russians at Spurgeon's College and soon also participation in conferences of the Christian Peace Conference (Prague) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). On the other hand, an influential wing of American Evangelicalism began supporting underground Bible smuggling for an underground church, especially during the 1970s and denounced the leadership of the by then officially recognized Baptist Union in Moscow.

In rather short order after 1989, the wide network of relationships between the Soviet Baptist Union and the ecumenical structures of the WCC, of the BWA and other sister denominational bodies such as the World Pentecostal Congress and Mennonite World Conference had ended. A new leadership group within the post-Soviet national Baptist unions, lacking experience in such ecumenical relations, now became part of many, but

rapidly shifting partnerships with Evangelical organizations that till recently had attacked them, but who were now offering cash and missionaries to effect the quick conversion of Russia for Christ. Rarely were these arrangements decided at a union level, mostly they were survival strategies by enterprising individual pastors and leaders, persuading others to join them.¹

Some of those patterns of relationship are the subject of this reflective commentary. It is organized around three groups of topics - the main trajectories of global Christianity since 1988, the variety of Slavic Evangelical attempts at inter-church alliances, and the American factor.

What Happened to Global Christianity since 1988?

Let us begin with the former Soviet Union. Initially there appeared to be a quite amazing phenomenon of Russians from all walks of life seeking Christian faith. The desperate demand for more Bibles was filled within a few years, then the Bibles sat on the shelves as elsewhere in the West. Priests and pastors were busy baptizing, and lecturing to any number of groups from university study centers to factory workers. The Orthodox tripled the number of churches opened, Evangelical statistics suggested similar growth patterns.

Then came the economic collapse, and the turn from looking to the West, especially to Christian America for the post-Communist fix. There was the rise of nationalist xenophobia, mounting pressures to reverse the freedoms of religion established in the law on religion of 1990, and since 1997, not only were significant measures to curtail missionary work incorporated in the revised legislation on religion (in Russia), but rules for granting visas continue to tighten up.

We need to be reminded of another major development that also affected the churches deeply. With the break up of the Soviet Union, there emerged not only 15 independent countries, but the church bodies were also structurally nationalized. The issues that emerged have still not been resolved. Autocephally and autonomy of Orthodox churches in Ukraine and Belarus are not yet clarified, relationships to Armenian and Georgian churches are more strained than earlier, and, at a more serious level, there are numerous alternative church structures that have formed within Orthodoxy. The Evangelicals had an

¹For a more detailed treatment, see this author's "The Re-Positioning of Evangelical Christians-Baptists and Sister Church Unions between 1980 and 2005" in Sharyl Corrado & Toivo Pilli, eds. *East European Baptist History: New Perspectives*. (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007) 187-209.

All-Union structure that needed to be revised after 1990. They organized a Euro-Asiatic Federation of ECB Unions² and envisioned a rotating leadership to avoid national preferences. But the structure, as I have discussed more extensively elsewhere, lacked budget and authority. In effect, the national unions struggled to survive; some are still struggling.

Soviet Orthodox and Soviet Evangelical leaders had exercised a leadership role with their counterparts across eastern Europe. That quickly ended. Indeed, the frequency of intercourse between leaders dropped drastically due to financial strictures. Further, the agenda for finding their way in the emerging post Communist civil societies differed widely.

Finally in the short space of a mere 15 years, post Communist societies had shifted from representing the new missionary challenge to becoming one of the more resolutely secular and post Christian parts of the world. This is not the end of that story, surely, but for our purposes, what matters is that where Russia and East Europe had seemed to promise the renewal of mission, one which might help America in particular overcome its spreading pessimism about cross cultural mission, by the early part of the 21st century the post Communist world had been pushed to the margins.

So in restating the question - what happened to global Christianity since 1988? - when we note the major trends globally speaking, it turns out that the long Soviet era may have mattered more. During the 20th century, the ecumenical century, the Christian traditions re-discovered each other. It was the most remarkable overcoming of the deep rifts since the Reformation of the 16th century, not an overcoming of the structural divisions and the distinctiveness that each Protestant body had developed, but a spreading readiness to make room in the telling of the story, for what other Reformation traditions were trying to do. This was a process characterized by a Euro-Atlantic rapprochement. That is, to take the WCC example, the assemblies and the major work of the committees (especially Faith and Order) from 1948 through 1961 involved mainly Americans and west Europeans. The Orthodox world did not become seriously involved till the assembly in New Delhi in 1961, and in terms of having bloc influence in decision making or blocking, that did not really happen till after Canberra. My point is that the fundamental patterns of inter-church relations were established by persons from the Euro-Atlantic axis.

²The forced union of Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals and later Mennonites to form the legally recognized All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUSCECB), had by 1988 resulted in the fusion of the first two and the departure of Pentecostals and Mennonites into their own structures. Thus in Russian shorthand, what outsiders lumped under "Baptist", the insiders regularly referred to as ECB.

During that time, the eastern European and the Soviet churches were experiencing isolation. First in the Soviet sphere, when by at least 1929, all religious bodies were separated from the state and lost entitlements. All of them had been forced to become free churches, and, although they suffered losses from very hostile state actions to free citizens from the clutches of clergy, all the confessional bodies were able to function as free churches. They had become post-Constantinian churches much more so, than was true in the western part of Europe, where post Christendom talk became more trendy in the last third of the century. Largely missing from the story was serious discussion among church leaders about the ecclesial implications. Those organizations, such as the worker priests associations, or the Christian peace entities nationally, who were seeking to find a place for Christianity under socialism, were distrusted then. Since the communist collapse all such individuals and organizations were quickly dismissed to the dust bin of history, and theological discourse about church and society seemed to be reverting to some pre-communist era. That is, if we think of the WCC shifting to church and society themes in 1968 and thereby paying ever more attention to justice, peace and even ecological themes as third world leaders began to find their place in global leadership, once again the second world was bringing up the rear.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Jenkins' hyperbolic book about the *Next Christendom*, became a best seller and the general public began to repeat the refrain that Christianity had moved south³. The majority of Christians were living in the southern hemisphere, the major demographic shift for Christianity in the 20th century, and soon the religious centers would no longer be in America, Rome or Geneva, or even in Colorado Springs. The challenge to rethink many things from a southern perspective is still in its preliminary stages, western theologians rethink their verities grudgingly at best, but what has emerged so far is mostly a rearrangement of western ways of thinking.

Since my eventual goal is to comment on the prospect of American capability to be reconcilers for the east European inter-church conflicts, this broad survey forces one to notice more intensely why reconciliation is so fundamental to ecumenism. Eastern and western Christianity had grown apart long before 1054. Linguistically the Orthodox spoke Greek and the western Roman church spoke Latin. Between about 700 and 1400 yet another linguistic shift had taken place, where the new large Orthodox communions spoke Slavic and the

³The reference is to Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. A standard survey of "moving south" is Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (2000): 50-58.

western church was Germanicized. Both Georges Florovsky and Alexander Schmemmann wrote eloquently about the tragedy that Christians from east and west no longer cared that the relationship was over. To recover a caring sense of God's church as the whole *Oekumene* requires a sustained process of reconciliation. Reconciliation makes sense when repentance and conversion happen, as in the meaning of conversion of the churches used by the French ecumenical group, Groupes des Dombes.⁴ Being reconcilers does not make sense if the reconciling mediator is not part of the exercise in remembering, repenting and forgiving, a point I realize, many in my own peace making tradition appear not to grasp.

Russian Evangelical Attempts at Alliance Building

At a gathering of historians of Slavic evangelical history, I developed in more detail the patterns of re-positioning for leadership since 1988, so I will offer only a few highlights. One of the most persistent themes in Slavic evangelical history, strikingly so to younger Russian scholars, was the emphasis on unity. It is striking because the story lines are most readily organized around major conflicts and splits. The reason why the divisions troubled all parties so much, had to do with their realization that internal conflict undercut their public witness. The reality of national and ethnic identities should be respected, was an oft repeated refrain, but Evangelical Christianity was international, was fundamentally transnational.

There were new efforts at inter-church relationship building following 1989. One early idea was to buy a building opposite the central Baptist church in Moscow as an interchurch center - it would enable other evangelical Protestant groups to come together, western representatives would share a common office and their entire contribution to the new mission thrust was to be cooperative. By the time the authorities had sorted out whether the USSR, Russia, Moscow, or the local district owned the building, years had passed. One initiative was an attempt by the Peter Deyneka organization to establish an Evangelical Association whose purpose was to mediate the process of church registrations, and to secure recognition of denominations after the 1997 legal revisions. By then too, Deyneka's *Vozrozhdenie* organization had established hundreds of congregations in the Caucasus region and some south Ukrainian provinces that turned out to be a distinct denomination.

Several new Evangelical denominations emerged, that were more indigenous in origin and character initially, later increasingly beholden to support from the North American

⁴Groupe des Dombes. *For the Conversion of the Churches*. New York: World Council of Churches, 1993.

evangelical Christian and Missionary Alliance. Many leaders were sons of Baptist pastors, impatient to be more culturally adept to the new settings than was the ECB union forged under Soviet conditions. Others were well educated new converts. Together they sought a contemporary church style, appreciative of the best of Orthodoxy, and missionary in more than salvationist categories. Their efforts at bringing all the different groups together under an Evangelical Missionary Association, have so far resulted mainly in structured links between similar groups from Krasnodar, Rovno and Kiev.

Another more successful inter-church initiative has been the Euro-Asiatic Accrediting Association (EAAA). The desire to offer broadly recognized theological degrees continues to drive the effort not only to have an accrediting association where the assessment teams are from diverse traditions, it still serves as tool to bring theologians together for conferences, and to coordinate production of a broad list of books for use in the schools, including digital texts.

One more curious effort, was an initiative from the German Evangelical Alliance to form such an organization in Russia. Four annual meetings have been held in Moscow, with modest attendance, and an organizing meeting was held in Novosibirsk in the autumn of 2006. Alliance minded individuals, usually pastors, teachers and other activists, make up the Russian Evangelical Alliance, not churches, so its influence is limited to fostering discourse. Finally, the above impulses to alliance building do indicate a concern by Slavic Protestants for seeking relationships at inter-church and international levels. Some scholars met at the Baptist Seminary in Prague to consult on themes projected for Sibiu 2007, but it is striking that Slavic Protestants have nearly disappeared from the tables of gatherings of the WCC or Conference of European Churches.

Among those with an interest in Christians making a more organized contribution to the building of civil society there is often a sense that better cooperation with Orthodox leaders must be part of the effort. Yet the relationships to Orthodoxy, both at the grass roots level, and at central leadership levels, remain more difficult than they were during the Soviet era. Suffice it to say, that although the Evangelicals are unusually well suited to serve as bridge between East and West, and could be a vital bridge to the church in the South as well (since it represents the church of suffering), this is an agenda of many little projects, of slow but persistent changes in what is taught about the other, and the more broadly discernible changes may only come after 50 years.

An American Role in Reconciliation?

To raise the question how and whether American churches (and its leaders) can be agents of reconciliation, is a necessary one, but it is not an invitation to do an inventory of our skills, or to launch numerous well meaning projects. CAREE may understand itself as committed to seeking reconciliation, having attempted for nearly 50 years to bridge the East-West barrier. But the role of American Christianity is another matter. It is crucial to recognize that Americans are known by the Protestant flavor of their religion, and more recently the global impact of America's Evangelical Protestant aggressiveness has created impressions that even many Protestants abhor. The American side in the Cold War was maintained by apocalyptic expectations of the dire consequences of a victory by the "evil empire" (USSR), and we (American Christianity) had given assent to threaten such evil with the ultimate weapons of destruction. I need not remind us that the period from 1993 to the present is not a story of nuclear disarmament; our stockpiles and readiness remain. What we have been learning from the velvet revolutions in Europe and South Africa is that for nations to resolve differences entails absorbing the moral dimensions of their history. It is through the recovery of a moral memory that our nation, or our western nations, may find the political ethic, the public theology necessary for conflict resolution.⁵ I offer a few more paragraphs illustrating the kinds of acknowledgment of shortcomings, of our weakness as American Christians and churches, where we can focus our efforts best.

One can characterize the American Christian relationship to the former USSR between 1988 and 1996 as one of fascination with the dramatic transformations within the former USSR. That included responding with money and projects to the widespread interest in Bibles and in faith questions. Americans thought they could share experiences from the positive role that religion, in its egalitarian denominational style, had played in US culture and economics. Then came the turn away from American promises, triggered by the financial collapse of the economies and the American inspired economic models for post-communist reconstruction that could not withstand the pervasive corruption, but became part of it. But it was also triggered by the impressions gained from the influx of largely independent para-church missions, mostly of a free evangelical style, whose ignorance of Russian history and culture and the concomitant arrogance of dismissive attitudes, shown particularly by the Co-Mission leaders, toward existing evangelical communities, to say

⁵Since 1989 *Religion in Eastern Europe* has carried numerous articles on the moral revolution, on the necessary elements for truth telling and social reconciliation, and on delineating a public theology.

nothing of the world of Orthodoxy. That reality largely accounts for the increase of legal restrictions on missionaries thereafter.

Over the past decade several trends help account for the current low level of inter-church relations between American and Russian churches. The major ones include the spreading impact of the decline of the denominational model for shaping church policy, including its relationships abroad. Not only were the funds and staffing for ecumenical work early casualties of cutbacks, the capacity of the National Council of Churches to put forward a united program essentially disappeared. At the world level, between 1997 and 2002 the World Council of Churches was shifting to use of forums of consultation instead of commissions or committees with staff, budget and decision making powers.

The American parallel was the re-organization of NCCC and its CWS&M into minimal staffing for essential functions and creating forums where themes and former committees for relating to various regions of the globe were now discussed without clear structures for policy making. Another trend was the virtual disappearance of the world of East Europe and the former Soviet Union from the daily news, especially from the nightly television news. Already in advance of the September 11, 2001 attack on the twin towers in New York, American society was being told to view the threat of “terrorism” as the central foreign policy concern, soon linking this to fear of the radical side of middle eastern Islamic groups that now replaced fear of communist Russia as primary frame for the American’s world view. The right wing of American Evangelicalism became focused on seeing Armageddon come to pass in the Middle East, and its heavy funding of the new mission initiatives in Russia and Ukraine dropped drastically.

There was also a major shift in alignments for the Evangelical denominations of America and the former Soviet Union. The steady rise of a Christian option often noted during the Perestroika years preceding 1988, coincided with a transformation of the character of the largest Baptist denomination in the USA, namely the Southern Baptist Convention. That was the takeover of all southern Baptist institutions by a fundamentalist wing, profoundly convinced of the rightness of its grasp of Christian truth. The large SBC mission board, always more aggressively American in its style of missionizing than was true of other and smaller Baptist mission societies, now adopted a unilateralist approach to its foreign mission program. For Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, it meant that long term leaders, with linguistic capabilities and cultural sensitivities, including a substantive

appreciation of Baptist history in Europe, left the organization and were replaced by less experienced staff, who met the new fundamentalist criteria.

In the broad sweep I have in mind here, this resulted in the termination of major SBC funding for the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Europe, now taken on by an increasingly effective European Baptist Union in which East European leaders also took leadership. The fact of that seminary's move from near Zurich, Switzerland to Prague in the Czech Republic, symbolized its shifting orientation, which soon became a reality. SBC funding for denominational offices, such as that in Moscow, dropped in favor of SBC mission initiatives in central Asia done in competition to the existing indigenous Baptist unions there. So international trafficking of SBC and Russian Baptist leaders ended, the latter developing a variety of partners or sponsors with other Baptist unions or groups of churches in America and Europe. That Southern Baptist story may have been more explicitly ideological than others, but similar patterns were at work with other Evangelical Christian and Pentecostal alignments.

At a more optimistic level, these reflections can be seen to point to the fact that conditions are nearly ripe for a new generation of north Americans, coming to eastern Europe as students, as life long learners. There is enough group memory left to rebuild networks of earlier relationships. It remains striking, evident also in recent scholarship from eastern Europe, the degree to which the network of individuals who kept in touch through ecumenical organizations, or through the Evangelical alliances, or student movements help account for so many initiatives of mutual aid, and of transcending barriers to make the 20th century the ecumenical century it was. Once a more systematic publishing initiative to make known the work of these new scholars gets underway, it may well be that the recovery of moral memory across national and cultural boundaries can begin to shape the public theology deemed so necessary.