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STEPPING OUT FOR A LITTLE AIR:
SOME PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN RELIGION IN RUSSIA

By Jeffrey Kisner

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On my campus of Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania, "stepping out of the building for some air" can result in two distinctly different experiences. The first is less than salutary for me: I must plow through a thick cloud of cigarette smoke created by those who are not allowed to practice their habit in the confines of the buildings of our campus. Since I am a non-smoker, the first experience is a negative one. The second experience is the desired effect: the deep intake of some fresh, clean air that invigorates one’s being, wards off the temptation for an afternoon nap, and stimulates the mind for creative activity.

These contrasting experiences provide an analogy to describe my responses to a recent venture to Russia with members of the American Academy of Religion from October 5-20, 1995. The People to People organization, founded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, sends "citizen ambassadors" worldwide to form personal friendships and professional relationships that foster peace among peoples. The scholarly delegation was a diverse one composed of two private and two state university teachers, four private liberal arts college professors, a campus minister who teaches religious studies part-time, a part-time seminary instructor, and one lay theological institute teacher. Two guests also accompanied us as we met with representatives from twenty different educational institutions in fourteen days. Thirteen of these institutions offer undergraduate or graduate courses in religion.

I came away from most of our encounters with state institutions with clouded impressions. For example, we visited Russia’s central research institution in the field of philosophy, the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Our anticipated dialogue with colleagues became obscured by a hazy billow, sometimes involving two or three
members of the Institute arguing with each other. The older members of this faculty had a decidedly Marxist view of religion. They categorized all non-Orthodox religions as "new age," including the Unification Church and the Church of Scientology. The fear among some intellectuals at the Institute is that the Russian Orthodox Church will try to re-establish an intolerant state church; others think the fear is totally unfounded. At the same time, scholars there denied that the Orthodox Church is an intellectual force in Russia.

A visit to another institution initially appeared to be clear, but then was eclipsed by the recurring smoky fog. Researchers at the Center for the History of Religion and the Church in Russia at the Institute for Russian History in Moscow are supportive of the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the current context. The separation of church and state in the former USSR, they recognized, had been "a wall with barbed wire and railings." Since perestroika, they now hope "to combine confessional belonging with the objective study of religion" though presently, it still seems impossible to some of them. Yet, our delegation became very uncomfortable when some members of their faculty began to talk about the inferior status of non-Orthodox Christians and members of other religions in a state where Russian citizenship is equated with Russian Orthodoxy. For example, when members of our delegation asked about possible anti-semitism one Russian professor replied that "if Jews became Orthodox Christians they would not be discriminated against because--alluding to the Apostle Paul's formula intended for a very different usage-- 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile.'"

Our visit to the State Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg was equally shadowed in a dull vapor. Our delegation identified and confronted our hosts with an anti-religious bias; two in our delegation had previous knowledge of the museum before perestroika. In those years, the museum was hostile to religion, especially in the texts of explanation cards in the displays; even the building itself had been "brutally taken from the Church." The response from our hosts was that the government had saved the building from destruction, that the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church was grateful for that action and for preserving the holdings therein which had (at their unintentional admission) been "confiscated from private collections." They accused our delegation of approaching and judging the museum as "believers" while they were "objective" in their approach. When we quizzed them about gold and silver icon frames from which icon paintings had been removed, they replied that the frames are the "valuable parts," not the painted figures. A matter of perspective, perhaps?

Though we enjoyed stimulating dialogue at Urals State University and Urals State Pedagogical University, both in Yekaterinburg, Russia, most of our experiences with faculty at state institutions were obscured by gray haze. Before perestroika, religion was taught "scientifically," that is, from a Marxist perspective. When the former USSR split, professors
of Marxist-Leninism and atheism literally became professors of religion overnight. Those who previously intimidated students to chuck their religious traditions in favor of the state Marxist ideology are now teaching those formerly rejected religious traditions to their students! It is certainly debatable whether or not these people can teach the traditions in a disinterested way.

But our encounters with colleagues at private institutions were as invigorating as fresh air. The St. Petersburg Institute of Religion at the Monastery of Alexander Nevsky provides both secondary and undergraduate education. The Institute was founded in the 1970s by former Leningrad dissidents, led by Vladimir Poresh. Poresh now heads this Institute, which was established by Orthodox Christians to give non-sectarian education about religion. The faculty's aspirations are high: they want to open their own publishing house. The faculty of the Institute fears that St. Petersburg University could open a religious studies department which would probably teach religion from a Marxist perspective. Students there indicated a desire to understand themselves by understanding the Orthodox tradition. Questions by our delegation engendered a debate among students at the Institute that concerned gender issues. One male student expressed that teaching should be a male-dominated profession and that women should "stay in the kitchen," where, he added defensively, traditionally religious dialogue takes place. Women students responded by saying that being a "housewife" is acceptable, but a good theological education is desirable to teach children. The women students also said that they believed that to be well-educated in an unstable society is a form of stability.

The most vitalizing developments in higher education that we witnessed on our Russian journey are happening at the St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy. The School is officially five years old, but it started during the Soviet era as an underground movement of home seminars in religion. The founders of the School, including Director Dr. Natalia Pecherskaya, are Russian Orthodox Christians whose students seek an intellectually informed faith that takes seriously the differences in religious traditions. The School has about 30 faculty that has carried on the first Jewish/Christian dialogue in the nation and is in process of developing a post-Gulag theology, resembling in some ways post-Auschwitz theology in the West. This School possesses a program which might compare favorably to a non-sectarian religious studies program at universities in the US. Their faculty includes confessing Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. The scholars there are both critically knowledgeable about religion and passionately committed to their faith traditions. It was on this site that our delegation engaged in the most enlivening academic dialogue of our journey. Topics included Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, moral theory, and Louis Farakhan's role in the "Million-Man March." (The march had taken place the day before our visit to the school.)
Regardless of institutional affiliation, this is an exciting time for Russian scholars of religion. Since the Communist structure fell, the general public, and traditional-age students in particular, have demonstrated a lively concern in studying religion. The concern reflects the creation of the "religious vacuum" in Russia since the declaration that Marxism is a "false religion." There is, at the same time, apprehension about the meaning of religious freedom and the teaching of religion in the "new Russia." While many choose to reclaim Russian Orthodoxy, most insist on a traditionalist interpretation of the faith which provides a sense of security, but no theological framework for adapting to the present context. State institutions are, in some places, becoming more open to permitting practitioners of various religious traditions to teach courses in religion. Scholars are writing textbooks because they now have access to works that were previously forbidden by the government. They are also in need of Western resources, especially books and journals. Our colleagues in higher education in religion in Russia would also highly value study and research opportunities in the West. Rapidly increasing numbers of younger scholars are enthusiastically availing themselves of opportunities to study in Europe and the US. Perhaps the senior faculty positions at the state institutions will be granted to them in the near future and some of the smoke will dissipate in favor of some fresh air.