

10-1994

Missional Ecumenism and Slavophilism in Russia

James E. Will

Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Will, James E. (1994) "Missional Ecumenism and Slavophilism in Russia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 5 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol14/iss5/6>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

MISSIONAL ECUMENISM AND SLAVOPHILISM IN RUSSIA

James E. Will

Dr. James E. Will (United Methodist) is professor of systematic theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. He is a former president of CAREE and a long-time participant in contacts with Eastern European Christians.

"The Russian Orthodox Church presently suffers a kind of internal fever in its relations with Protestant Churches," paraphrases one of Victor Petliuchenko's vivid metaphors in his negative response to the possibility of forming "sister church" relationships with United Methodist and other Protestant congregations in the U.S.A. As re-gathering Russian congregations face daunting tasks of restoring parish life while renovating the more than 15,000 ruined church buildings recently returned by the state--an almost impossible task in their present economy--there is no question in his or anyone else's mind that they could use whatever help such relationships might engender. Yet Archpriest Petliuchenko held that unless and until the Holy Spirit healed their "fever," such ecumenical relationships for many parishes, no matter how wise in principle, are presently impossible in practice.

Depending on the point of view, the cause of this "feverish" dis-ease is either the virus of nationalism or ecumenism, or perhaps both in their concurrent affect on Christ's body in its Russian Orthodox form. Father Petliuchenko estimates his church is about equally divided between those who nationalistically blame their present malaise on falling victim to ecumenism, while the other half lament the resurgence of the traditional nationalism they hoped they had left behind in Czarist Russia. There is, of course, no sociological data to substantiate these estimates; but Victor Petliuchenko as Vice-Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (and ecumenically active as a professor in the Odessa Theological Seminary before taking this office) is in a good position to know his church and make this judgment. The fever metaphor vividly expresses his sense of the dis-ease caused by the interaction of these equally powerful spiritual forces in the Russian Orthodox Church today.

The spiritual tendency toward a 'feverish' fusion of nationalism with ecumenism in the Russian soul came to clear literary expression in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Slavophilic assertion that the Russian people are "the only God-bearing people in the whole world, slated to revive

and save the world." In an address honoring another celebrated Russian author, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky defined "the vocation of the Russian man" as "doubtless universal-European and even ecumenical. . . . To receive with brotherly love all brothers into his Russian soul, and perhaps even finally to be able to utter the word of universal great harmony, of final brotherly concord between nations, according to Christ's commandments."¹ This Slavophilic tradition helps us understand why Russian Christians now seeking to replace a failed Communist ideology that taught their people they were destined to speak 'the word of universal great harmony' for the healing of the nations, find it crucial to re-establish and protect a uniquely Russian form of Christian spirituality. Even if we suspect or reject Slavophilic national messianism, as most ecumenically oriented Christians do, Western churches should recognize the cogency of Victor Petliuchenko's claim: The Russian Orthodox Church needs time to restore its relationship with the Russian people after seventy years of severe governmental repression--if for nothing else (but there is much else!) than to guide and discipline their Slavophilism into more genuinely ecumenical channels.

Dimitry Pospelovsky summarized a decade ago the essential motifs of Slavophilism in a way that indicates their potential to make a contribution not only to Russian churches and culture, but more ecumenically to our whole world:

- 1) The belief in sobornost as the free interplay between individual persons and society when both are sublimated by a common hierarchy of spiritual values; and,
- 2) A worldview that rejects revolutionary disruptions of the historical development of societies and accepts only evolutionary, organic progress emanating from within the society and its evolving institutions.²

What is now at issue in the hearts and minds of many Russian faithful, however, is the validity of their relationship to ecumenical structures like the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, and through them with most of the other churches in the world. Some Russians see their church's entrance into the World Council in 1961 as its second "fall," following the first when Peter the Great a century and a half before opened their Russian culture and church to the West and abolished the Patriarchate. On the other hand, seventy years of Communist rule has eroded the 'caesaro-papist' link in Russian spirituality, and one may hope that their experience of ecumenical participation for more than three decades--during which Metropolitan Nikodim served as a president of the World

¹Cited in Salo Baron, Modern Nationalism and Religion, (New York: Harper, 1947), p. 209.

²Paraphrased from his essay on "The Neo-Slavophile Trend and its Relation to the Contemporary Religious Revival in the USSR," in Pedro Ramet, Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and EastEuropean Politics, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), p. 45.

Council of Churches and the present Patriarch Alexei as president of the Conference of European Churches--point in the opposite direction.

Re-establishing the pastoral care of the Russian Orthodox Church for most of the Russian people, under genuinely ecumenical leadership, is the best way, in my judgment, to safeguard against their returning to the kind of idolatrous Slavophilism lamented by Salo Baron:

In the writings of such Slavophiles as Kirevski, Khomiakov, Samarin, the brothers Constantine and Ivan Akaskov and Danilevski, or of such sympathizers as Dostoevski, Russia's old imperial drive received an unmatched religious and humanitarian rationale.... They thus ascribed to their nation a messianic role which invested Russia's imperial expansion with qualities redemptive of mankind at large.³

For more than three decades, the Russian Orthodox Church has covenanted with most of the rest of the churches in the world through the World Council of Churches to be "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (WCC Constitution, emphasis added). Their theologians have participated with many of ours in developing the ecumenical ecclesiology expressed in the Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry document of the Faith and Order Commission to affirm that "we are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and in all the world." (BEM, II.D.6., emphasis added)

The present struggle to resolve the dialectic between "each and all " in Russian souls and congregations, however, requires more ecumenical sensitivity by Western Christians than has often been evident since Gorbachev's perestroika opened Russia to our evangelistic and missional activities. Some Protestant evangelists approach Russia today like nineteenth century missionaries (mis)interpreting "dark Africa." Consider the report of the Rev. Dwight Ramsey about his 'heroic' efforts to establish United Methodist Churches in a dangerous Russia, as he describes to a laity banquet in Tennessee "how he had huddled with a frightened group of Russians under the only street light for several dark blocks as a car cruised slowly past them":

"I could feel the people with me shaking; they were fearful," Mr Ramsey said. "The gangs in Pushma had been fighting, and there had been several drive-by machine-gunnings. I was on the front row, so I could see the six men in the car who looked at us closely as they drove by."

The approximately 500 people gathered . . . held their breath as Mr. Ramsey continued. "And then a strange thing happened," he said in amazement. "A young woman stepped out and stood in front of me, placing her body between me and the men in that car. She

³Modern Nationalism and Religion, p. 195.

was willing to give her life to save mine because she felt the message I was bringing about Jesus Christ was so important." Welcome to the new Russia!⁴

While that kind of soap-opera rhetoric raises 'missionary' offerings in the United States to evangelize 'benighted' Russians, it also raises the destructive 'fever' in Russian Orthodox churches, which Victor Petliuchenko asks our forbearance and cooperation to help heal. Such rhetoric too largely reflects the national messianism of American civil religion (which is a mirror-image of Russian Slavophilism) that we are now in a position to promulgate in Russia. The fearful event Mr. Ramsey so vividly described, after all, could have occurred in my native Chicago as readily as in Pushma; and there is as much need for spiritual heroism in Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes as in the worst places in Russia.

Evangelical Christians in Russia, like the Russian Orthodox, have expressed "their negative feelings . . . about evangelizing in the states of the former Soviet Union." As a "Council for the Coordination of Missions," they have published an open letter to inform American Christians of the difficulties that our efforts too often inadvertently have caused our Russian brothers and sisters:

In Moscow alone, more than a hundred western organizations have been registered, each of which wished to put its own program into effect. In doing so, they, of course, try to use the infrastructure of the already existing churches of the country, which is still unable to withstand such pressure in terms not only spiritual, but also organizational.

Second, local missionary organizations are not able to compete with the strong western missions. The best workers, having been offered much higher salaries, are tempted to work with a western organization. . . . Instead of receiving help and support from western missionaries the local institutions are actually having to fight to realize their own vision of ministry.

Third, in a time when the national self-consciousness of our peoples has awakened and sometimes bursts into obvious nationalism, it is extremely harmful to evangelize without considering the local culture, traditions and religion.⁵

The ecumenical church has accumulated much wisdom--if we would only recall it--to guide a better response to the present evangelistic and missional challenges in Russia. It is particularly appropriate to recall the work of the Faith and Order Working Committee when it met in St. Sergius Monastery in what was then called Zagorsk, Russia in 1973. They recognized then under the conditions of "cold war" what we must seek to actualize now under the conditions of peace: The church is a "sign of the unity of humankind and an agent of that unity."⁶ We should do nothing to endanger or undermine the unity they discerned and

⁴The United Methodist Reporter, April 15, 1994, p. 3.

⁵Signed by ten persons from nine states in the CIS on March 23, 1993.

⁶Church, Kingdom, World, WCC, 1986, p. 6.

affirmed as we learn better how to become God's agents in advancing it. Their report specifies perspectives that could guide our present efforts if we would adequately recall them:

1) "God has sent the church in Christ to be a sign of salvation and judgment. This sign only becomes visible when it is confronted with the particular conditions of human life in one place."

The spiritual, social and economic needs of the "one place" that is Russia today are calling many around the world to respond in evangelical and humanitarian ways. Their spiritual energy should be valued as a sign of God's salvation and judgment, and directed toward advancing the unity of humankind that God intends.

2) "Living as a sign means to put no limits to what God may intend to work through the church and even outside its limits and boundaries."

Many Western Christians are working far beyond their previous boundaries as the limits the Russian Communist government previously had imposed on religion are now gone. But we are not called, nor I think even allowed, simply to extend our Western "limits and boundaries" as we establish our own congregations and institutions. This is demeaning and divisive. To be signs of the unity that God intends, we must honor, support and empower the indigenous churches of the Russian people--and that means principally the Russian Orthodox Church.

3) "As a sign of the Kingdom and lordship of God, the church will have to be a prophetic sign calling to repentance. It must be a sign of reconciliation as well as binding together those who are separated by human sin."

Many of us were deeply separated from faithful Russian Christians during the cold war, while many of them were paying a great price for their faithfulness. We have not really repented of that long alienation if we do not make full use of our present opportunities to reconcile and bind together what our nationalistic and ideological sins had so grievously separated.

There is, of course, much evidence that the Holy Spirit is guiding the churches by this ecumenical wisdom to help heal the "fever" that endangers the unity of Christ's body in Russia. On the very day that Father Petliuchenko was sharing his concern with our United Methodist group, the Methodist Bishop in the CIS, Bishop Ruediger Minor, was delivering \$35,000,00 from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to Russian Orthodox Bishop Sergei for use in the new Russian Orthodox Department of Social Services that he heads. And when we met several days later with Abbot Ioann Ekonomtsev, who heads the new Russian Orthodox Department of Religious Education and with great energy is developing an Orthodox Pedagogical Institute and a new Russian Orthodox University as well as helping each of their congregations to form a Sunday School, he spoke appreciatively of all of the help he is receiving from many churches, including Protestant churches, in these momentous endeavors. I also know of forty "Volunteers in Mission" groups from the United Methodist Church who will be constructing housing for the elderly and helping reconstruct Russian

Orthodox churches, monasteries, kindergartens, clinics, and orphanages during the coming summer in Russia. Undoubtedly, there are many more of such ecumenically oriented groups from other denominations.

Dimitry Pospelovsky was convinced before politicians like Vladimir Zhirinovsky emerged in the Russian political scene that there are only a few extremist "national bolsheviks" in the contemporary Slavophile movement in Russia. If that ever has been or still is correct--or when our increasingly sensitive ecumenical relations with our Russian brothers and sisters helps it to become the case--then perhaps the authentic Slavophile dimensions he discerns in Russian spirituality may interact with our churches' ecumenical missions in Russia to achieve the reconciliation, justice, and peace that the God we all worship as revealed in Jesus Christ would give us.