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ACADEMIC HELP NEEDED IN CHANGING RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

It is a major understatement to say that most things in Russia are changing. Having just returned from my ninth trip to that country, I was overwhelmed by a palpable sense of change, which was confirmed by nearly all with whom I came in contact, from cab drivers to professors. All agreed that there is no return to the old system, despite persistence of attempts by hard liners to reverse the processes. Likewise, they all agree that no one knows where the changes are leading. The options range from a hope for prosperity and democracy to a civil war *a la* Yugoslavia.

Three things were striking as I came in touch with scholars, mostly from the two universities in Yekaterinburg--the large Ural State University and the brand new, small, private Humanitarian University, as well as few scholars from Perm, Ulan-ude, and Moscow.

The first was their outgoingness and cordiality. Gone is the carefulness, somberness, and occasional secretiveness that generally characterized most of my previous contacts within the country. They acted with eagerness and abandon, having unburdened from fear of contacts with foreigners which characterized the formerly closed city of Sverdlovsk, now renamed Ekaterinburg and opened to foreigners.

The second was their eagerness to learn about things of which they now feel they had been deprived. They seem desirous to catch up with the kind of scholarship practiced in the West and wish to close the information and methodology gap. The university professors not living in Moscow or St. Petersburg had even more limited opportunities to travel abroad. Now that such travel is no longer limited, it is ironic that the world economic crisis makes that goal as far away from them as it was during years of imposed isolation. A round-trip air plane ticket to the U.S.A. in hard currency is approximately ten years of their income in rubles. Thus, it is unlikely they will be visiting the West unless someone in the West pays for it.

The third was their fascination and eagerness to learn about religion. While most of those with whom I came into contact still consider themselves unbelievers, they tend to think that religion is a basic element necessary to human culture, and they are quite earnest to learn about it. The interest is so high that it verges on gullibility. Nearly anything can be presented to them as a religious option and they seem to be all too willing to give it serious consideration, not having either the critical tools to examine it nor the reticence of traditional

religions to be open-minded toward other alternatives. In some way, the older, more established scholars seem almost more eager to jump on some religious band-wagon than the younger ones. I saw former Marxist-Leninist philosophers and historians now ardently subscribing to, say, the Baha'i religion, citing now Baha'ullah as readily as they once probably cited Lenin. Very few, if any, praises can be heard for any of the Marxist classics.

With the younger scholars, the mood seems to be much more pragmatic than ideological. They seem less eager to find a religion, and many felt that a non-believer can be just as good a human being as a believer. The younger scholars (mostly researchers, with as yet few opportunities to teach classes within the rather elitist Russian higher educational system) also struck me as being more forthright. The older generation seem less aware of any ethical problems in their acquisition of rare manuscripts and icons from the Old Believers or Orthodox churches while the younger ones seem more aware that such religious people had few options but to turn over their precious materials to a museum or university--which was better than have it destroyed by the party apparatus. Some of the scholars worked hard to get the confidence of such believers living in remote areas and apparently had the good sense of not publishing some of their findings knowing that it may attract the unwanted attention of the police and propagandist. There is apparently a good deal of raw material collected in such expeditions which await better times to be processed, analyzed, and published. There are now many opportunities for Western scholars to join them in such expeditions or to arrange them for themselves, as for instance a Finnish colleague has done exploring shamanistic tribes in Siberia.

My overwhelming impression was that they need our help, and I believe such help can be offered by those willing to get involved. As I inquired about the ways that we can assist them in their work, they pointed out the following three areas:

The first is for Western scholars to teach and do research there for periods from a week to a year in nearly any field but particularly in religious studies. The explicit invitation came from Ural State University in Yekaterinburg, but it seems that similar conditions exist elsewhere. Scholars who are on sabbatical leaves, who have a month between semesters, or whose vacation calendars would fit the Yekaterinburg semester schedule can lecture either for a brief, intensive "mini-course" or a semester-length course. They can teach in English or another Western language; expert translations will be provided. The university will also provide room and board in an "academic hotel" which they own. The Western scholar must be able to fund his/herr own transportation and expect no salary from them. Family members can also be accommodated. This could be an exhilarating experience both for such a lecturer and for the local recipients.

The second is the need for books and journals. Access to such literature was almost non-existent outside of the capitals, and now with the economic difficulties of the newly

independent states, it has been reduced to nil. Used books in good shape that are dependable are needed in any field, and especially in religious studies. Perhaps most needed are books on methodology, i.e. introductory studies as well as journals. The sender must be able to pay the postage; addresses of recipient institutions can be provided.

The third is issuing invitations to scholars to attend meetings or spend some time studying or doing independent research in a Western institution of higher leanings. This may be less expensive for European universities where a train ticket could be purchased for such visitors and where room board and a small stipend would need to be provided. Also Eastern European scholars are eager to be published in the West; editors of journals should explore such opportunities.

In any case the need for contacts exist, and the opportunities to do so without government interference seems to exist, and we need to use such windows of opportunity while they last. As a token of such interest the current issue of OPREE contains the work of several Russian scholars done during this transitional period. The four pieces in this issue were all written in the Spring of 1991 prior to the formal dissolution of the USSR, and readers will note how quickly such work seems to be dated. In any case, they are a document of a time in which scholars from that part of the world were trying to shift gears and become sensitive to issues long neglected or suppressed under the Marxist-Leninist orientation. We hope that the future scholarly work from this area will find its way into our publication, as the freedom of research and study of this formerly tabu field will improve in quality. We invite our readers from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to send us the fruit of their research.

The editor of OPREE is willing to serve as an intermediary between those scholars able to go to lecture or send literature. Please address such inquiries to Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA 19010 or telephone (215)-527-0200 or fax (215)-525-2930. Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe and the Europe Committee of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. have also indicated their interest in helping wherever human and financial limitations make possible such assistance.

Paul Mojzes, editor