

PROSELYTIZING, MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AND THE LAW IN RUSSIA

By Tatiana Volguina

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have command you; and lo, I am with you always even to the end of the ages. Amen." (Mt. 28.18-19)

"Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: but as it is written, to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand" (St. Paul the Apostle)

As far back as 1952 there was a clear picture of the Orthodox approach to the problem of missionary activity among Christians.

Archbishop Athenagoras from the Greek Orthodox Church addressing the Third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund, Sweden, said: "We are ready to give information on questions relative to the teaching of our Church but not to express our opinions or even the opinion of our Church on the teaching of your Churches. We do not come to criticize other Churches but to help them informing them, according to their wish, about the teaching of our Church..."

"The only thing I take the liberty of recommending to all of you is to be kind enough to all of you is to be kind enough to have same friendly attitude towards us..., to respect our Church and, above all, to condemn in your conscience the tendency of any Protestant group to exercise proselytism... Such proselytizing, if not stopped, might cause enmity... and this would be disastrous..." Since that time the issue of proselytism has been discussed in many meetings.

In the history of the Church, the term "proselytism" has been used as a positive term and even as an equivalent concept for missionary activity. An historical overview shows that the understanding of "proselytism" has changed considerably. In the Bible it was devoid of negative meaning. However, in recent times, proselytism has taken on negative connotations when applied to activities of Christians trying to win adherents from other Christian communities. These activities may be obvious or subtle. The motives may be unworthy or by dubious means which violate the conscience of another human being. Even proceeding with good intentions, the Christian reality of other Churches and their particular approaches to pastoral practice is often ignored.

Proselytism stands in opposition to all efforts for unity. It includes certain activities which often aim at having people change their church affiliation and which must be avoided. Among these are:

Making unjust or uncharitable references to other churches' beliefs and practices and even ridiculing them;

Comparing two Christian communities by emphasizing the achievement and ideals of one and the weaknesses and practical problems of the other;

Employing any kind of physical violence, moral compulsion and psychological pressure (the use of certain advertising techniques in mass media that might bring undue pressure on readers or viewers);

Using political, social or economic power as a means of winning new members for one's own church;

Extending explicit or implicit offers of education, health care or material inducements or using financial resources with the intent of making converts;

Manipulative attitudes and practices that exploit people's needs, weaknesses or lack of education especially in situations of distress, and failing to respect their freedom and human dignity.

However, we should also think about the different motivations that lead to proselytism. One of the most important is the holding of distorted views of another church's teaching or doctrine (discrediting the veneration of icons as signs of idolatry, interpreting the use of art in church buildings as a transgression of the first commandment).

Different understandings of missiology and different concepts of evangelization also underlie God's gift of salvation as coming exclusively through one's own church. This can lead to competition or conflict in missionary practice among the churches rather than to a common approach to mission. Unfortunately, there are occasions when the personal and cultural confusion of people, their socio-political situation, the tensions within the church, their hurtful experiences in their own church can be played upon to persuade them to be converted.

Sometimes the evangelizers are tempted to take advantage of the spiritual and material needs of people or their lack of instruction in the faith in order to make them change their church affiliation. Proselytism often means a lack of sufficient regard for people's culture and religious traditions. We should always remember that the Gospel takes root in the soil of different cultures while it cannot be limited to any culture. In order to avoid the proselytism of Christians among Christians we must simply remember the words from the Gospel: "This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you... You did not choose me, no I chose you... My command to you is love one another."

Some of the coming groups even aim at the reevangelization of baptized members of other churches. We should take into account that membership in particular churches can

be understood very differently. The duties and responsibilities of church members also differ from church to church.

The most important question is, "Do the coming IV 'missionaries' acknowledge the existence of local churches in the places they are going or not?" If the answer is positive then their superiors should act through the existing churches. If the answer is negative then they should first learn the history of the country, teach this to the missionary groups before proceeding. History has enough witnesses and martyrs of the Churches in Russia to show the missionaries that they are entering a Christian country. This will work only if the missionaries have a clear and sincere wish to bring the Gospel but not their style of life, or if their intention is not to make Orthodoxy disappear in Russia.

From 1988 religion became relevant again in Russia. By 1991 thousands of Christian missionaries went to Russia intending to convert the "atheists" to their faith. More than 500 Christian missionary and humanitarian organizations are presently operating in Russia. Their evangelical activities include everything from distributing Christian literature to holding massive stadium meetings. Many of them are doing much more than simple "soul saving."

Foreign religious groups support political organizations, provide training in business practices and play an important role in Russia's education system. They even try to enlist local people in their efforts. While Russians are discussing the possibility of teaching religions in the schools or inviting clergy to schools to meet with children, foreign Christians are already having an influence on Russian society in the area of education.

In 1991, the Ministry of Education (after many visits from American missionaries with humanitarian help for children and their families) asked CoMission, the umbrella Organization composed of over 60 individual American evangelical organizations involved in Russia, to develop a curriculum for teaching values in public schools. "Christian Ethics and Morality: A Foundation for Society" was CoMission's response. Since then more than 16,000 teachers have been exposed to this curriculum during two three-week meetings (The CoMission, First Quarter, 1994 (Vol.1, No. 2).

CoMission supports the continued implementation of its curriculum through the provision of American missionaries to assist local teachers. It hopes to send 12,000 people to Russia on one year tours of duty. CoMission's goal is to transfer administration of all its activity over to Russian people by 1997. Even if it affects only a small part of Russian classrooms, it bears great symbolic weight.

The fact that the Ministry of Education approached this Organization rather than local religious or secular ones hints at the influence western ideas now have in Russian society. It also indicates the enormous financial strength of western religious organizations compared with the local churches. This is one example of the hidden and dangerous proselytizing activities which influence the minds of children. These activities are possible due to the legal status of religious organizations. According to present law,

foreign groups coming to Russia have the same rights (but more money) as the local groups.

Christians from the United States have also become very involved in supporting free market reform. Numerous organizations are attempting to prepare Russians to live in a capitalist society. These economic evangelists view their mission as part of the larger task of improving the "level of moral development" of the Russian people. But "winning souls for Jesus Christ" is still the primary goal of Christian missionaries.

Televangelism is a part of this evangelistic campaign. Prominent American televangelists such as Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, and Pat Robertson appear regularly on Russian television. As a result of these efforts, it has been estimated by evangelists that 90% of the Russian population has heard the Gospel.

While western evangelists regard this statistic as the sign of a job well done, it points to a major source of tension between them and local Russian Churches. From a local perspective, one of the most damaging impressions Westerners have of the former communist nations is that they came out of the Soviet control as primarily atheist societies. Russia is a mission field - this is how they see the situation there.

This notion is particularly wrong in light of the recent struggles of the Orthodox Church with communism, and the strong sense of religiosity in Russian society as a whole. Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike have criticized this belief as untrue, pointing out that such beliefs lead to the weakening of the local churches.

As foreign missionary efforts include a lot of money, they draw away the best local church-workers (later turning them to their religion). In 1993 Russian Baptists wrote in their appeal to western missionaries:

...local missionaries organizations are not able to compete with the strong western missions. The best workers, having been offered much higher salaries, are tempted to work with a western Organization. So the local missions lose editors, interpreters, preachers... Instead of receiving help and support from western missionaries the local institutions are actually having to fight to realize their own vision of ministry (Council for Coordination of Missions. "Open Letter To Whom It May Concern...").

The Russian Orthodox Church is also critical of the ignorance and arrogance of the western missionaries. Numerous statements from church officials express the belief that if they want to see Russian people Christians they should do it through the already existing Christian Churches and Church denominations. There is a rich spiritual tradition in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church and Gospel have been in Russia for over 1000 years. The coming missionaries should know about the many struggles of the Church to maintain a Christian witness throughout the centuries, and especially during the difficult communist time.

We must also mention the fact that some of the western Churches and religious organizations are supporting the local ones without importing their western ideas. One example is the Episcopal Church of the United States. Acting through the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate they help ordinary Russian believers. Another is the Church of Brethren, which on behalf of the National Council of the Churches of Christ and the Church World Service is overseeing an agricultural development program in Russia. There are projects in the diocese of Smolensk, in the Wilderness of Anosino (in the Convent of Sts. Boris and Gleb), in the new parish in Akademgorodok (Novosibirsk Region, where the people did not have a church at all), and in some other places. The Catholics have, on the whole, recognized the wrongness of the proselytizing activity and have changed their attitude towards the Churches in Russia. At the same time the current economic problems and the idolization of the west by some people (especially young) helps the foreign missionaries to weaken local churches.

But always, as Wesley Ariarajah states, between the Churches' understanding of the necessity of mission and the complaints about proselytism lies the tricky issue of religious freedom. Churches should protect the freedom of persons to preach the Gospel and the freedom of hearers to respond to it. The concept of religious freedom, however, is also the main instrument and argument of those who wish to win converts from existing Christian communities. In those difficult situations, Christians along with other religions, should enter into the dialogue with the civil authorities in order to reach a common definition of religious freedom. With that freedom comes responsibility to defend through the common actions all human rights in our societies.

Now, as Russia is moving to become an open society with increasing religious freedom, new difficulties and new tensions occur. Though we acknowledge the freedom of persons to choose or change their religion or confession, we should be careful to avoid the competition between local churches and the missions which appears to be increasing. A missiological study of this problem has to take into serious consideration the fact that religious freedom must not become a license to disregard and to disrespect local churches. Rather, religious freedom should promote common witness. At the same time we should not forget the rights of the individual in relation to the rights of the community. During the last Hierarchical Council of the Russian Orthodox Church it was decided to form a special commission to deal with the questions of missionary activity. This commission, headed by the Orthodox bishop now headed by the Orthodox bishop, is very active with working with this problem and the mission of the Russian Orthodox Church in the changing situation of our time. We should not forget that the spreading of the Gospel must be done in a peaceful way, without enmity towards those who belong to other confessions.

In Russia all Churches and religious organizations are governed by the Russian Federation Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations", which gives equal rights to all religious organizations and to Russians as well as to foreign citizens. However, consideration of the new law governing the activity of religions (people and organizations) began in 1992. The following reasons were given for the change: the changes in other Russian legislation (the new Civil Code and the new law on public

associations), the abuse of tax exempt status by some groups who carry out commercial activity in the guise of religious organizations, the "invasion" of Russia by the foreign missionaries and most important, the dangerous nature of certain sects which the present law cannot control. A special commission of representatives from the Churches and religious organizations was established to advise the government.

This new law is considered much more restrictive, violating the freedom of religion. Some foreign religious organizations, such as NCCC, have taken a strong stance against the draft and have asked the Russian authorities to reconsider some parts of it. It confirms the secular nature of the State, forbids special privileges for any special religion, forbids the establishment of a state church, mandates the equality of all groups and believers before the Law. But at the same time, it has redefined what is considered a "religious organization" to include only those organizations that propagate a particular religious doctrine and hold worship services. The law requires all religious organizations to be registered by 1999, sets limits and permits restrictions on their activities.

Until now we have been speaking only about the Christian missionaries. Along with the Christian "invasion" we have a lot of different sects and so-called religious groups including the "White Brotherhood", "Bogorodichnyi Center", Aum Sinreke, The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon among others. Some of them have shown a dangerous side to their activities (Asahara case, White Brotherhood). Against some of them there has been no official cases, but there are enough examples of their negative influence on people (usually the young) to be a cause for worry.

Concerned parents formed a commission of mothers who organized their work to protect young people. When the Rev. Moon came to Kiev planning to conduct high level meetings, this committee sent to the State factual documents of the sect's activities which they felt were dangerous. All top-level meetings were canceled. Germany has also refused Rev. Moon a visa.

One can say that the restriction of the law against the foreign groups and sects is a violation of human rights but how else is it possible to protect people? When we have the criminal cases against them, when we face the facts of destruction brought by them, is it not too late?

If the existing law cannot protect people and religious organizations in Russia from destruction, if religious communities have no right to protect their flock then the law should be reconsidered. Under the umbrella of religious Organization almost any group can be registered now. Once registered, it is difficult to stop their activities before they recruit followers. There is a trial for Asahara in Japan but his followers still have an organization in Russia.

These changes are understandable when in Russia there have been so many cases where it was too late to deal with the results of the "activity" of some groups.

At the present time all state organizations dealing with religious questions are in the process of reorganization. In March the president signed special papers about the activity of the commission of religious representatives.

The new draft of the RSFSR Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion has been given to the State Duma. The changes relate to the articles 2, 4,5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 19. There is also a draft of the regulations for the opening of the foreign religious representations in Russia.