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# EVANGELICAL-ORTHODOX DIALOGUE IN RUSSIA ON THE EVE OF THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF CHERNOBYL

By **Michael J. Christensen**

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As an international relief and development consultant working with church groups in Russia and Belarus, I have been frustrated at times in my attempts to get Orthodox and Protestant leaders into the same room together for religious dialogue, let alone to propose collaborative projects. Mutual misunderstanding and suspicion persists. Charges of "evangelical proselytizing" or "Orthodox corruption" prevent serious ecumenical discussion. The only breakthroughs I have witnessed have been initiated by Evangelicals who offer humanitarian assistance as well as openness to the Russian Orthodox Church.

In planning a 1994 Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue in Moscow, sponsored by World Vision's Moscow-based Christian Resource Center, we identified three basic obstacles preventing Protestant and Orthodox leaders from coming to the same table to talk about their differences: (1) exclusive claims of the territorial prerogatives of a privileged, national Orthodox Church; (2) ignorance and arrogance on the part of evangelical missionaries; and (3) ecumenism without substance.

After summarizing these obstacles, I will identify signs of hope for mutual understanding embodied in cooperative efforts currently underway between the Russian Orthodox Church and a few American evangelical groups.

## Obstacles to Dialogue

1. Russian Orthodox leaders, having lost and regained political power, now seem unwilling to share it. Claiming almost a divine right as a state church, Russian Orthodox leaders use their privileged status and territorial prerogative to invalidate other religious groups, not only the new arrivals ("cults") but also established Christian communities such as the Pentecostal and Baptist Union churches that have operated and thrived underground throughout the Soviet communist era.

Writing in Pravda about the offensive presence of Evangelicals and other "cults" in Russia, Mikhail Antonov called missionary activity a "purposeful brainwashing of the population in the spirit of Catholicism, Protestantism, and occultism with a clear purpose to discredit and eradicate Orthodoxy."<sup>1</sup> In support of the national church, laws have been proposed to restrict foreign and domestic missionary activity in Russia. By maintaining territorial prerogative and privileged status, by restricting and excluding other religions, and by refusing to apologize to its own people for "necessary" compromises under communism, the Russian Orthodox Church for many has lost its moral authority and spiritual vitality in the post-Soviet state.

Halina Grzymala-Moszczyńska has made essentially the same observation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Her essay, "Established Religion vs. New Religions: Social Perception and Legal Consequences," powerfully presents what happens when a state-sponsored, privileged national church invalidates other religious groups. It not only prevents ecumenical dialogue but also often violates human rights regarding religious freedom. The result of "territorial prerogatives" of the official church in Poland is that it has lost the moral authority it maintained under communism.

Andrii Krawchuk makes the same point in his essay, "Religious Life in Ukraine: Continuity and Change." When religion and nationalism are combined, one official church assumes a privileged place. The territorial prerogatives that once belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church now belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its competitors for power and apostolic status. When other churches and religious groups are viewed by the state church as dangerous to nationalism and threatening to the new status quo, ecumenism and ecclesiastical partnerships are impossible.

2. A second obstacle to meaningful ecumenical dialogue is evangelical ignorance and arrogance in proselytizing Orthodox adherents. Western evangelical groups tend to "target" Russia for evangelism and mission. In so doing, many exhibit profound ignorance about the history of Christianity in Russia and arrogance in their refusal to recognize the validity of Russian Orthodox theology and faith. Separated by centuries of church history, language, and culture, Russian Orthodoxy and American Evangelicalism remain ignorant of each other's distinct traditions. From the evangelical perspective, Orthodox devalue personal salvation and the need for church renewal. From the Orthodox perspective, according to Deacon James Krotov, speaking at the 1994 Moscow dialogue: "Protestant missionaries came to Russia with the explicit purpose of proselytism to convert Orthodox [as if they were] heretics . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Keston Institute researcher Jane Ellis (also at the conference) understands the charge of "evangelical ignorance" as grounded in the mistaken assumption that "the Orthodox have no concern for mission, or that the [Orthodox] church is dead or corrupt." Thus, some Evangelicals say, "'I've been called to preach the gospel; if [the Orthodox] don't like it, that's too bad.'"<sup>3</sup>

The Orthodox charge of "evangelical arrogance" is grounded in commonly cited examples of missionary groups who "steel sheep" and rebaptize Orthodox believers into

the "true" Christian faith. When this happens, a real question is raised of whether Evangelicals even have the capacity to be involved in Christian witness in Russia without being guilty of "proselytizing" (in the intrusive, imperialistic sense).

However, not all evangelical groups carry out their mission with ignorance or arrogance. Many have done their theological homework; many exude humility and openness in approaching Orthodox; and many encourage spiritual renewal from within the Orthodox faith. Youth with a Mission, Young Life, and World Vision International are all examples of evangelical groups working in Russia whose philosophy of ministry is culturally based, responsive to human need, and sensitive to Orthodox concerns.

Linford Stutzman, in his essay, "To Win the Hearts and Minds: Evangelical Mission Activity in Albania as Global Culture War," is essentially sympathetic to the evangelical mission. Using Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to analyze the impact of evangelical missionaries in Albania, he offers a fair assessment and superb description of the way many Evangelicals go about their mission: They embody hope for people in despair, offer a new vision of personal and corporate transformation to those whose previous dreams have been shattered, and deliver change in the form of personal empowerment and a plan to redeem the world by creating a good and just society. Their prophetic role combined with religious pragmatism is a powerful challenge to the established religious status quo. They are effective because people are spiritually hungry for what Evangelicals offer.

Stutzman's essay, however, fails to take sufficiently into account the evangelical priority and burden of concern for "saving lost souls" more than transforming a corrupt society. The fact that this historic missionary emphasis is now being expressed "holistically" through personal evangelism and social concern, with ethical and political dimensions, does not diminish its focus on the necessary religious experience of being "born again." This imperative is inherently threatening (and often offensive) to Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant Christians.

For Evangelicals, a just society can only come about when individuals are spiritually transformed through repentance and faith. Stutzman seems to understand evangelical redemption primarily as a social vision rather than a personal one. Social transformation is a part but not the core of evangelical conviction. For example, relief and development programs, designed to improve the quality of human life, are undertaken by Evangelicals as a means (not an end) to spiritual programs. Evangelicals preach the gospel to save bodies and souls for eternity. In pursuit of this distinctive mission, some Evangelicals go to extremes in proselytizing and imposing their religious agenda.

However, the truth of the situation is found in the main, not the extremes. Though some Evangelicals in Russia rebaptize Orthodox converts and preach an exclusive Christian faith, most do not wish to discredit the Russian Orthodox Church. What they want is a level playing field of mutual tolerance and occasional cooperation, not cultural war played out on a mission field tipped in the direction of special privilege of one church over others.

Though some Orthodox leaders are intent on excluding evangelical missionaries from Russia by law, the truth is that not all priests are hostile to evangelical religion; not all bishops and metropolitans are corrupt. Nor did the Orthodox Church as a whole sell out to the KGB; nor was it controlled by the communist state. Many Orthodox are willing to enter into serious ecumenical dialogue with Evangelicals and other groups that affirm historical Christianity. Some are even willing to recognize the legitimacy of churches outside of Orthodoxy--those that seek to identify with the apostolic church.

3. The issue of "catholicity" (belief in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church) raises a third category of obstacles to Orthodox dialogue, which is more of a problem for "liberal," mainline Protestants than conservative, marginal Evangelicals. That is the issue of ecumenism without substance.

From the Orthodox perspective, many "liberal," mainline Protestant church leaders and bureaucrats have the spirit of inclusivity and dialogue but not the substance of the faith. Perceived by Orthodox as liturgically deprived, spiritually dull, and theologically shallow, mainline Protestantism may be faulted for not affirming the essential, historical dogmas of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith." How can Orthodox be expected to enter into meaningful dialogue with groups whose confession of Christianity they do not recognize as true? Too many differences and not enough common ground prevail.

From the liberal, mainline Protestant perspective, the Orthodox hierarchy and antiquated patristic theology are simply baffling. Modern Protestant theologians and church bureaucrats find it difficult even to agree on what issues are theologically substantive and open to discussion. Bureaucratic willingness to negotiate any doctrine or position tends to disqualify liberal Protestantism as a serious contender of the faith. Beyond humanitarian aid, mainline Protestants seem to have little to offer Orthodox.

Evangelicals claim to be "biblical" and "apostolic" in their confession of the historic Christian faith. Though liturgically and ecclesiastically at odds, Evangelicals and Orthodox have much in common theologically (for example, creedal doctrines of creation, fall, incarnation, salvation, sanctification, and consummation) and a basis for meaningful dialogue about their differences (for example, whether Christ died for some or all, whether sanctification restores original human nature in this life, or what constitutes the church of Jesus Christ on earth). Despite the obstacles, there are signs of hope.

#### Signs of Hope in Orthodox-Evangelical Cooperative Ministry

If mutual understanding and appreciation are to be achieved, ecumenical dialogues and joint religious ventures must be proposed and attempted. Are there any examples of "successful" Orthodox-Evangelical dialogues and cooperative efforts in Russia?

The 1994 World Vision Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue in Moscow was moderately successful. Many evangelical missionaries working in Russia and a few responsive Orthodox priests and deacons came to the table. Some academic historians also

participated in the event. However, the dialogue did not have the blessing of the Patriarch and, therefore, did not enjoy wide support among Orthodox. Many Evangelicals concluded before the conference began that there could be no meaningful discussion, given how polarized the two groups already were. As one evangelical leader said after being asked why his seminary did not take the time and effort to communicate with Orthodox leaders: "We're occupied with our day-to-day work." In other words, there is no time to waste on ecumenical dialogue when our job is simply to preach the gospel and make disciples. The Moscow event was World Vision's first serious attempt at religious dialogue in Russia; as such, it is a hopeful sign.

CitiHope International, like World Vision, is a Christian relief and development organization working in the former Soviet Union. Since 1990, with the invitation, blessing, and participation of the Russian Orthodox Church, CitiHope has distributed over \$150,000,000 worth of food and medical emergency products in Belarus for the children of Chernobyl and their families. In 1995, a new cooperative venture was proposed and established for the Russian Federation: the Sobornost Fund--a joint humanitarian relief project of the Moscow Patriarchate and CitiHope International. Its purpose is to receive charitable donations in the United States for the procurement and shipment of needed medicines and supplies for distribution in Russia. The Sobornost Fund, authorized by the Moscow Patriarch, is truly a unique Orthodox-Evangelical partnership. The chairperson and secretary of the fund are the Vicar Bishop of His Holiness and a Church deacon. The vice chair and treasurer of the fund are two Nazarene ministers representing CitiHope International. Fund-raising has commenced, with the first medical shipment planned for the summer of 1996.

Russia for Jesus--an American Orthodox group comprised of Orthodox clergy and laity and Protestant Evangelicals--monitors and supports Evangelical-Orthodox dialogues and has sponsored a number of "missionary" trips to Russia to promote spiritual renewal within the Orthodox Church. The parish church they hold up as a shining example of Russian Orthodox ecumenism is Saints Cosmas and Damian in Moscow.

In contrast to the gold and glitter, liturgical preeminence, and power of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral is the humble parish church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in the shadows of the Kremlin. Returned to the people in late 1991, the church is still under renovation. Hundreds of worshippers were attracted to the church even before enough icons were found for the sanctuary. Perhaps due to its social outreach and ecumenical stance, the five-year-old church has been successful in attracting Western aid. Not only World Vision but also Jerry Falwell's television ministry has offered technical assistance, curriculum, and supplies.

The charismatic and controversial pastor of the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian is Fr. Borisov, the head of the historic Russian Bible Society in Moscow. A scientist-turned-priest, a new thinker, Borisov is not always perceived as in harmony with Russian Orthodox concerns. His understanding of the nature of the church, for example, is not the narrow "one true church" model but, rather, the image of a rooted tree with many branches embracing Christians in other traditions. He often comes to the U.S. and enjoys

popular support among Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. He even co-sponsored Jerry Falwell for an evangelical rally in a Moscow stadium attended by 10,000 people. Borisov and some of his deacons also participated in the 1994 World Vision-sponsored dialogue with evangelical leaders in Moscow.

Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky--ecumenical officer of the Orthodox Church in America and chairperson of the Europe Committee of Church World Service of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.--recently delivered a lecture at Drew University on the state of the Russian Orthodox Church and its relation to Western Christianity. To illustrate how Orthodoxy is thriving in the former Soviet Union, he used Borisov's church as his major case study. For the Sunday Liturgy, he said, over 2,000 worshippers pack the chapel of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. Several hundred children are enrolled in Sunday School. Frescos are being uncovered on the painted walls of what was once a church but had been turned into the printing factory of the Ministry of Culture. Now a church of the people again, a spiritual and cultural revival is apparent.

Speaking to a predominantly liberal Protestant audience, Kishkovsky neglected to mention the evangelical connection to this five-year-old Russian Orthodox church or how dependent it has been on Western contacts for humanitarian aid, religious curriculum, church repair, and technical assistance. He celebrated the emphasis on the church's charitable work and social services without crediting Orthodox-Evangelical ecumenical dialogue as a source of inspiration. He simply indicated that Russian Orthodoxy is rediscovering its roots and the need to apply its faith to social problems in dialogue with, not domination from, Western Christianity:

The present task of the Russian people is to remember their past, both good and ill; and to remember the best of their pre-Soviet spiritual heritage in a way that is constructive and reconciling, not for revenge or further separation. For this act of remembrance, conversation with the West is helpful. But the Russians need genuine dialogue, not imposition of western ideas, however glamorous they may seem to some . . .

Leading Russian thinkers, writers, philosophers and theologians--like Florensky, Berdyaev, and Bulgakov--who were repressed during the Soviet era--now are available in book form on the streets of the new, emerging Russian society. A wealth of insight and light [is] to be found in these thinkers . . . to solve many of the problems faced, like Chernobyl . . . economics, nationalism, etc. Only Russians can solve Russia's problems, again, in dialogue with, not domination from, the West.<sup>4</sup>

Spiritual renewal can indeed be sensed in Orthodox circles: The Open University in Moscow, founded by Fr. Alexander Men', who was axed to death (by the KGB?) in 1990 as the last Russian Orthodox martyr under Soviet communism, is associated with the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. (Members of the American group, Russia for Jesus, recently commissioned and funded an icon of Fr. Men'.) Bohemian and intellectually progressive in style and substance, the Open University is attended by 300 students and offers a full curriculum of religious studies, including a seminary.

"Hosanna" is a progressive, spirited youth-oriented religious community of a few hundred members who consider themselves to be the spiritual children of Fr. Men'. They are open and confident in their spirituality--thoroughly Orthodox, yet inclusive of all persons of good faith. Engaged in works of mercy in Moscow, Hosanna has effectively reversed the 1924 Soviet law that forbade the Church from engaging in social or charitable activities. The group sees it as their gospel mandate to visit the sick in public hospitals, to provide food and clothing to the needy, and to be hospitable to strangers and foreigners. Valuing ecumenical dialogue, they have visited the Taizé community in France and have hosted church choirs and groups from the West. In 1995, they opened a Christian coffeehouse ministry in Moscow.

There are, of course, other Russian Orthodox parishes and Western Christian groups that are successful in their attempts at dialogue and cooperative ministry. I lift up these three examples--World Vision's attempt at dialogue, CitiHope's joint venture for humanitarian aid, and Russia for Jesus's association with the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian and partnership with the Hosanna community--as signs of hope in a field where much misunderstanding and ecumenical disappointment prevail.

What Fr. Michael Meerson, of Russia for Jesus, told a group of Protestant evangelists should perhaps be said to all who wish to dialogue and minister with the Russian Orthodox: "There are more martyrs this century in Russia than in all the history of the church in the world combined. You cannot come to Russia to preach unless you know this." Solidarity and compassion, after all, are the first steps toward ecumenism, evangelism, and religious liberty.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Thomas S. Giles, "Has Rift between Orthodox and Protestants Begun to Heal?" Christianity Today 38 (September 12, 1994): 66.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., pp. 66-67.

4. Leonid Kishkovsky, "The Role of Religion in a Changing World," The Ezra Squire Tipple Lectures at Drew University, October 5, 1994.