Western Perspectives on Church-State Relations in Soviet Era

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Introduction

Many scholars have pointed out that religion, viewed by sociologists as a “sacred canopy” for world views has always been a formative factor in the social order. The key concepts of religion concentrate on a world view to live by, on making sense of the relationship between human life with its uncertainties, and God (or gods in comparative religious terms). There have usually been religious practices and rituals to sustain the basic religious understandings of the social order, which were regularly reformed in response to major societal changes.

In the long drawn out process of modernization, where one thinks of the shift from thinking of the ruler as God ordained (Divine Right of Kings) to a state structure rationally organized to oversee many functions and the decision makers were responsible to those they ruled (i.e. a democratic understanding), there were changes in assumptions involving government, and changes in assumptions involving religion. Those changes proceeded unevenly, were not harmonious, or there were even outright clashes. Keeping some of those patterns in mind helps us locate the distinct experience during the Soviet era.

The most obvious point of distinction, was the persistent assumption by the majority of Soviet officials in power, that religion and religious social institutions had become irrelevant, belonged in the dustbin of history. Yet the most striking recognition at the end of the 20th century, not only within the former Soviet Union but globally, was that religious belief, practice, and societal influence had not only survived, but had increased in significance. Had the Soviet leadership misread historical development, or did their actions stimulate a vigorous reaction? That can be debated, but it would be accurate to say that the Bolshevik reading of the future of religion relied on a western secularization understanding of the historical trajectory prevalent in the late 19th century. It was a positivist form of secular thinking that they adopted and stayed frozen to. Whereas in western Europe the transformations of the century resulted in a series of major shifts in social theory throughout the 20th century, these rarely influenced Communist Party policy toward religion. On the contrary, as Anderson’s relatively recent (1994) systematic study of Soviet
policy toward religion makes clear, the primary focus of state authorities was seldom on religion, rather on economics and on learning the best technology. Indeed, as a very recent examination of the Soviet Union’s relations with its Warsaw Pact partners, and with China revealed, the most persistent theme in the de facto policy was to catch up with the West, especially with the technological advances of the new world power, the USA, and to use its east European partners exploitatively to reach that end.

When we compare and contrast the social visions of ancient Israel, of Christianity, and of classic Marxism, all were rooted in Judeo-Christian social teaching. Recalling the main types of social teaching suffices to alert us to what influenced Christian thinking during the 20th century in Russia. A common theme of Old and New Testament Biblical thinking, as pointed out by a Catholic liberationist theologian from Mexico, Jose Miranda, was God’s persistent concern for justice. This applied in particular to the marginalized of society who should be treated justly, which liberation theologians summarized as “option for the poor”. The tense drama throughout the Biblical texts and the entire history of Christianity so far, has revolved around the predilection of some leaders of church and society to maintain their status and power, so that prophets often rose up to remind them of God’s desire of justice for all.

In the early days of Christianity two key statements by the new followers of Jesus, have provided the axis for debate on what kind of kingdom of God, or reign of God, Jesus had come to announce. When the Jewish religious authorities, barely tolerated within the Roman empire, demanded that the Jesus followers stop fostering what seemed to be a new religious movement, the apostle Peter responded with the line, “we must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). In his advice to the Christian community getting established in Rome, the seat of the unfriendly empire, the apostle Paul urged that “every person be subject to the governing authorities...” (Romans 13:1). For Christianity, the ideal bias has been toward radical trust in God, and to trust in the power of love over all violence, as epitomized in the cross of Christ. The moral dilemma for daily living was captured in the pithy remark by Jesus: “give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, give unto God what is God’s.” What should legitimately belong to Caesar’s realm, and when must God’s reign supersede it?

Paradigms of Law and Legal Theory in Christian History for Today

At the beginning and at the end of the Soviet Union, there was talk about the need for law. Tsarist law was arbitrary and contradictory, the principle of autocracy never gave way to something like a constitutional monarchy. Hence a new concept of socialist law was attempted, where the will of the people was to be primary. It got expressed in “peoples courts”. When in the late 1970s the churches began to experience more toleration by the state, this was linked to a new emphasis on “soviet legality” - that is, a social order more stable by basing it on the rule of law, no longer as subject to the vagaries of political winds. Has the search for a new post-socialist legal paradigm since 1990 found some consensus? Does not an acceptable post-communist church-state paradigm depend on some broadly supported legal paradigm? Toward the end of his book John Anderson noted that during the Perestroika years numerous discriminatory practices were quietly dropped, such as the non-legal requirement for parents to register their passports before having

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4 Ibid.
their children baptized. Finally in 1989 the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) announced “that the much criticized, unpublished instructions and decrees that it had issued between 1961 and 1983 were to be abrogated as incompatible with the principle of a law governed state.7

Unclear at the outset of the Soviet era were the corporate understandings. There was that magical phrase, “all power to the soviets”, a democratic appeal that all decisions were to be by the people. Yet it soon became clear that the pyramid of soviets (councils) were too easily manipulated by a small power elite. Societies not part of the Soviet power structure (that is, not directly part of the institutions that formed the state) soon lived in a kind of limbo. This was particularly true of the churches, since the separation decree of 1918 denied the right of juridical personhood to any and all churches. That right was partially permitted after 1944 through arbitrary instructions from the CRA not anchored in law. When the right of juridical personhood was restored in 1990, in practice it has been inadequate, and in the post-Soviet national laws, such as the Russian legislation, the penchant for control from a governmental center has been hard to eradicate.

So it may help to keep in mind the gradual history of development of notions of “societies” (obshchestvo in Russian) that had in common some notion of corporate or ‘community’ understandings, but its theoretical underpinnings have been quite diverse. For Christianity, the notions of a corporate body have been central - the church is to be the one body of Christ, with its many members that differ but together constitute a united body, Christ as its head. The imagery worth listing here includes the tension between the image of Christ its head, as the pantocrator, and as the suffering Christ, the one who serves. The Orthodox tradition whose ethos still shapes Russian imagination today, tended to imagine a structure of rulership, at the head of which were patriarchs who were to exercise holy rule over the spiritual things, and there was to be a secular ruler, the emperor, overseeing temporal matters as a good Christian. The imaginative term for that ideal state on earth was “Simfonia”. Since the symphony was difficult to maintain, and even unthinkable during the centuries of subordination to Muslim rule, even more unthinkable under atheist Soviet rulers, the desire for a better church-state concept has long been obvious. Simfonia is unlikely in the future.

The creative formation of a network of communities by Old Believers to survive over three centuries, then the formation of a functional national network of communities by the Protestant leaning free churches such as the Baptists, Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals, has been an important social contribution now finally being noticed. Not only did it demonstrate, as early as 1905, the democratic capacities of the people (narod), that form of brotherhood (bratstvo) or fellowship (obshchina) was flexible to adapt to the most sustained efforts to destroy and subvert, and is still the source of strength and influence of the free churches in Russian society. Notable in this regard is the repeated refrain in the posthumously published article by sectarian specialist Klibanov, that it was the deep commitment to respect the human person, including the personhood of one’s opponents, that not only accounted for the sectarian survival against great odds, but that accounted for their record of social service. Klibanov’s frequent claim that Soviet officials (himself included) were too blind to see, is salutary, even if coming rather late, but perhaps all will see better in the future.8

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7 Anderson, p177. He cites numerous other such changes during “this changing legal context”.
8 The reference is to a manuscript found in Klibanov’s papers, presented at a conference in 1994, but only published as Aleksandr I. Klibanov, “The Work Ethic of Russian Old Believers”, in Georg B. Michels & Robert L. Nichols, eds. Russia’s Dissident Old Believers 1650-1950, supplement to the Modern Greek Studies Yearbook, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota, 2009, 97-120. Comparing Old Belief to the Spiritual Christians from which he traced the rise of Baptists and other free churches, Klibanov noted that “their ethical codex, in particular, and especially their work ethic, was based on the affirmation of the intrinsic value of the believer.” p113.
Issues Raised by the 105 Year History of the Russian Baptist Legal Status

Soviet authorities and the new free churches both shared a vision for the separation of church and state. The free churches were heirs to a longer tradition that had already been challenging the way the new nation states of early modern Europe sought to dominate and control the church. The left or radical wing of the western Reformation had resulted in numerous alignments of congregations seeking to be free of state control. We now acknowledge that deep desire for religious freedom, given the major spread of such churches around the globe in the past two centuries of mission, by calling them free churches. The self-conscious theologies of church-state relationships differed among them, but a common instinct was to sustain a clear expression of separation between the religious commitments their members lived by and held each other accountable to, and the way the variety of states they lived in, placed demands on their allegiance. That is, the church-state relationship was an issue that must constantly remain contested.

What were the main contours of that contestation during the 20th century in Russia, and what have we learned from it? At least four chronological phases of change account for the questions that follow:

1. *What understanding of tolerance was the Tsarist Empire moving toward in 1905? Why?* There had been some discussion of tolerance (*veroterpimost’*) within the Dual Ministry under Alexander I. The Dual Ministry combined a new ministry of education with a ministry of religious affairs, all of it headed by Alexander N. Golitsyn, till then the Ober-Prokuror of the Orthodox Holy Synod who had also taken on the direction of the Department of Foreign Confessions. Tolerance was framed in the Pietism of the day, with its Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant expressions, or in the joint cooperation in the Russian Bible Society. So it had a religious quality of appreciating the spiritual values of the other, even as one stayed in the confessional tradition of one’s birth.

By the end of the 19th century the meaning of tolerance had changed. For key Orthodox spokespersons, including its active missionary society, tolerance now was rooted in a philosophical dismissal of doctrine and truth, and there was the expectation, which later statistical reports confirmed, that after the toleration act of 1907, persons would leave Orthodoxy, some joining the newly legalized Baptists, many others rejecting religion in general. Nikol’skaia has provided many examples from the St. Petersburg region to show how actively the Baptists grew as a result. An older western dissertation by Blane, relying more heavily on the papers of key Evangelical leaders in the absence of access to state papers, drew attention to how much the law shaped the structural formation of congregations, with their executive committees and record keeping. He too noted how after 1909 a reaction to restrict those freedoms briefly experienced by the Evangelicals became a reference point for their renewed activism after 1917.

2. *Why was the first Soviet committee on religious affairs named the Liquidation (Likvidatsii) Committee? What was the source of its thinking?* That has remained more difficult to answer. Several early dissertations, Blane and Steeves, cited the Soviet religious specialist Putintsev, who was an atheist propagandist, for some of the thinking and work of early Soviet religious policy. Putintsev’s work remained difficult to obtain outside the Soviet Union, I recall spending some days in Moscow in 1994 finally able to read through his works and take notes. He too noted how after 1909 a reaction to restrict those freedoms briefly experienced by the Evangelicals became a reference point for their renewed activism after 1917.

3. *What influence did the Russian Baptist movement have on the development of religious freedom in Russia?* The influence was significant. The self-conscious theologies of church-state relationships differed among them, but a common instinct was to sustain a clear expression of separation between the religious commitments their members lived by and held each other accountable to, and the way the variety of states they lived in, placed demands on their allegiance. That is, the church-state relationship was an issue that must constantly remain contested.

4. *What impact did the liquidation of the Russian Baptist movement have on the development of the Russian church-state relationship?* The liquidation had a significant impact. The Baptist movement was one of the most active and influential in the Russian church-state relationship, and its demise had a lasting effect on religious freedom in Russia.

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proved difficult to explain the “likvidatsii” word. What was apparent was that the staff, starting in early 1918 with one person spending some time looking for a typewriter and paper, were entrusted with the task of executing the decree on separation of churches from the state and the schools from the churches. Within a year part of their energies went to working out the arrangements for the special permission of 1919, for sectarians to secure alternative to military service status on the basis of making a credible claim for conscientious objection. Before that committee’s files ended, it had dealt with numerous closures of mostly Orthodox parishes, following general instructions sent out, and then needed to deal with appeals.

Tracing out the state structure for addressing religious matters before 1944 has been difficult, and remains so. The liquidation committee as central department for religious affairs seems to have ceased functioning by the mid 1920s, perhaps as republican structures took over. By then a functioning administrative structure for Russian Orthodoxy had become nearly impossible, the treatment of the “successors” to Patriarch Tikhon were in and out of prison, and after a *modus vivendi* was reached by *locum tenens* Sergei’s submission to Soviet power in 1927, he still lacked most of the instruments for leading the church, apart from some symbolic acts. Similarly the testing of each of the evangelical unions - Baptist, Evangelical Christian, Pentecostal, Mennonites, Adventist - over the issues of a loyalty statement and abandoning claims of conscientious objection to military service, ended with leadership greatly restrained, even though the efforts at evangelism, mission, offering theological education persisted in some regions. In all of this the church representatives noted the hand of the secret police, who were doing extensive surveillance, and apparently had power and authority to carry out the varieties of harassment. According to Anderson’s findings, admittedly not comprehensive, the motives and theories for actions were not evident, aside from securing Soviet power (or control by the Party general secretary) against all potential opponents. In so doing, rights of persons, never mind the already absent right of juridical personhood of the churches, were ignored. At most the Party debates, some reaching central committee level, resulted in the Law on Cults of 1929 and the major program of church closures that followed.

It was also the time of the rapid rise to influence of the League of Militant Godless, whose key leaders might as well have been state officials, in terms of their capacity to speak for Soviet policy on religion. Here too, dissertations since 1991 by western scholars perusing state archives gave a fuller picture of the League, and the ways it managed to win over former priests to help expose church flaws.  

3. Did the Law on Cults of 1929 (which persisted, in spite of revisions till 1990) represent a change in thinking? Were there parallels outside the USSR? The primary line of thinking, when noting the simultaneous campaign of collectivization of agriculture and industry and what is often known as the Stalinist war on religion were the post NEP era renewed Party goal, ideologically driven, of a rapid transformation of Russian society toward “full communism”. In that sense there were no parallels, except that after World War II such societal transformations were attempted across eastern Europe. The success in the latter cases was very uneven, the character and context of each country, and of its religious makeup and legal traditions, produced a degree of diversity, and revealed capacities for effective resistance that ultimately accounted for the collapse of the communist projects.

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Many of the articles of the Law on Cults have often been referred to as existing in other forms of government as well, notably in the west. For example, regulations on fire insurance of public buildings, on regulated forms of self-governing societies needing statutes, annual meetings for oversight of money and activities, or clarity on what deviant behavior was subject to civil law or to criminal law. In most western countries, however, such laws and regulations applied to broad categories of the general public, were not treated as part of a law on religion. If there was a partial parallel, then one thinks of such countries as Germany, France, Austria or Switzerland, where specific confessions with state church status had been fully free to function, and its clergy in the modern era swore allegiance to king or constitution, but the state provided services such as collection of a church tax, or the churches provided chaplains for the military. The role of minority churches, or sects as many were labeled, was more difficult, with more restrictions. Gradually through the democratization processes after both world wars, and the ethnic population shifts that ensued, there was a steady transition to granting religious rights to minority groups and churches.

In contrast, after the Soviet state’s need to acknowledge the service of church leaders in the Great Fatherland War, it was deemed necessary to establish a Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church under the Council of Ministers, as well as a second Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults that had responsibility for all other Christian confession, as well as Jews, Muslims and other religions. This was a temporary adjustment to the strength of Orthodox sentiment as Soviet leaders perceived things. By 1965 it was possible to integrate the two councils into the Council of Religious Affairs (CRA), though with sections for some of the major groups of religious traditions. This might be similar to the Ministry of Religious Affairs of 1817-24 under Golitsyn, as I once pointed out, but the CRA was not shaped by a policy of religious tolerance toward all, with the CRA merely the necessary liaison between the religions and the appropriate department of government. After 1965 spokespersons for the CRA took pains to talk as if they were merely doing liaison, but its actions, and published statements by leaders then, and as confirmed more thoroughly from CRA reports to the Central Committee preserved in the archives examined by the new scholars since 1991, the ideological intent was consistently one of the elimination of religion from Russian society in the near future, and grudging toleration of some activities till that eventuality.

4. One of the first official acts of the USSR was the decree on separation of churches from the state. Its intent was to eliminate the influence of religious organizations from building the new society. In various forms the struggle to overcome religious vestiges (or the war on religion, as it was experienced by the churches, synagogues and mosques) persisted into the early phases of Perestroika. What did it mean, therefore, that for some observers the vision for building a new civil society was viewed as an essentially religious task (hence the rise of Soviet atheist rituals), whereas other scholars argued that Soviet state treatment of the religions was not deemed important?

Perhaps it is best to respond by pointing out that western as well as Soviet scholarship of the time was shaped not only by cold war politics, or by the agenda of building communism, but also by the personal background of the scholar. Western scholarship on the Soviet Union was long dominated by exiles and their students whose political alignments were crucial, and whose interest in religion as a factor in politics or world view formation was minimal. A minority of scholars relying on more comparative social science perspectives began what came to be called revisionist approaches to Soviet developments, differentiating among regions, among the administration practices of different parts of government, etc. The influence of cultural anthropological studies in third world mission finally showed an impact on re-examining the role of beliefs and practices when applied to so-called secular Europe.
The other general remark that space may allow here, is to note how little has been published since 1999 on the role of religion, or of moral philosophy, on the transformations of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Given the recent flurry of anti-tolerance statements by a sociologist in the employ of the Russian Orthodox Church, or the state committee on religious affair’s readiness to reject the European Court’s call for granting legal registration of Roman Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, it is obvious that the discourse within Orthodox leadership appears to be shaped by fear of loss of influence, and with little familiarity with the global shifts to an understanding of the right of religious belief and practice as basic to a healthy society.\footnote{See Forum 18, a digital newsletter. March 2011.}

5. How and why did Soviet policy differ from policies toward religion in eastern Europe, or in China, southeast Asia and Ethiopia? An adequate response would require separate papers examining the cultural factors in each region. Here I will restrict myself to a few general observations, intended to draw attention to the transformations of populations during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Recent articles in the \textit{American Historical Review}, the publication of an historical association for all historians working in America, that attempted to review what the many publications on World Wars I and II have achieved, drew attention to what the authors claimed was a neglected area of study. The eastern front took many more lives, resulted in much more destruction of agriculture and industry, than was true of the western front. This was true not only for the war against Nazi Germany and its allies, it was also true for the first world war. The point of relevance here is that when Soviet power emerged after 1917, the Tsarist empire, that had been noticeably dysfunctional since 1905, essentially collapsed on itself. Until the mid 1920s, the Soviet leaders contended not only with a civil war on three fronts, several of them were supported by western powers. So the sense of external threat was acute, and the excessive treatment of Christian believers, who they thought were more likely to be a fifth column making common cause with western powers, can be understood that way.

At the same time, the lack of serious inter-church relations between the Orthodox world and western Catholic and Protestant worlds, and even more so the latter’s profound ignorance about Christianity across eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, meant that the east European churches lacked the instrumentality to resist state persecution, when compared with what had changed by 1950. The emergence of the World Council of Churches, or of the Lausanne Movement, to cite an Evangelical inter-church initiative, were largely driven by western Christian communities and leaders. When Soviet church leaders began to get involved after 1961, they struggled for decades under two disadvantages. For one, Soviet peace policy coopted Soviet churchmen into using what international church relations they could become part of to push a Soviet perspective on the cold war. Secondly, Soviet churchmen had not been part of major moments of shared reflection on international developments, nor had they many trained theologians and other experts to be taken seriously by their western colleagues. When we look at what has changed since 1991, that respect for competence has grown, a new generation is getting to know each other internationally, even if the voice of Russians and neighboring countries is still a seldom heard minority at international events such as the 2010 congresses on world mission.

**Free Church Perceptions of the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Eras**

Central to the uncertain actions of the Russian Baptist Union since 1991, as illustrative of other free church unions in Russia and neighboring countries, has been the reality that so little public discourse has taken place on reviewing the past, understanding the experience, and setting
directions for the future. So the recent conferences on history of the Baptist and other free church traditions, held in Moscow and in Donetsk, or some of the discussions within gatherings of the EAAA, must be seen as major and positive. May that continue, and may what was discussed get widely circulated. Understandings and changes can then follow.

Two basic questions to probe further are: What has been problematic, and continues to be so? What has earned respect? What I have learned in more than two decades of teaching global Christian history, has been to notice how often, in the modern period, church leaders, or the leaders of new church initiatives such as mission societies were energetic persons with great vision, but showing little readiness to learn the background to the challenges they sought to overcome. What is also obvious is that the watching world has tended to assess Christianity by the practices it noticed, not its official theories or doctrines.

What has been problematic in Christian history is Christian practice, the lived out ethics of faith. Surely that is because Christian faithful nevertheless remain flawed creatures, still prone to sinfulness, including being driven more by one’s ego, than by submission to the will of Christ. Even more so, the church’s institutions have often been the source of unfairness, of unjust privilege to the strong and wealthy, less able to advocate for the poor and weak. Throughout modernity, the “social question” has been a theme by which the historical performance of Christianity was assessed. Marxist critique was particularly bitter against Christian churches’ inability to resolve the social question so that justice would prevail. The past century of Marxist/Communist attempts to resolve the social question better, in the end produced results even more ambiguous than the Christian record. Across eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the public by 1990 had begun to look to the Christians and to the churches with respect on matters of morality and the social question in general. Two decades later, as recent social studies appear to show, the public is less positive toward the churches.

Key to the free church tradition was the emphasis on believers who had made a public commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Free church practice placed great emphasis on mutual accountability for high moral behavior, and practiced discipline of its members. By 1986 it was common to hear comments in Soviet circles of respect for the quality of life of the sektanty, including the Old Believers, and those more familiar with them realized also that those believers included many of great intellectual ability and skills. Further, love of neighbor, and love of enemy, as Jesus called for, were part of that desired lived ethic, but difficult to practice when Soviet policy between 1929 and 1991 forbade organized charity and mission, or any social/political involvement. Yet the teaching and tradition did not disappear, so charity and mission societies appeared everywhere after 1991. It was a time of creative engagement with the social ills of society. Both Orthodox and Protestant scholars from the West and from Russia turned to the first part of the 20th century for wisdom on what might be recovered. Perhaps one of the negative features in the patterns that developed during the 1990s, was the positive fact of financial and moral support from

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12 The reference is to a conference held in Moscow, October 18-19, 2007, to review 140 years of the Russian Baptist tradition, 21 presenters from within the tradition, that can be deemed to precede the conference of April 3-5, 2011 in Moscow, where this paper was presented. Between 2007 and 2010, Donetsk Christian University sponsored annual scholarly conferences in spring, titled Pomnyi ves Put’ (Remembering the Whole Story) that focused on reconciling the histories of the Evangelical Christian Baptist unions and associations that had parted ways during the Soviet pressures on religion. Another publication, Sharyl Corrado & Toivo Pilli, eds. Eastern European Baptist History: New Perspectives, published by International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 2007, contained papers from a 2005 conference, where the presenters included a few western specialists and the new scholars from the former Soviet Union working at advanced degrees.

free church bodies in the west, that too readily became a negative dependance when the economy collapsed. The challenge to a building up of church structures supported and sustained by its committed members still seems very daunting, though one can detect progress.

The lived social ethic of free churches should not be taken for granted. Currently in USA books have appeared for Evangelical readers that present the significance of church community action as almost a new discovery, by stressing to highly individualist believers that one’s Christian faith cannot be lived without the help of fellow believers - it takes a church or congregation. So too in Russia, the influences since 1991 from western Christianity have been biased toward the individual, insufficiently toward church cohesion and witness. The forms of mutual aid long practiced de facto in the Soviet years were what earned respect, and deserve to be emulated in the future.

The Relevance of Human Rights

The initial commitment of the new Soviet leaders to breaking down the institutional power of the Russian Orthodox church as bastion of counter-revolution, has puzzled those scholars who knew about the variety of reform, renewal or renovation movements within that church. But in international terms, Orthodoxy had for centuries been essentially unknown in the West, and generally speaking, liberal and socialist thinkers alike dismissed Orthodox thought as irrelevant, as they thought Roman Catholic theology to be. The ‘socialism’ that took power in 1917 was after all a form of westernization in its intellectual foundations. By the time of the “thaw” (the western label for the slow process of revisionism in the USSR after the death of Stalin) a new theme about human rights had taken on more international significance than even the framers of the Declaration on Human Rights (1948) had envisioned. Human rights theory is currently being reconsidered from many angles, to explore its relevance for the 21st century, and we must therefore also identify its influence on church and state thinking and practice in post-communist Russia.

Parts of the Russian intelligentsia became involved with human rights movements, some concerned for artistic freedom of expression, some seeking a Marxism with a human face, and some seeking the restoration of national rights, some of religious rights. The common experiences of suffering imprisonment and other harassment by the resistant Soviet state had resulted in recognition of mutual concerns and respect, even for the free church activists who seldom saw themselves as part of the intellectual elite. What role, therefore, did the human rights movements play in the transition to post-communist society?

Specifically with reference to the Russian Baptists, how do we evaluate the human rights dynamic for the post-communist years? It was the dissident Russian Baptist movement, that we in the West labeled the Reform Baptists (usually referred to within Russia as Sobet Tserkvei) that relied the most on human rights appeals to the UN, to the WCC, and above all to public opinion via the popular press in the west about specific claims of violation of human and religious rights. Yet in the post-communist decades the Reform Baptists have remained the most reluctant to make common cause in searching for a social order of religious pluralism.

Soviet officials tended to stress that social and communal rights were more vital than individual rights, and there was a critique among Christian theologians in the west who saw appeals to human rights as rooted in the excessive individualism emerging from the philosophical Enlightenment of the 18th century. Yet the 50th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights triggered some rethinking, that drew attention to the much longer tradition of the right to dignity and freedom of human beings that were created in the image of God. In an illuminating assessment of what Samuel Moyn called “The First Historian of Human Rights”, the Luther specialist Gerhard
Ritter had published an essay in 1949 in the prestigious German journal, *Historische Zeitschrift*. It was ignored as too religious and conservative, but Moyn, who just completed a book on the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, took him seriously. Ritter remarked that having “experienced a reality without human rights”, “now we know ... that the premises of human rights are valid,... on human rights depends... whether life on this old European continent will remain worth living.”

Moyn claimed that it was “because it preserved the inward moral sphere that religious freedom emerged as the first of all human rights.”

A western perspective on the recovery of human rights since 1989 or 1993, has been shaped by the by now widely known and studied Truth and Reconciliation Commission of post-Apartheid South Africa, and by the more ambiguous Truth and Reconciliation processes in a few Latin American countries when their national security states were reformed. A systematic review of violations of human rights had started in Russia and several neighboring post-Communist states, but the societal reconciliation theme was soon sidelined, the defensive postures of the Yeltsin and Putin governments have resulted in too frequent violations of human rights, including religious rights, and restricting access to key archives again. The absence of violence and demands for revenge from the long suppressed religious communities, has often been noted, they understood their theology to require a stance of forgiveness and offering hope for the future. Perhaps the scholarship from within that region, will soon foster more discourse on the necessity of religious freedom as human right, in order for a society to make much progress toward the “good society” vision and for church-state relationships that flow from such premises.

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15 Ibid p63.