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Witte & Bourdeaux's "Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia. The New War for Souls" - Book Review

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South, where various cultural and religious worlds intersect. This has also served to enhance pluralism in the Ukrainian worldview and a tolerant attitude toward different ways of thinking, including the religious. These are vital pre-conditions for inter-denominational and inter-religious understanding and cooperation.


The face of Christianity in the former Soviet Union (FSU) has been transformed several times this past decade. When the Soviet Union dissolved, it was common to speak of a spiritual vacuum needing to be filled, and to report on the ‘harvest of souls’ in Russia. Then came warnings about ignorant and inappropriate evangelists/missionaries and their methods. This era came to be known as the ‘Struggle for the Soul of Russia’, to cite one UMC video that showed contrasting images of non-denominational baptisms in swimming pools and multi-generational families lined up for baptism by an over-worked Orthodox priest. After 1997 the new Russian Law on Religion produced images of new restrictions on religious practice, in which Russian Orthodoxy has privileged status, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism are recognized in geographic regions, and the Catholic and Protestant (mainline & evangelical) traditions that can show legal recognition from the Soviet era may apply for re-registration.

The law was an outright attempt to stop missionary activity, especially by new religious movements and undisciplined independent groups. There was a serious problem of proselytization threatening Orthodoxy and the cultural future of Russia, so said many prominent Orthodox leaders. Universal rights of religious freedom were once more threatened, so said many prominent Western legislators and spokespersons for the mission agencies.

This book of essays represents part of the research findings from a major Pew Foundation funded project on “Soul Wars...in the New World Order”. managed through Emory University. That accounts for the human and religious rights framework for the book, even though its contents at many points transcend that western legal mentality. The proselytism debate within ecumenical Christianity requires addressing the issues of missiology and of ecclesiology, missing here are theologians and missiologists, especially from the Orthodox world. The WCC affirmations of common witness which included a rejection of proselytism as “perversion of witness” were more easily arrived at in 1961 when the point of reference was the distant third world. Now a renewed decade of mission within Europe. east and west, has brought to the fore the present relevance of the long legacy of confessional strife. Although *Proselytism and Orthodoxy*... hardly represents the definitive treatment of the topic, it offers some rich reading.

First of all, the diversity that is Russian Orthodoxy today comes through quite well. The essays by Philip Walters and James Billington offer numerous shrewd insights. For example, Walters noted the parallels between pre-soviet mission efforts that described Orthodoxy as moribund, hopelessly tied to the state, and the current descriptions of its tendency “toward schism...
... exacerbated by particular aspects of the Soviet legacy”. Those included a “post-totalitarian mentality” that dramatized the church’s situation as ‘impotent victim’ yet expecting some maximalist solution. Billington, who noted the essentially religious imagery surrounding the moments of political crisis of the past decade, drew attention to the popular notions of miracle, providential intervention, and moral recovery that set the promise and limits for Orthodox leadership. He drew attention to authoritarian nationalists seeking some return to a mythic status quo ante, and on the other hand to younger reformers who are “working for a parish-based renewal of Russian society independent of the government and aided by a revived Christian pedagogy centered on the vernacular Bible... and a liturgy translated into modern Russian.” This reformist vision has clear affinities to Protestantism.

The major Russian Orthodox voice from within is Metropolitan Kirill, specifically his speech at the WCC conference on world mission held in Brazil (1996). It contained key observations about the chaos and suffering his society experienced this decade. Then he articulated a missiology of inculturation whereby culture becomes “a bearer of the message of Christ”. Addressing himself to Western churches, Kirill thanked them in detail for support in the past but then complained more extensively about a “crusade... against the Russian church, even as it began recovering from a prolonged disease”, noting that some missionaries “behaved as though no local churches existed”. Metropolitan Kirill’s solution for getting beyond the “ecumenical disaster” of proselytism is to base mission on what he called “the fundamental principle of the early Christian ecclesiology: the principle of the local church”. That is, “that the church in a given place shall be fully responsible for its people before God...that nobody anywhere shall ignore a local church.” Given the centuries of voluntary and involuntary dispersion of former local churches into a global diaspora, it is difficult to imagine Kirill’s proposal applied anywhere (unless he had a reunited Christianity with new redistricting in mind), but it does reveal how much he regards the other diaspora churches within the present territory of the Russian local church as unwelcome.

The Witte-Bourdeaux volume is most fascinating for the way former Soviet religion specialists now read that history and offer current assessments. Aleksandr Shchipkov’s review of recent sociological studies ends with charts and depth interview material to show that religious belief was always present for a major portion of the population, but that those beliefs now cohere less along ethnic and confessional lines. For example, recent findings enable some mapping of religious adherence - over 50% of the True Orthodox Church belong to other national minorities than Russian, and 40% of the practicing Catholics in central Russia are Russian, while around Irkutsk in eastern Siberia Catholic parishes are almost entirely Russian. There is much more geographic grouping of various Protestant groups, or evidence showing the Urals region as particularly susceptible to secularization and therefore today revealing “an abundance of home-grown sects”.

One thinks in a more differentiated way about the proselytism issue after being told that “the Christian heartland [from Pskov to Samara] and Christian Siberia are divided by two belts: an Islamic-pagan one and a ‘secularized’ one.” Patterns of recent Christian mission have evolved
out of the history of deportation and migration to the eastern frontier and out of specific new mission initiatives. One statistical table allowed Shchipkov to conclude that in fourteen of the eighty-eight regions of Russia, the number of Protestant churches exceeds the Orthodox and there "one may expect escalation in the conflict between these two Christian groups." Perhaps the author's most telling conclusion is to suggest that future interreligious conflicts may be due to the "massive breakdown in the religious and ideological assumption of an entire people" rather than to specific proselytizing activities.

Since it is still uncommon for Protestant missionaries to the FSU to engage in public self-criticism, the essay by Mikhail M. Kulakov, president of the Russian Seventh Day Adventist Church marks a striking exception. His denomination which had numbered 34,146 in 1990 and suffered from schisms under the Soviets, had tripled to 99,000 by 1994, having been strongly supported by the entire world body. As early as 1926 the Adventist General Conference had adopted a statement that recommended holding in high esteem people in other communions "engaged in winning souls to Christ", working with them in a spirit of courtesy. It recognized the right for their members to switch to another communion, and rejected any restrictions or geographical limits as "an abridgement of the Gospel commission". Yet having stated the religious liberty commitments, Kulakov also acknowledged Adventist suspicion of the ecumenical movement and a popular Adventist self-understanding as being "the only true remnant". The essay ends with a discussion of deeper issues of Adventist mission in Russia, that includes the clash of mind sets between new converts and those who survived the Soviet years.

The foreign assistance brought efficiencies and success, but did not really provide the resources for dealing with "a sea of human needs" for which cultural understanding was a prerequisite. So Kulakov calls for building deep roots in Russian society and a Christian focus on "an acquisition of the basic Christian understanding of God, the world and the human person", rather than with preserving denominational "otherness".

The emergence of sects and new religious movements has dominated the public debate about proselytism and the need for legislative restrictions on such missionizing. Sergei Filatov's essay on the movements offers two most striking conclusions. One is that the statistical success of these movements is quite marginal to society, the Unification Church at its height in 1994 did not exceed five thousand. Filatov is especially worth reading for the information on indigenous new religious movements, especially the Great White Brotherhood, the Church of the Last Testament, and the Center of the Mother of God - each of which invented their own form of paganism. The conclusion Filatov reaches is that both Russian Orthodox leaders and many of the Western mission leaders publishing apologetics against the cults are making a mistake. Contemporary Russian society manifests a host of beliefs, but the beliefs and superstitions are "complex, eclectic and changeable", to struggle against them is like fighting a specter, like "fighting one's own shadow".

Although several articles give a statistical picture of evangelical Protestant missions, this data from about 1996 is no longer current. A second section offers a systematic assessment of the new legislation on religion of 1997 and a quite instructive "mapping" of regional differences as
provinces have struggled but generally failed to enforce limits to religious freedoms. A third section offers two sets of guidelines for foreign missionaries. In general these recommend being courteous and respecting local culture and mores, but do not really address the deeper issues evident in Billington, Shchipkov, and Kulakov.

Russian Orthodox anxiety about proselytism has become a major preoccupation, yet the research presented in this book finds the anxiety quite out of proportion and misplaced. Indeed, one might conclude that a facing of the real issue of the 'war for souls', has much less to do with inter-confessional proselytism than it does with a realistic acknowledgment of the democratic nature of modernity that is forcing changes on all the churches. A thinking society that welcomes the religious dimension is waiting to see which reformist impulse will shape the character of the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish. Islamic organization they wish to become or remain a part of.

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