

## Reflections on Church, Mission and Society in the Former Soviet Union Today

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### Key features of the transformation

**A**lthough it is a widespread truism that the stages of metanoia include repentance, conversion and then new personhood (2 Cor. 5:17), it is not common for free church persons to think of applying those stages to a people, a nation, a country. That is due, no doubt, to the fact that the believers churches emerged in the modern era, as an expression of the democratic impulse and the steadily increasing focus on the human individual. But metanoia for a people is a common theme in the Old Testament; indeed the new peoplehood themes of Ephesians and I Peter are more communal than our usual spiritualizing tendency allows.

The former USSR (FSU) has been passing through such a massive moral and spiritual transformation. What we say about the churches, the mission agencies and the social/political developments there would be too easily analogous to North American notions, were we not to remind ourselves of the earthshaking national proportions of their transformation. Their own rhetoric has been self-consciously spiritual. For us therefore, to consider that process primarily in the popular western categories of GNP, living standards based on our cost of living codes, or on electoral prospects of a handful of politicians, is to trivialize a process of transformation that has become quite overwhelming.

The Perestroika era made it possible for the people of the FSU to experience national repentance. Solzhenitsyn long ago had spelled out what such a repentance should be about—a rejection of the grand lie, of one's own personal participation in the lie. It meant a specific renunciation of Stalinism and even Leninism, and it meant that the church leaders needed to acknowledge their complicity or their failure of nerve. There is by now a short list of significant writings telling the story of how those renunciations of past deeds have been attempted. The magnitude of repentance still carries the day, even though the voices demanding a reassertion of national pride, power and dominance were unexpectedly strong in the Russian Federal elections of December 12, 1993. The later reaction should be seen over against

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of the fact that there has been no serious self-examination by Western society—rather a spirit of triumphalism quite out of keeping with the moral pretensions of what had been presented to the Soviets as Christian nations.

In any case, I still find it necessary to think of the widespread screening of the movie, “Repentance,” in 1986-7 as the graphic moment of learning to see, to enter into the pain of those who suffered, to feel the starkness of the question—“what good is a road that does not lead to a church?” That represented a profound collapse of commitment to the theory of materialist progress. It represented an acknowledgement of Marxism’s poverty of spirit for which some religious option or at least a broad cultural recovery must offer hope.

Some conversions are sudden and datable, others gradual. Among the possible stages of Soviet societal conversion that truly marked the way, the aborted coup of 1991 was the moment of euphoria, especially for those who crowded around the Moscow White House and dared to conquer their fears, the way fellow East Europeans had lighted the night and rekindled their souls in the autumn of 1989. When the USSR ceased to exist at the end of 1991 and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) came into its amorphous existence, Russians, Ukrainians and other peoples began to think of the new beginning.

In 1991 the Soviet public was deeply concerned about, even excited, to discuss the question of what the New Russia was to be like. Now in 1994 it is a more troubling question. The “civil war in a teapot” (around the White House and Ostankino TV station in Moscow) in October 1993 lacked the energizing power that the early Perestroika beginnings and the 1991 nonviolent revolution had attained. No one cared who won the standoff, except that Yeltsin’s group was respected a bit more than Khasbulatov and Rutskoi.

Since the general Christian and mission trends of the past five years within the FSU have been shaped so strongly by the drastically changing context, it is imperative that we seek to understand at least the most major societal preoccupations, namely the state of the economy, and the state (or states) and the law. Once the barriers to the practice of faith and Christian mission had collapsed by late 1989, it became common to speak of a spiritual harvest field, of opportunities to be seized. Soon an unseemly race was on to be known to have mission and relief projects in the FSU, the Mennonite press revealing a similar penchant to be seen to be active. What needed to be done was deemed to be simple-to help establish a free market, to establish democracy and to preach the Gospel. The naiveté of expectations for all three has been especially striking.

Instead of making a quick switch to free enterprise, what is now most easily visible is the truly catastrophic economic collapse of the FSU. (Instead of “perestroika” the black humorists now talk of “katastroika” or “destroika.”) Joint ventures between Soviet and Western companies were introduced, mainly in the food service industries, but high taxes caused most such ventures to fold soon after. Governmental reform attempts to link prices of goods with the cost of production resulted in catastrophic inflation. So far, the highest inflation rates were recorded in the fall of

1993. By the summer of 1994 the Russian inflation rate was listed at only four percent per month. The national bank's lending rate was down to 150 percent and the many new investment "banks" were offering a bit less interest on short term investments than they had in the winter. Now the banks were advertising gains of 50 to 500 percent per annum, depending on whether one invested for one month, three months or six months. Many people made quick fortunes, as has been true in most postwar settings, whereas the millions of people who invested in the MMM pyramid scheme for selling unsupported and unregistered securities saw their shares drop overnight in early August 1994 from 120,000 rubles per share to 900 rubles. Many pensioners had hoped to supplement their rapidly declining monthly pension by such investments now had nothing.

In the big cities of Russia everyone was buying and selling, much of the trade being the surplus products from Western Europe. But trading in foreign goods is no solution for the production and sale of local products. Production, however, has entered into a drastic decline, 40 percent less than a year ago when the decline was already catastrophic. The new bankruptcy law of the summer of 1994 and the further privatization effort by presidential decree will result in an autumnal massive wave of bankruptcies of major state industries and truly widespread unemployment. Major single-industry cities in the Ural region, for example, will be the worst-hit. Some companies that had converted from military to civilian products, such as producing video recorders, were unable to compete with the quality products coming from Japan. The human toll was also expressed in new statistics showing a drop in male life-span by three years, and the most drastic decline in births per thousand people ever.

If the Russian Federal revealed widespread poverty and hardship, incomes of average wage earners slipping from close to the equivalent of \$150 per month a year ago to only \$100 per month, the situation was much worse in the Ukraine and most other former republics of the USSR. For example, the rector of a university in the Ukraine with whom I traveled now earned the equivalent of \$34 per month—the highest salary in his institution—and his only travel now was to Kiev to try to extract more money from the government or industry to meet his monthly salary obligations.

The demagogic speeches of V. Zhirinovsky attracted a quarter of the voters, and in general the voices of the old order were regaining a hearing. Still, some sense of political stability could be noted by the summer of 1994. The new Russian Duma (parliament) was badly divided; nevertheless, political groupings were learning to function. In the Ukraine and Belarus the people elected presidents now more ready to negotiate political and economic arrangements with Russia.

Less publicity is given to the bloodshed caused by ethnic wars in the FSU than if that in for Bosnia, but given the large population and large geographic area, the suffering experienced dwarfs that of the south Slavs. Granted, some individuals have become successful entrepreneurs, but there is a widespread belief that financial success is only possible through paying protection money to the Mafia. The generally

reduced need for outright material aid evident during the winter of 1994 (as compared with the previous two winters) shows how much citizens have learned to work out a new networking system not dependent on money. Nevertheless, the countries as a whole, and the Orthodox and Protestant churches within them, are falling into excessive financial dependency on foreign currency. This is new, for both government and the churches had been notable for their independence, when contrasted with their East European neighbors.

There are two areas of concern that make it difficult to see the economic collapse as merely a temporary phase. The political culture of the FSU lacks a good reference point for strength. Gorbachev had openly complained about the absence of a healthy culture of political discourse, of people merely waiting for orders to come down from the center. Presently, visitors to the country are struck by the lack of confidence in any politicians, by the widespread conviction that in the capitals the politicians merely give speeches and avoid action. No longer fearing the once powerful KGB, the police, or the army, the average citizen feels little respect for the structures. What they do see and respect are the numerous private security forces that enforce protection with guns and bombs.

Less immediately evident to the outsider, but probably the most intractable of problems, is the total disarray of the legal system. When the Supreme Soviet was dissolved and Yeltsin called for new elections, the head of the Supreme Court was also dismissed as politically compromised. Russia became subject to the legal edicts of a president and his advisers. The new constitution provided some point of reference, but a host of related legal revisions have not yet followed, and the supreme court itself was only beginning to resume duties in the autumn of 1994.

More fundamental is the collapse of the structure of values that supported the laws created by the Soviet Union. Following the revolution of 1917, the new Soviet authorities had rejected tsarist legislation as class-biased and slowly set about creating a new concept of proletarian law. In practice the new people's courts and local soviets were making laws on the spur of the moment. That experience was particularly difficult for the churches whose understanding of legality was dismissed as bourgeois. This reliance on laws that followed the shifting winds of political change persisted till the 1970s when there was a more concerted effort to establish a sense of "Soviet legality." The latter was an effort to assure the citizens of their rights, of beginning to expect due process.

Before a stable society can function, what will be needed is a reconstruction of some basic moral or societal points of reference for legislation. In the absence of a common law tradition, and having followed the natural rights thinkers of the Enlightenment (in its socialist variation rather than the American individual rights direction), and finding it wanting, it is difficult to imagine what the building blocks for a legal tradition might be. What is needed is a period of re-education in jurisprudence, and only then can one hope for the kind of due process taken for granted in much of Western society.

This also means, among other things, that most of the Christian organizations

functioning in the FSU today are still unable to leave a paper trail that bears public scrutiny. Some time in the future those Christian agencies will need to recover a legality that now seems imprudent to insist on. Since the state is seeking to finance itself by the taxes it is able to collect, it has resorted to excessive tax demands but without the necessary tax police to enforce the legislation. So tax avoidance is widespread. Church and mission agencies are also engaging in numerous contracts (from rent payments to payment for services) by paying in cash and with minimal reporting. These habits of paying to get things done will be very difficult to unlearn later.

### **Recent trends for western evangelical protestant missions**

Since 1990 there has been a massive invasion of evangelical missionaries. One encounters their publicity on the street regularly. One is handed tracts and invitations to meetings at the metro stops. The most grandiose and public effort has been the CoMission project to teach school teachers how to teach Christian morality. The idea evoked vigorous criticism from Orthodox spokespersons during the acrimonious encounters between June and October 1993 when legislation to restrict mission work was proposed by the parliament that Yeltsin finally dismissed. The Orthodox wanted to know American Protestants should have the right to work so closely with state educational institutions, when any move by the Russian Orthodox to claim state church status was immediately denounced.

Tens of thousands of short-term teachers have traversed the country, virtually none of them arriving with any background in language or culture. At a meeting of religious leaders in June 1994, one Orthodox bishop complained about missionaries who said they were Seventh Day Adventists who walked into an Orthodox worship service in progress and accosted the worshippers, telling them their faith was false and that they should come to the Adventist service. Protestants would like to dismiss such stories as bizarre episodes, but the attitude of denominational disrespect seems widespread.

The missionary invasion that has both Orthodox and Protestant churches in the FSU concerned, is the many independent groups who seek no counsel from their Soviet counterparts. Before it dissolved in June 1994, the Moscow Christian Resource Center (CRC) (World Vision-supported) had developed a data base of over 2000 such Western mission groups. One interesting trend emerging from the first phase of mission invasion has been the fact that some missionaries, after encountering problems, were beginning to ask questions about the culture and about the older Slavic religious traditions.

That has included some quite modest efforts at dialogue with Russian Orthodoxy. Leonid Kishkovsky, ecumenical officer for the Russian Orthodox in America, was invited to a weekend conference at Fuller Institute in Pasadena in late 1993 in which he found prominent evangelical mission leaders asking probing questions with apparent sincerity about the essence of Orthodox faith. The Moscow-based CRC organized a small consultation in May 1994 on Protestant and Orthodox dialogue. It illustrated the problem representative speakers and of finding an appropriate vehicle

for dialogue.

Heads of churches met in June 1994 at the Orthodox hotel in Moscow under the theme, "Christian Faith and Human Enmity." The purpose of the meeting was to publicize the fact that resort to violence could never be justified by appeals to Christian faith. The participants struggled to design some regular forum where complaints about proselytism and worse violence in the name of religion could be reported and dealt with. In order to meet as cooperatively as they did, they had decided not to invite those Protestant missionaries they so freely denounced, nor did they include the Uniates who constitute the problem between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The latter conference was notable for involving representatives from the many different confessional groups who had not met since the Soviet Union collapsed. Some participants saw that as the most significant positive fact—they were starting to seek each other out again. What makes this so difficult currently is the near total collapse of an information exchange. Not only are individual church denominations unable to carry on regular information exchanges within their ranks, including simple things such as keeping an accurate list of the number of churches and clergy, there is no reliable source to check on the other churches. The CRC had sponsored regular publication of a Russian language survey of the Russian press on religion, and an English news service, even if the material was episodic and of uneven quality. With the collapse of that service in June 1994, there is now no organized effort at information gathering. With the widespread ignorance of each other's history, plus the fact that Orthodox publishing houses have been reprinting pamphlets against the sects, (based on the flawed materials from the Tsarist era when the Orthodox helped send Protestants into prison and exile), it is hardly surprising that the inter-Christian tensions are so high.

### **Trends within the former soviet evangelical communities**

There have been many, many new converts and many new congregations established since 1989. There are now mission congregations in areas of the FSU where there had been neither Orthodox nor Protestant witness heretofore. The nature of the influence of these new converts, many of them better-educated than the average evangelical sectarian during the Soviet years, is still not easily apparent. Three larger developments—emigration, denominational collapse and financial dependence—are however the cause of current widespread anxiety.

Between 1987 and 1993 most religiously active Mennonites (and Mennonites within the All-Union Congress of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUCECB) and Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (CCECB) evangelical unions) had emigrated to Germany. Some of those who emigrated helped sustain serious mission projects in Karaganda, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, Kirgyzstan. In Omsk region and in the Slavgorod region of Western Siberia formerly unregistered and independent groups are now somewhat better-organized and calling themselves Mennonite Brethren.

The *Friedenstimme* Mission, an arm of the Reform Baptists that had its base in

German Umsiedler churches of ethnic Mennonite origin, had developed a major program of relief even before Perestroika made this easier. That mission still exists, in spite of a recent split, but both sides are now quite restricted to working with the Reform Baptists in the FSU who have become a highly separatist church. *Friedenstimme* no longer has much linkage to the larger evangelical world, although some accidental links with Beachy Amish and Holdeman Mennonite groups have occurred.

Some young, theologically-educated emigrants (Umsiedler) established LOGOS Mission which experienced an explosion of growth after 1989. Its current support base and linkages with indigenous groups in the FSU probably needs to be re-assessed in light of its long-term potential. Aquila Agency and other less-organized Umsiedler mission support for ministry in the FSU are also becoming regularized. We lack information for a detailed overview.

More alarming for Russian/Ukrainian evangelicals has been the spreading emigration fever. Thousands of Ukrainian and Russian evangelicals have come to the USA, largely for economic benefit, even if some of them claimed entry on the grounds of past persecution. Even students at Western theological institutes, once they have become accustomed to American ways, have been reluctant to return and put their families through the hardships. Emigration has also been aided by the sense that these Slavic people did not feel at home in their own countries.

Yet, on the other hand, their emigration made it even more difficult to counter the spreading sentiment that only the Orthodox are truly indigenous. How could they demonstrate that they are not an alien element? What they sense they need is a better understanding of their history, and a way of making that history known and understood to the general public. Several related efforts at beginning Slavic evangelical history projects have emerged. Yet serious funding will have to come from abroad during the initial phases till there is a broader recognition that without knowing one's past one cannot seriously plan for the future.

At its congress in March 1990, the All-Union Congress of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, the largest most integrated evangelical Protestant body, reorganized its structure and its name. Each republic now created its own union with a "president" as chief administrative officer, and the central union also received an administrative president with three vice-presidents assigned special responsibilities in theological education and international relations, in evangelism, and in finance and administration respectively. For the first time a Ukrainian, Grigorii Komendant (only 45 years of age) was the leader of the whole. Long-time general secretary, Alexei Bichkov, continued as one of the vice-presidents till he retired in 1993. But Komendant suffering from ill health, soon moved back to Kiev, and increasingly the primary leadership fell to the administrative vice-president and treasurer, Alexander I. Firisiuk of Belarus.

Further restructuring after the collapse of the USSR followed. The union now was renamed Euro-Asiatic Federation of ECB Unions. In March 1994, following the death of long time Ukrainian leader Jacob Dukhonchenko (replaced by Komendant)

and the retirement to Odessa of Russian leader (and former AUCECB president) A. E. Logvinenko (replaced by the unknown Peter Konovalchik) and the departure of A. I. Firisiuk to head the Belarussian ECB Union in Minsk, it was time for yet another change. Walter A. Mitskevich, a long-time regional senior presbyter near Moscow, suddenly became the executive secretary of what was left of the Euro-Asiatic Federation, Komendant remaining as president with two other vice-presidents to assist.

Since March that central union has struggled to meet its monthly financial commitments to a minimum of staff. It continues to debate whether it can afford to maintain its bimonthly journal *Bratsky Vestnik* and monthly magazine *Khristianskoe Slovo*. Although officially responsible for two new seminaries in Moscow and Odessa, it has been unable to send any funds since January 1994. Indeed, the Odessa seminary received no funds from any of the participating unions since the beginning of 1994.

From the beginning (1990 and 1993) those two seminaries received major support through grants and the supply of foreign professors, particularly from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the Baptist World Alliance, also some faculty services from Mennonites. By the summer of 1994 both schools were almost totally dependent on foreign aid. Virtually all publication and evangelism planning efforts were being done together with a Western partner. Leaders were also saying that virtually all of the unions would not survive unless current foreign funding would increase. The Euro-Asiatic Federation seems to be on the shakiest financial foundation of all, often turning to Compassion Ministries (an independent relief program with offices next-door headed by Michael Zhidkov) for facilitating communication with the regions.

The autonomous ECB churches which were the most aggressive in evangelism and charitable work in 1989-90 continue to be active. Nevertheless common planning structures remain weak. Instead individual key leaders and their mission/charity structures are functioning by means of a series of unrelated partnerships with Western groups. LOGOS College, now in St. Petersburg, and Donetsk Bible College (now less directly an arm of the Svet Evangeliiia—(Light of the Gospel)—mission) are becoming known as training places for missionaries and some pastors for the independent churches. Most of the teaching is still done by visiting professors, the Donetsk school functioning almost like a branch of the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver (augmented by Western Baptist Seminary). The LOGOS school is beginning to refer to itself as St. Petersburg Christian University, although accreditation considerations are only beginning and the liberal arts offerings are quite limited.

The Pentecostals have been slower to organize. Bible schools were started in the fall of 1993 in Kiev and Moscow, in both cases also with the aid of teachers and financial support from the West. There are now independent Pentecostal unions and former ties with the Evangelical Christian Baptists have broken down almost completely. Since many of the new missions are charismatic or pentecostal in orienta-



tion, the diversity of Pentecostalism in the FSU will likely increase.

### **What is happening to orthodoxy?**

Orthodoxy has never believed in a controlling central structure that would compare to the Vatican. Russian Orthodoxy is even less tightly-structured because it had been controlled from 1721 through 1918 as part of the tsarist governmental administration, and during the Soviet era the entire structure collapsed before being rebuilt under Soviet state control. That is, current structures lack popular support, the Patriarchate having more the prestige of old tradition than the ability to administer a modern church. It is probably safe to say that Orthodox leaders are more interested in worshiping than in managing structures. There is still a keen sense of the resurrection of faith, since the demand for baptisms of new converts has not yet abated.

Within those parameters, however, there are quite intense countervailing forces evident within the central hierarchy. Patriarch Alexey II is still regarded as a moderate. He is not seeking state church status for Russian Orthodoxy, but he is speaking out more aggressively against Protestant evangelical and Roman Catholic proselytism. His political vacillations during the stand-off between Yeltsin and Khasbulatov have left him with an image of being closer to the anti-Westernism of the conservatives in the new Duma than with the political reformers now in power. The differing Orthodox forces include anti-semites, and liberally-oriented types seeking common ground with the intelligentsia and with Protestants (although one of the most prominent, Gleb Yakunin, was defrocked by the Patriarch in December 1993 because Yakunin would not obey the new decision to keep clergy out of running for election to parliament). There are also differing lay Orthodox movements, the brotherhoods (which foster right-wing nationalism), and others that meet for fellowship, Bible study and other social service activities, who evidence charismatic and Taizé influence.

The Orthodox leaders have exerted quite heroic efforts in theological education. That has included expansion of the correspondence school system, linking this with a catechization program for lay people engaged in children's education. New seminaries have emerged. Diversity of Orthodox visions is evident also in the emergence of other forms of theological education. They include a four-year program of evening school (half the students are women) in Moscow; an Orthodox university (St. John the Theologian) with theology, philology and history faculties; a free Orthodox university (Alexander Men) holding classes in a downtown parish; a free Orthodox university in Petersburg; and a graduate school of religious studies that has an Orthodox section. In most cases the fact that the schools completed a year of studies and planned another one, relying on guest professors from the existing universities, was quite remarkable, given the absence of money and minimal administrative structure.

Monasteries are proliferating, including those for women. Common programs and rules seem to be lacking. Some lay retreat centers have emerged. Nevertheless, there is still a quite desperate shortage of clergy and considerable uncertainty about

how the church is to engage modernity. Most of the ideas for modernizing the church are associated with reform movements that were compromised during the earlier years of the Bolsheviks or those ideas are unknown to current leadership. That includes ideas for more democratic parish structures (still the weakest link in Russian Orthodoxy) and even women preaching!

Ethnic Orthodox conflict has remained intense. Relations between the Russian Orthodox, the Ukrainian, Belorus, Georgian and Armenian Orthodox churches are all under strain. In the Ukraine two schismatic groups plus the legalized Ukrainian Greek Catholic (Uniate) church continue to compete for buildings and allegiance.

Because of the weakness of Orthodoxy abroad, the task of helping the best streams within Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy to gain ground should be a challenge to all who care about the growth of Christian faith in the FSU. In early 1994 an American-based agency called International Orthodox Christian Charities Organization established an office in Moscow. Headed by Mary Hennigan, who formerly worked with CARE and Catholic Relief Services, they have launched a two-million-dollar relief program.

Mennonite efforts at building relationships with the Russian Orthodox, as well as continuing with Protestant partnerships, are still modest, but there has been some progress. That has included creation of a registered Mennonite Central Committee branch office in Moscow, new staff learning Russian and becoming acquainted with some of the leaders of theological schools, assisting in providing Bible commentaries, as well as participating in dialogue with Orthodox representatives in the West. Mennonite Brethren continue to support a radio ministry, now in the process of being indigenized under the leadership of Leonid Sergienko working from a Moscow studio. Mennonite agencies have also contributed to a variety of educational efforts involving the Christian College Coalition or independent exchanges. More vital than high-budget relief shipments or funding of the highly publicized summer evangelism projects that many independent agencies offer, will be the creation of a core of trained staff committed to long-term relationships and a constituency that remembers its long history of commitment to helping keep Christian faith alive in the FSU.