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RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN RUSSIA

by Paul Mojzes

Thirteen American professors of religious studies went to Russia, October 5-20, 1995, in order to meet with their counterparts under the auspices of the Citizen Ambassador Program. We engaged in numerous, rather intense encounters with the nascent group of professors of the same field in Russia. Here are some observations from that experience and previous observations:

Upon the collapse of Communism in Russia, as in all other former Communist countries, a need was perceived to introduce the study of religion in schools. From the outset two ideas became dominant. One was to teach catechism on an optional or compulsory basis mostly by priests and theologically trained lay people but under the auspices of a church organization. The other option was to offer some courses on the religious heritage that would be taught by teachers trained in the discipline of religious studies. The first option was attractive to the leadership of the great historical churches but was feared by minority churches and the unchurched. The other was preferred by those who felt that young people need to be introduced to the great ideas of the religious traditions in a non-denominational manner.

Here we shall deal only with higher education. Unlike many other European countries theological education in Russia had not been a part of the university system even during tsarist times; there were special theological schools and academies at which future priests and other church leaders were trained. No religious studies were taught at the universities. Consistent with this tradition the Russian Orthodox Church having been reduced to only a few theological schools during the Communist period (Moscow Theological Seminary, St. Petersburg Theological Academy, Odessa Theological Seminary) was free to open a large number of theological schools. And so did many other churches. Thus, for instance, the Evangelical Baptists, The Seventh-Day Adventists, the Roman Catholics, and as of recently the United Methodists operate theological schools for the training of their cadres. Altogether there are over a hundred theological seminaries and Bible schools today.

The situation is more complex at other institutions of higher learning. During the Soviet period a two-tier educational system operated: universities and institutes, the latter more research oriented and generally more prestigious. This division persists. In a number of universities and institutes religious studies have now been introduced. The former Institute for the Scientific Study of Atheism in Moscow is now the Institute for the Study of Religion; the Museum of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad is now the Museum of Religion in St. Petersburg. The Institute for Russian History now has a section for the study of religion in Russia. The Lomonosov State University in Moscow and the Urals State University in Ekaterinburg, for instance, are now introducing courses in religious studies as part of their general educational curriculum as optional courses.

In addition a third kind of institution emerged, which included private schools, institutes, and universities, some of which teach both theology and a general curriculum, such as the St. Tikhon Theological Institute, the Alexander Men Open University, while others like the St. Petersburg Institute of Religion, and the St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy exclusively deal with the study of religion and related subjects. The latter two, in my opinion, developed the most dynamic programs.

Many of these private institutions do not have their own buildings but are renting space which most of us would consider substandard in quality (some have no heat, very inadequate lighting and toilet facilities, and deteriorated classrooms); they have inadequate or no libraries, and many of their teachers hold two or three jobs concurrently (for instance, teaching different courses at the university) because they are being paid so poorly. The students pay little or no tuition, and it is often hard to imagine how these institutions operate on such limited budgets. Moonlighting with double or triple overload is based on the widely accepted working habits in many of Russia's institutions where a professor is not required to show up at the institute except once a week, on pay day. Teaching resources are extremely poor. Appropriate books in Russian are scarce and in many fields non-existent; books from abroad are arriving but are not accessible to the majority due to language barrier and availability.

During the seventy years under communism there were only two approaches to the study of religion. One, used in seminaries, was the education for priests and choir-leaders, heavily liturgical and dogmatic in content. The

other was Marxist propagandist diatribes against religion--studying religion for the sake of defeating and ridiculing it. During short intervals of liberalized approach to religion a few scholars were able to get by with only mildly slanted sociological studies of religious phenomena.

Now a discipline or area study is to be developed nearly *ex-nihilo*. It is not surprising that the birth pains for religious studies are enormous. Looking at the personnel who are now involved in teaching religious studies, one can categorize them into four groups.

The first are former and in many cases still-convicted Marxists who were either doing sociology of religion or were teaching Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism. Most of them no longer publicly identify themselves as Marxist and some, against all evidence, maintain now that they used to oppose totalitarianism. A number of them are involved in writing introductions to religion or studies of religious movements, new and old, arising in the West. The term "critical study of religion" used in the West to describe the scholarly, non-dogmatic approach has an entirely different meaning in Russia; it is used for the Marxist approach. To our chagrin we found out that we may have been misunderstood during a segment of our meetings with Russian scholars as if we were pursuing the Marxist interpretation of religion! While this group of scholars maintain that they are studying religion in an unbiased manner, it seems that they will continue to do damage to the reputation of religion in their barely disguised hostile approach. In addition it seems that certain very basic assumptions, such as an economic explanation for everything, are being held by vast segments of the population and are remains of the Marxist indoctrination. This group tends to be defensive about the Soviet approaches to religion and considers the persecutions as Stalinist aberrations, which, they claim to have consistently opposed.

The second, larger group, can be described as "return-to-Russian-Orthodoxy." This group is openly critical of the Soviet period and with sadness and shock grasps the genocidal scope of Communist persecutions of the Orthodox Church. It is interested in rediscovering the Russian Orthodox past, which has been successfully filtered out of education and experience. Eagerly this group seeks to discover the "Russian Orthodox soul" and maintains the future of the country's well being is tied to the re-baptism of Russia. People in this group eagerly seek to disseminate everything they can discover about the Russian Orthodox heritage.

There are two sub-groups in this approach. One is **restorationist**, namely going back to the pre-Bolshevik period, seeking to recover traditions that, in its estimate need to be reimposed without any alterations to the present period. It tends to be very nationalistic, dogmatic, anti-Semitic, and anti-foreign. To this sub-group Marxism was simply a foreign import imposed by force on the Russians, which can now be discarded. Many of the sub-group claim that the Communist rule did not have any positive contributions and they imagine that one could go directly from 1917 to 1990; some even wish to return to the pre-Peter the Great or to the Kievan Rus periods.

The second, much, much smaller group are the **revitalizationists** who work for a renewal of Orthodoxy. This group seeks to bring about the encounter of the great Russian Orthodox spiritual and ecclesial tradition with the challenges of the modern world. A number of them are the followers of the martyr Alexander Men (e.g the Alexander Men Open University). A good many have an evangelistic zeal for this Orthodox renewal, and they fear that the restorationists are endangering the future. They find inspiration in the great Russian Orthodox thinkers of the 19th and 20th century, including Aleksei Khomiakov, Vladimir Soloviev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great emigre writers such as Nicholas Berdyaev, Georges Florovsky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolai Afanasiev.

In addition to the above two large groupings there are two additional important categories of scholars. What can be called the third major group consists of scholars who have embraced a non-traditional Russian religion. They may have become Roman Catholic, Protestant, Baha'i, Buddhist or joined one of the new religions. A segment of this group simply replaced one dogma with another, having been formerly dogmatic Marxists and now with equal assurance quote the prophet Baha'ullah or Rev. Moon. For some people this shift was as much for economic benefit as it was for conviction. But a larger segment of this group have undergone a genuine conversion having found the answer to their quest in some creative non-Russian options. The latter seek to indigenize their newly adopted faith, appreciate and use the great spiritual Orthodox heritage and are able to become effective teachers of religion.

The fourth major group is closest to the prevalent Western approach, namely to pursue the open-minded, scholarly exploration using the accepted methodologies of studying religion. On the whole they are young; some of them had studied abroad. Some of them are religious and may have come to study religion because religion plays a role in their personal lives. Their commitment to a specific religion does not stand in their way to do research and to

teach in a sympathetic but critical way their own religious tradition or others. A fair number of them are agnostics who have rejected the anti-religious training of their younger days but have not (as yet?) found a religious faith to embrace. Minimally, however, they appreciate the importance of religion in collective and personal life and are willing to immerse themselves into the fineries of religious experience. It is this fourth group that will hopefully be in the position to catch up with the international level of scholarship provided that they continue to interact with their colleagues from abroad. Surely, there is much that they can and must learn, but interaction with Western scholars is not just a one-way street. They have had and continue to have a chance to explore religious groups not frequently studied elsewhere, such as the Old Believers, Siberian shamanistic practices, Islam as practiced in Russia and the former Soviet republics, Buryat eclectic Buddhism and Orthodoxy, Orthodox iconography, medieval manuscripts from that area, and so forth and assist others in understanding these religions.

In the Soviet period a very limited number of scholars were able to benefit from access to Western professional literature and from travel abroad. Today no such prohibitions exist, yet many Russian scholars are nearly as isolated as they were before because of economic reasons. A trip abroad may cost the equivalent of an annual salary, a book or journal subscription is equivalent of a monthly income. Other Eastern European scholars face similar handicaps except that the Russian difficulties are greater due to vastly greater distances and isolation of Russian provincial cities. One encounters the greater sophistication among St. Petersburg scholars of religion; their location provides for the greatest cross-fertilization of ideas. But others are not so lucky.

Here, again is one more challenge for American and other Western scholars. Due to our leftover fixation with Russia as a former rival superpower the interest level about Russia is great among academics as it is among lay people, and it is likely that this will turn out to be an asset in fulfilling their vast need.