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The Problems of Cultural Adaptation of the Evangelicals during the Soviet Period

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Gennadi Sergienko, PhD in New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary (2011) was among the first of the emerging leaders of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) who came to USA to study theology in 1990, obtained a MTh degree (Dallas Theological Seminary), and became Dean of the newly established Moscow Baptist Theological Seminary. A few years later he returned to study in Pasadena, CA, then returned to Moscow as teacher of New Testament in several seminaries and colleges, and is currently Pastor of the Second Baptist Church (Moscow) which was started in 1990. During the last two decades of the Soviet era, he was already a staff assistant to the President of the AUCECB, teaching in its correspondence course, and Russian editor of the Russian Bible Commentary series (31 volumes) translated from English (an international project of Baptists and Mennonites in partnership with the AUCECB). This paper was presented in April 2011 at a Baptist Historical Conference in Moscow, co-sponsored by the Russian Baptist Union and the State University of the Humanities (Moscow).

Cultural adaptation is an inevitable process of gradual change within a religious tradition evoked by the influence of the dominant culture. Even when dominant culture has to renew itself under the pressure of new ideas and religious movements, it transforms and adapts these ideas and movements into categories and forms, which make sense within a given society. The very fact that even after more than a hundred years of existence, Russian evangelicals are still being perceived as a foreign phenomenon, conspicuously testifies to a very poor level of cultural adaptation of this religious tradition within the context of Russian society. Why would that be the case? In answering this question I would like to delineate certain reasons. First of all, from a historical point of view, even a hundred years is a relatively short period of time. In itself it is a quite remarkable fact that during this period evangelical Christianity put its roots in the Russian soil and became an authentic religious phenomenon.

Second, it is of special importance that these “hundred years” cover, possibly the most tragic period of Russian history, including the Bolshevik revolution, civil war and two World Wars, years of unprecedented systematic terror, in the flames of which perished millions. Even the sheer listing of major tragic events of the twentieth century points to the apocalyptic as the cradle and definitive paradigm of the Russian evangelical Christianity. This is what brings together Russian evangelicalism and early Christian community. Being born within the context of sharpened apocalyptic expectations, the early Christian community presented a challenge to the pagan world, which should either accept the Gospel or perish. The Apocalyptic preacher has paint of only two colors at his disposal: black and white! In his portrayal of reality there is no place for nuances: “the image of this cosmos is passing by” (1 Cor. 7:31). There is no place for negotiations! Expectation of the coming end of the world is not the best stimulus for social activity. In many ways it explains the antisocial, secluded, character of the incipient evangelical community in Russia.
Apocalyptic Paradigm Leads a Believer into Ahistorical Existence

All of the tragic events of the twentieth century were read through the prism of the coming end. Paul’s dictum that “existing authorities are from God” (Rom. 13:1) was hard to swallow for many Russian evangelicals. The brutality of the Soviet system was more of a reminder of the coming reign of the Antichrist. Whereas for early Christianity over time the apocalyptic paradigm began losing its relevance, for the Soviet evangelicals it continued to play the dominant role. Whereas early Christianity gradually overcame the dichotomy between the kingdoms of Christ and of Caesar, for the Soviet evangelicals the chasm between the two grew ever bigger. Coupled with the traditional pacifism, this religious group evoked legitimate suspicion of being unloyal to the political establishment.

While helping a believer to stoically carry out the vicissitudes of life, an apocalyptic mentality persuaded him/her that the tribulations of life were the norm, not the exception! Life will not become better; on the contrary, the situation before the coming of Christ will become even worse. Poor living conditions, scarce food supplies, mockery and injustice at work – all of that were the legitimate signs of the coming end. Such a readiness to accept without complaisance Soviet reality put the believers among the silent statistical majority and in no better way corresponded to the expectations of the Soviet bureaucratic system.

Dull and nearsighted politics aimed at the eradication of religious prejudices, on the one hand, and the apocalyptic mentality, on the other, fostered in the minds of the believers an image of the “suffering church” as the only true version of Christianity. Correspondingly, the absence or lack of persecution was perceived as an abnormal phenomenon and provoked the radicals among evangelicals to engage in open confrontation with the Soviet system.

Claiming their non-involvement in politics, Russian evangelicals, ironically so, became involved in the power-play between the superpowers. As citizens, Russian evangelicals felt themselves as “aliens” on their native soil, and thus considered as “friends” those who opposed the communist system abroad. We all too readily assumed that since they were against the “evil empire” they supported our cause. As is well known, there are no friends or foes in politics, just interests.

The ahistorical existence of a believer resulted in his/her indifferent attitude to the country of their origin, as well as having a weakened link to their cultural heritage. Of no value to a believer was not just the culture of the Soviet period, but basically the whole stratum of the Russian cultural heritage. Literature and art was of interest only if they contained any reference to religious matters.

Still another reason for poor cultural adaptation of the Russian evangelicals has to do with Stalin’s politics of terror, as the result of which the evangelical movement was decapitated of its intellectual and spiritual potential. This very fact severed the prospects of any kind of cooperation with the civil authorities for many decades ahead. This painful memory still lives in the hearts and minds of those who lost their loved ones to the ruthless grinder of the Gulag.

Deprived of its intellectual and spiritual elite, evangelicals were doomed to follow a sectarian pattern of development, in many ways imitating the forms and methods of the authoritarian system in which they lived.

Here I would like to draw another parallel with the early Christian community, which from the point of view of social stratification comprised representatives of different social classes (with the majority belonging to the lower classes). Among the majority of the “unwise, weak, and simple” (1Cor.1:26) there was a minority of those who claimed their adherence to the cultural and business elite of the time. These were the people who in time came to play key leadership roles in the Christian communities. Alongside attempts to challenge the status quo (“in Christ . . . there is
no slave nor free” Gal. 3:28) there is a clear preference shown in the early Christian community to “wise, strong, and noble” (see the critique of such tendencies in James 2:1-5). These were the people of means and influence, the network facilitators of the incipient Christian communities.

Whereas initially the evangelical movement in Russia comprised representatives of different social classes (aristocracy, business people, students, working class, peasantry), during the Soviet period it became almost exclusively a movement of “pensioners and women”. In response to an exclamation by a dissident Orthodox priest Dmitry Dudko (writing in the mid-seventies of last century): “No, the godless authorities failed to convert the Russian Orthodox church into a church of old babushkas!” another Orthodox priest, Alexander Borisov, replied: “In reality we should regretfully state quite the opposite: they have succeeded, for our Church as it exists in the present, indeed became the Church of aging and elderly women.” If this was true of the Russian Orthodox Church it was certainly true of the marginal religious groups as well.

We should admit that even deprived of its intellectual and spiritual elite, the evangelical community demonstrated a remarkable degree of survival within this hostile environment. Potentially every male member of the community could become a preacher or a teacher. While securing the high level of survival, this model had at least two major shortcomings. First of all, it downplayed the importance of theological training, not to mention education and culture in general. Mediocrity and illiteracy remain a serious obstacle for the intelligentsia to join evangelical churches even today.

The second point is closely related to the first one. The prevailing model testified to the absence of a common school of interpretation. Taking into consideration our high view of Scripture, we do not always realize the great potential which is contained within the biblical witness, potential for good and ill. There are plenty of examples of constructive and destructive uses of the Bible throughout all of Church history. For this reason a common school of interpretation is so important. Otherwise the Bible becomes an instrument of religious demagogy and profanation. The church pulpit often becomes the place of Babylonian confusion, when preaching on the same text, preachers come to contradictory conclusions. Any text, taken out of its context, serves as the justification of one’s erroneous views. For example, physical discipline, for which there is a clear Scriptural mandate, is still a common place in many Christian families. It comes to us as a major surprise that such a practice is considered a felony in many western countries.

The absence of that very stratum of the “strong, wise, and noble” is one of the reasons which explain the absence of a clearly defined Russian indigenous theology, which in turn signifies our continual dependence on Western teachers. We only recently started to open for ourselves the complexity and contradictory character of the Christian theological heritage. Taking into account the context we are coming from, one can almost assume our natural leaning toward the fundamentalist type of theology. My concern is that we will continue to preach for quite a while with an “American accent”, which in turn will continue to confirm the stereotype of the evangelical tradition being an imposition from the West.

An intentional politics of the Soviet authorities, on the one hand, and the apocalyptic paradigm, on the other, pushed evangelical Christianity further into its cultural ghetto. The official propaganda did its best to foster quite a negative image of Baptists or Pentecostals, for example, who were portrayed as the outcasts of the society. Indeed who in their sound mind would dare to step into a prayer-house (usually located as remotely as possible) of these sectarians?

The realities of the first century Roman empire put the followers of Jesus into the dilemma of their existence within the pagan environment. How they were to live “within the world” and be

1Александр Борисов, Подвигии Ния/М. 1994, 44-45.
“not of this world”? For this reason in the letters of Paul, for example, we find his apocalyptic rhetoric coexisting with his responses to the existential needs of the readers. In answering this question Paul basically says: “Yes, go ahead and eat whatever is offered to you (including the meat sacrificed to idols?)” (1 Cor. 10:27). It is a very bold recommendation because, as Paul knows well himself – 1 Cor. 10:20, food consumption in the ancient world was always marred with religious connotations.

No doubt Russian evangelicals were facing similar questions. As I was working on this article I came across a written testimony of a long-standing relative of mine, a professional musician, prima-violinist of the Bolshoi theatre, Georgiy Slesaryov. In his memoirs written in the mid-thirties, not long before he was arrested and executed, he was asking himself whether it was appropriate for a Christian to be a musician.

I believe that in answering those kinds of questions Christians have consciously proceeded from the negative: the Christian is the one who does not drink (alcohol), does not smoke, does not go to movies or theatre, does not read books (except for the Bible). In stating what the Christian is not, we found it difficult to state what the Christian is.

The nineties of the last century opened up a new page in the history of Russia. The period of unprecedented freedoms gave us a chance to get out of the ghetto. We had to learn anew how to live and preach the Gospel to our contemporaries in a meaningful way. If there was any positive outcome from the massive emigration of the evangelicals to the West (primarily to the USA), it was the liberation of our churches from the blind adherence to culturally stipulated traditions of the past. On the other side, we have to admit that in an attempt to attract as many followers as possible, some evangelical churches proceeded by lowering the barrier which distinguishes “church” from “circus”.

I remember how in the chaos of the early nineties the Moscovites were introduced to the American version of Christianity through the ministry of Christian athletes from the USA who were breaking chains “in the name of Jesus”. Contrary to the old paradigm, whereby the evangelical community considered itself as the challenge to “the world”, today we see attempts to unite the secular and sacred worlds into one. When a worship service becomes more like a discotheque, your body coming into motion even before you can comprehend the words of the songs sung.

Coming back to the issue of our positive influence on the society, we should admit that we have only started taking our first steps into this direction. Today we observe a quite effective work of the rehabilitation centers for drug addicts. Many churches employ different programs aimed at helping people suffering from different addictions. Also widely spread is the social outreach to orphans, handicapped and war veterans. Recently we organized at our church a cabinet of medical and social help. It is one of the first examples of ministry aimed at helping women struggling with the issue of abortion. Ministries like that require a joint effort by several churches or church groups.

In conclusion I would like say that more than a hundred years of the evangelical community’s existence on the Russian soil makes it an integral part of Russian society. Today we are trying to leave behind the painful memories of the past years and to learn how to live in the dynamic, new realities of the present; to live as the citizens of our country. In my view the more assurance we get that the totalitarian past is irrevocable, the more reasons we have to consider ourselves sons and daughters of the Russian land.