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Glanzer's "The Quest for Russia's Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW:

Glanzer, Perry L. *The Quest for Russia's Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002. Reviewed by Donald Fairbairn

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting opening of a supposedly atheistic state to the Christian gospel precipitated one of the most intensive Protestant missionary efforts history has ever known. At the forefront of that enormous missionary push was the CoMission, a consortium of 83 evangelical organizations that worked together with the Russian Ministry of Education to provide biblically-based moral and ethical education in the public schools of Russia and a handful of other neighboring countries. From 1992-97, the CoMission raised more than \$60 million to send over 1500 short-term missionary educators to Russia and its surroundings. What is most noteworthy about the CoMission, however, is the fact that it was a partnership not between Western evangelicals and indigenous Protestant believers (as one might expect), but between Western evangelicals and a secular government. This partnership eventually dissolved as the tension between the Westerners' evangelistic goals and the Russian state's educational goals began to mount, and as the Russian Orthodox Church (at first favorable toward the CoMission) began to voice its opposition to the Western infringement on its historical territory.

Glanzer's solidly-researched and engagingly-written book chronicles the interaction of the CoMission, the Russian Ministry of Education, and the Russian Orthodox Church during the 1990s. The author is to be commended for his depth in probing that very complex interaction and his evenhandedness in evaluating it. As he demonstrates in his conclusion, the CoMission's history has much to teach us about evangelical missionary methodology, Church-State relations, and relations between evangelicals and other Christian traditions. In this review, I would like to discuss two of the book's major strengths and then explain three issues on which it is notably incomplete and could be supplemented.

Perhaps the strongest part of the book is Glanzer's treatment of what he calls "legitimizing narratives," that is, dramatic stories told by Western evangelicals that indicated to them that the founding and work of the CoMission were part of a "sacred story" of God's action in opening the door to the former Soviet Union. Such legitimizing narratives were told and re-told in Western evangelical circles, and they played a huge role in uniting the various evangelical organizations, generating enthusiasm for the CoMission's work, raising funds for the project, and encouraging and sustaining the short-term missionaries on the field. Glanzer points out that these legitimizing narratives also played a role in squashing potential dissent among the evangelical leaders about the methods and goals of the organization. Glanzer perceptively notes (p. 193) several problems with legitimizing narratives. First, they make it seem as if anyone who argues against them is rejecting what God is doing. Second, they make it difficult to dispute strategy decisions based on the perception of what God is doing. Third, they make it possible for one to attribute difficulties to some other cause besides problems or flaws in

the strategy. (For example, unexpected obstacles can be too easily explained as hindrances from Satan, rather than as problems in the CoMission's strategy itself.) Finally, the legitimating narratives often do not reflect what has actually happened. (For example, reports of extraordinary numbers of conversions among the Russians did not square with the Russians' own perceptions of what happened to them through the CoMission's work.)

In noting these problems, Glanzer puts his finger on a significant lesson that all Western evangelicals would do well to learn. We live in a religious age dominated by Pietism and Revivalism, two closely-related historical movements that have placed great emphasis on personal religious experience. In such an environment, evangelicals have a tendency to see many kinds of experiences as signs from God that legitimate particular courses of action. Once people become convinced that such courses of action are "God's work," then no difficulties or obstacles will be likely to dissuade them from that conviction. In such cases, personal experience becomes self-authenticating, and people do not recognize the need to evaluate their own actions carefully. Glanzer points out correctly that the presence of such legitimating narratives cannot be an excuse for avoiding careful reflection and discussion about the ethical and moral issues growing out of a particular course of action. To put it simply, legitimating narratives are not authoritative in themselves, and in fact, nothing in our own experience is authoritative in itself. We must place our experiences, and the courses of action to which they seem to direct us, under the judgment of Scripture, and indeed we must subject our own individual readings of the Bible to the collective understanding of Scripture in the Christian community. No matter how clear it is that God's hand is in a particular work, the question of how we carry out that work must be addressed prayerfully, thoughtfully, and scripturally. Without saying so directly, Glanzer suggests that the CoMission would have benefited from more careful reflection on and discussion of the ethical questions of how it carried out its work, and his conclusion has relevance for many other endeavors besides the CoMission. He writes, "My hope is that this analysis may spur further ethical reflection on how evangelicals in general carry out and fund mission work" (p. 194).

A closely related strength of the book is its treatment of the tension between the way the CoMission depicted itself to the Western evangelicals who constituted its prayer and financial base, and the way it described itself to the Russian Ministry of Education. Glanzer states that the Ministry of Education stipulated that the Christian ethical instruction brought by the International Schools Project (the precursor to the CoMission) be voluntary (that is, not a part of the required school curriculum) and inter-confessional. The Western evangelicals were initially successful in meeting these requirements to the satisfaction of both the Ministry of Education and the Russian Orthodox Church, and the CoMission billed itself to its Russian partners as a provider of a Christian-based morality and ethics curriculum. However, providing moral education was far from the only goal of the CoMission. The major purpose was to do evangelism and discipleship, and in fact the overall thrust of the Christian ethics curriculum was that in order to live by Christian morality, one needed to receive Christ as Savior. Moreover, the CoMission continually depicted itself to its Western constituencies as the largest evangelistic outreach in history, one in which anyone (educator or not) could participate. This tension between the two

visions of CoMission's purpose eventually drew the fire of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose officials believed that the Westerners sought to pull people out of Orthodoxy and make them Protestants.

Glanzer devotes significant attention to the ethical ambiguity of this tension, and yet his conclusion is rather guarded: "The result was that, instead of fulfilling the request to train educators to teach Christian ethics, the CoMission primarily sought to mobilize and train missionaries for evangelism, leading Bible studies, and church planting. This deficiency was often noticeable, tragic, and in my view, ethically problematic. This mission work and training in Christian ethics could have been successfully combined, but if this combination were to succeed, the Christian ethics training should not have been slighted" (p. 196). I fully agree with both halves of this conclusion. In fact, I believe the damage done by the somewhat dishonest depiction of the project in very different ways to different audiences has been even greater than Glanzer indicates. Not only did the Russian officials who originally agreed to the project feel a sense of betrayal, but anecdotal evidence indicates that many of the Western short-term missionaries felt betrayed as well. I have no rigorous evidence to document this point, but during my years in Ukraine (1992-96) I heard of Western Christians who were given substantial promises during the CoMission recruiting blitz: promises that they would be able to have American-style conveniences in Russia, that they would need no linguistic, educational, or missionary experience but would see extraordinary conversions to Christ, etc. Many of these short-term missionaries were ill-equipped to cope with the difficulties of living in a foreign culture, without many conveniences, unable to communicate except through translators. These difficulties were often coupled with profound disappointment when the missionaries discovered that the Russians' initial enthusiasm toward the CoMission was beginning to cool off as Russian school teachers realized that many CoMissioners were not trained educators. The work was hard and often slow-going, as is usual in foreign missions. But these were not people who had been carefully selected and made aware of the difficulties they would face. They were people who had been caught up in the first flush of enthusiasm, and as the difficult reality set in, its effect on some of the CoMissioners was devastating. I have heard reports of people who returned to the West not with hearts aflame for the world (as one would hope they would after a year or more on the mission field), but who were embittered toward the entire task of missions. Glanzer describes very well the negative effects of the CoMission's seeming dishonesty on the Russians, and my own observations indicate that there were substantial negative effects on some of the Westerners (and by extension, on their home churches) as well.

In addition to these two great strengths of the book, I would like to address three areas in which Glanzer's treatment is good but seemingly incomplete, areas that could have been strengthened by a fuller discussion of the Russian context. The first two of these concern the interaction of the CoMission with the Russian Orthodox Church, and the third deals with the CoMission's lack of interaction with indigenous Protestant Christians.

Overall, I believe Glanzer does a good job of discussing Russian Orthodoxy's opposition to the CoMission. Certainly one can argue, as he does, that the Russian Orthodox Church's "power grab" in the middle of the 1990s was ultimately a destructive move,

rather than a constructive one. He ends this discussion by citing Father Alexander Borisov's opposition to Orthodoxy's use of political power in Russia, and Glanzer concludes, "For those who desire a vibrant and reformed Orthodoxy, let us only hope that the church hierarchy does not ignore Father Borisov's perspective" (p. 200). I fully agree, but I think Glanzer's presentation would have been more complete if he had addressed the internal tensions within Russian Orthodoxy that lie beneath this issue. In general, there are two major strands of Russian Orthodox thought. One strand, sometimes referred to as "traditional," "nationalistic," or even "fundamentalist" Orthodoxy, is very closely allied with Russian nationalism. This strand of thought makes the assumption that to be Russian is to be Orthodox, and it inevitably sees the presence of other religious groups (especially other Christian groups) on Russian soil as a threat to the purity of Russian Orthodoxy. This strand of thought is as concerned with maintaining Orthodox hegemony as it is with the actual spiritual condition of the men and women who call themselves Orthodox, and as a result, it does not hesitate to use political means to assure that hegemony. This, of course, is the strand of thought that was being reflected in the Russian Orthodox Church's actions toward the CoMission.

However, there is another strand of thought, sometimes called the "renaissance" strand. This is a form of Orthodox thought that flourished in the late 19th century in Russia and throughout the 20th century among Russian expatriates, especially in France, the U.K., and the United States. Renaissance Orthodoxy has demonstrated a keen desire to get in touch with Orthodoxy's original sources (the New Testament and the writings of the early Church) and has exhibited a theological and spiritual vitality greater than anything Russian Orthodoxy had experienced in the previous few centuries. Most significant for Glanzer's discussion is the fact that this strand of thought completely rejects the equation of Orthodoxy with Russian nationalism and even calls nationalism a heresy. This strand of thought dominates Russian Orthodoxy outside of Russia, and it is present within Russia as well. (See chapter 10 of my book *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* for a fuller discussion of this tension between the two strands of Orthodox thought.)

What is especially noteworthy is that both of these strands of thought are present within the upper echelons of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy. In the late 1990s I was told by two Orthodox priests (one of whom is a ranking official in the Moscow Patriarchate) that Patriarch Alexy II is personally in favor of the renaissance strand of Orthodoxy, but that he is having trouble keeping the fundamentalists at bay. If this is true, then the heavy-handed way the Orthodox Church responded to the CoMission does not necessarily indicate a universal intolerance of Protestants. Rather, that action lies near the center of a significant fault line within Russian Orthodoxy, and it is not clear which direction the Church as a whole will ultimately take. Evangelicals who look back on those events may be tempted to brand the entire Orthodox Church as hopelessly political and nationalistic, with little true concern for souls. Such a summary dismissal would be a great mistake, since it is possible that the renaissance strand of thought (what Glanzer calls "a vibrant and reformed Orthodoxy") may yet rise to the fore in Russia.

Another issue on which Glanzer's treatment is incomplete also relates to Russian Orthodoxy. His training in sociology leads him to expect religious conversions to follow

the pattern considered authentic by the group the converts are joining (in this case, a pattern of dramatic, instantaneous change brought about by a decision for Christ, as expected by Western evangelicals). He is puzzled to find that although the Western missionaries described the Russian conversions in this way, the Russians themselves did not. Rather, Glanzer asserts, many of them spoke of being on the "road to belief" or of being "halfway to God" as a result of the CoMissioner's influence on them. (See p. 128.) On p. 146, Glanzer speculates that this slow pace of conversion was the result of Orthodox influence on the Russians and of the radical shift required to convert from a communistic worldview to a Christian one. He is certainly correct here, but in fact there was much more to this situation than he seems to recognize. A significant difference between Protestant and Orthodox spirituality lay behind the Westerners' and the Russian's expectations, and that difference rose to the surface in the varied ways they described the same conversions.

Protestantism, with its foundational emphasis on justification by faith, gives most of its attention to the changes that take place in a believer at the beginning of faith, the moment of conversion. (These changes are described using terms such as adoption, regeneration, remission of sins, redemption, and reception of the Holy Spirit, as well as justification.) As a result, the moment when faith begins is the crucial moment in one's spiritual life, and one's subsequent development as a Christian grows out of the changes that have already taken place. I call this a "backward-looking" spirituality, in which the motivation for Christian life comes primarily from the believer's gratitude for what God has already done in saving him or her. In contrast, Orthodoxy focuses not on the beginning of faith, but on the end, the goal. The crucial moment is the time at the end of history when believers will be fully united to Christ, fully brought into the heavenly kingdom. Orthodox spirituality, then, is "forward-looking," because the motivation for Christian life comes from looking ahead to the goal that God has called Christians to reach. (I discuss the difference between forward-looking and backward-looking spiritualities at some length in *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, especially on pp. 7-8, 76-7, 91-5, and 119-26).

When one understands this fundamental difference between Protestant and Orthodox spiritualities, it becomes clear that the Russians who converted to Christianity through the CoMission were deeply influenced by the Orthodox approach to Christian life, whether they recognized that influence or not. They were culturally and religiously predisposed to understand spiritual ideas within the framework of a journey toward God, a forward-looking spirituality. They thus understood what the CoMissioners told them and what God was doing in them from within that framework. In contrast, the Western missionaries themselves understood God's action in the conversions in a different way, through their own framework. The result was a classic case of something being intended in one way but heard in another way, as happens very often in cross-cultural attempts at communication. This does not at all minimize or call into question the genuineness of the conversions Glanzer describes, but he would have been better able to explain the divergent interpretations of those conversions if he had discussed this difference between Orthodox and Protestant spiritualities.

The third issue on which I find Glanzer's presentation incomplete, and probably the most significant omission in the book, concerns the CoMission's surprising unwillingness to work with indigenous Protestants in Russia. Glanzer reports (p. 73) that at the inception of the project, both Russian Baptist leaders and some American scholars of Russian Protestantism insisted that any large-scale Western missionary work needed to be coordinated with indigenous groups. He mentions in a footnote on p. 158 that the reason for the unwillingness was that CoMission leaders did not want to damage the group's fragile relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church by appearing to support "rival" indigenous religious groups. But in neither case does he discuss this issue further, and I believe it deserves additional research and explication. My own impressions on this point are the result of anecdotal evidence, but during the early 1990s I heard Western missionaries (staff members from many of the groups that comprised the CoMission) describe Russian and Ukrainian Protestants as traditional, rigid, and legalistic, and therefore unable to adapt to the changing conditions in the former Soviet Union so as to be an effective evangelistic force. It is a little surprising that Western missionaries made such dismissive comments to me, considering that at that time I lived and worked among indigenous Protestants who had gathered from all over the former Soviet Union to study at Donetsk Christian University (eastern Ukraine). But the fact that even I heard such comments may indicate that the attitude behind them was widespread.

Whether or not such a belief that indigenous Protestantism was too ingrown and traditional was actually a prominent reason for the CoMission's unwillingness to work with indigenous Protestants, one thing that cannot be denied is that those Protestants were deeply astonished and hurt by the CoMission's actions. A number of my Russian evangelical friends expressed shock that the Americans would spend an unimaginable sum of money (the figure being batted around at the time was \$40 million; Glanzer indicates that ultimately \$60 million was raised) to send untrained, ill-equipped Westerners to Russia, when the indigenous groups could fill all of Siberia with their own missionaries for a fraction of the cost. I was occasionally asked to explain the CoMission's ministry to my Russian friends, since they perceived what the Americans were doing as "shallow work." And perhaps most telling, some evangelical leaders commented publicly that what they really needed from America was a small number of well-qualified, culturally-savvy scholars to help them with theological education, not a large number of inexperienced missionaries on the front lines.

Whether or not my anecdotal evidence is typical, the CoMission's lack of involvement with indigenous Protestants, and the effect of that unwillingness on those Protestants, form an integral part of the CoMission story, a part that deserves to be studied and explained. While Glanzer is not to be faulted for leaving this side of the story out of his book, perhaps he is the one who could conduct the additional research needed to tell it well.

What emerges from Glanzer's excellent book is a very mixed picture, and this is certainly as it should be. Far too often the CoMission has either been portrayed in glowing terms as one of God's most extraordinary works in history, or derided as a clumsy and ill-thought-out act of American religious imperialism. In actual fact, much good has come of the

CoMission: surely it has helped in bringing Christian morality to Russian school students, and it has unquestionably brought many people into close contact with the message of Christ. But this good has come at a high cost. Glanzer describes several aspects of this cost very well- the danger of using legitimating narratives to authenticate one's actions, the questions of integrity raised by different ways of depicting the project to different audiences, the angry reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church. Other aspects of this high cost he leaves largely unanalyzed-the embitterment of some of the CoMissioners toward missions, and the CoMission's tragic act of ignoring the three million indigenous Protestants in the former Soviet Union.

In the face of such a mixed legacy, one must ask how the mistakes of the CoMission were allowed to happen, whether they could have been avoided, and most important, how we may avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Glanzer leaves us with the impression that the primary culprit was haste. God miraculously opened the door to the former Soviet Union, and few evangelical leaders believed that door would stay open long. Therefore they believed they needed to rush in as quickly as possible. The result of that haste was a lack of attention to some crucial questions. On p. 76, Glanzer quotes respected Mennonite historian Walter Sawatsky as saying in 1992: "Soon the door of opportunity may be closed again, hence we must get the minimal proclamation to as many as possible. Such missionaries [who hold this attitude] are too busy to wonder whether their style of work might be a precipitating factor in closing doors." The events of the late 1990s, as Russia passed a law restricting the freedom of religious groups not historically present in the country, have shown how thoroughly prophetic Sawatsky's words were. And the likelihood that the haste of Western evangelical missionaries helped contribute to the restricting of freedom of religion, even for some groups of indigenous Protestants, is a very bitter pill for us to swallow today. But swallow it we must, if we are to learn from the history of the CoMission and apply what we have learned to the challenges that confront us in missions today. Glanzer's book is a commendable tool to help us begin learning such lessons.

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