
Walter Sawatsky
Anabaptist Mennonite Theological Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss3/5

This Article 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 administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arofe@georgefox.edu.
BOOK REVIEWS

Reviewed by Walter Sawatsky, Professor Emeritus of Church History and Mission, Anabaptist Mennonite Theological Seminary, Elkhart IN USA.

Anniversary reflections on developments since the end of the Soviet Union 25 years ago have started, but rare is the book attempting an assessment of what happened to post-Soviet evangelicals. At the time of the transitions (1989-1991), the Protestant evangelicals were perceived by critically thinking persons in the USSR as a potential bridge to the world of America. One prominent economist, Alexander Zaichenko, even referred to the famous Max Weber thesis about the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, to argue that the high work ethic and respected lifestyle of Soviet evangelicals could make a similar impact, at least once they reached ten percent of the Soviet population as a critical mass. The book under review avoids economic theory, concentrating on the strengths and weaknesses of evangelical theology and missiology, its theory and praxis, but it does prescribe a serious engagement with post-Soviet society, if its contextualized theology and missiology is to have authenticity. The “hope” of the title is stated succinctly early on: “the contribution that post-Soviet can make towards the formulation of a viable Christian social philosophy is enormous.” (32)

This book is intended, in its English original, for an insider readership, namely British and American evangelicals, especially Baptists, and for the recently educated post-Soviet evangelical leaders, who use English as a second language - a surprisingly large number by now. Searle was a missionary teacher in Ukraine and dean of global relations at Donetsk Christian University, before quite recently becoming tutor in theology and public thought at Spurgeon’s
College, London. Cherenkov, as one friend in Moscow remarked to me, is a Russian born who became a Ukrainian nationalist-technically he was born in Saratov along the Volga in Russia to a Russian father and Ukrainian mother. After completing a doctorate in theology in England, he began a mixed career of writing, mission agency administration, then rector of Donetsk Christian University for a year (overlapping with Searle) before returning to the Association for Spiritual Renewal (Vozrozhdenie) as vice-president, an organization with roots in the Deyneka mission, which quite recently was renamed “Eurasia Ministries.” Having some personal acquaintance with Mykhailo Cherenkov, it was easier to detect which sections were clearly his contributions, and to guess at Searle’s sections on the basis of which footnotes appeared where.

This background is vital for contextualizing the book and the moment of its appearance. A much broader readership in the west and in Russia/Ukraine will benefit greatly from this effort at taking stock. Readers should keep the background in mind as a way of imagining the deeper grounds for the critiques, for the forthright visions for the future, and for the likely obstacles to a positive reaction in a variety of circles. It is really a very important book, worth reading carefully and taking copious notes as I did, and doing something about it: join the conversation, the dialogue, to try to hear the range of agonies of those in the conversation who respond aggressively or dismissively.

Cherenkov was very active in the Maidan demonstrations in the center of Kyiv [or Kiev] during 2014 - especially when in mid-June 2014, the beautiful Donetsk Christian University buildings were confiscated by the Pro-Russian Separatist forces as military headquarters. That Christian school, one of the first to form a theological training center in the late 1980s, first to launch a mission training school (1991) for its supporting indigenous mission “Light of the Gospel,” had soon after renamed itself a Christian university as signal that it was working toward
the model of liberal arts colleges or universities sponsored by religious supporters or denominations, as in the USA. It turned out unfortunately, that the primary American advisers to the Ukrainian and Russian governments in the initial post-Soviet period advocated secular, and pro-capitalist educational models, with low regard for social sciences and the humanities. It now appears that Donetsk Christian University is no more.

In a general sense, the framework for thinking with the authors should be a sense of Slavic Evangelical theology “then” (Soviet period), plus during the chaotic post-Soviet era (1991-2014), and “now.” It would be a much stronger book if the authors had devoted some time to assessing the Soviet Evangelical era (1917-1991), and its emergence during the late Russian Imperial era (1860s-1917). Instead the authors rely on presumed knowledge, treating my own book on the Soviet Evangelicals (1981) as a given without noting so many more recent improvements on it by their own scholars who had more extensive access to newly available archives. This reviewer will add asides for that longer “then” period, which preceded the truly exciting and fascinating post-Soviet era that are their primary referent for “then.”

Indeed, given the author’s primary interest in theology and missiology, that post-Soviet era emerges in quick sketches here and there, limited mostly, as the writers acknowledge, to the “Baptist” world. To say “Baptist” is to signal to an American or British reader, that ‘Baptisty’ was often Soviet atheist shorthand for ‘sektanty’, whereas with the Evangelical movement, it came to be shorthand for Evangelical Christian & Baptist (ECB), the formal name for an officially tolerated church union, and also the essential part for the name of its split-off, never legally recognized union, which for English readers, many of us have called “Reform Baptists.” From 1945 to about 1987, that legal union included Pentecostals (also recognized as Evangelicals in America and Britain), and from 1966 to 1991, included a major portion of the
Mennonite Brethren. Hence the critiques, and the targeted audience to persuade is a not insignificant part of the post-Soviet evangelical world. Not mentioned but also not insignificant for the arguments, is the fact that other American origin missions successfully planted churches in the former Soviet Union territory - the Evangelical Free Church, the Christian & Missionary Alliance, the Christian Church, similarly a variety of independent unions of Pentecostal and Holiness churches were started. It is nevertheless true, as the authors contend, that particularly in Ukraine and in western Siberia it was a strict Calvinist form of Baptist thinking that had the largest impact in providing new funding from abroad for mission plants, and for theological colleges to teach their particular brand of theology. I recall the initial enthusiasm with which Baptists around Kiev responded to the ministries of a famous Baptist from USA named John MacArthur who essentially bought the services of key Baptist union staff as translators for his preaching/teaching. This showed the profound impoverishment of rather strong Baptist unions in Ukraine and Russia, when the ruble collapsed, and able leaders were forced to sell themselves to new western mission organizations who had little sense of contextual missionizing.

Readers will want to check the strongly worded critique of the MacArthur ministries, from which also emerges the authors’ critique of, and rejection of the notion of worldview transformation. The ‘famous’ MacArthur turned out not only to be outside this reviewer’s point of reference, and outside that of the Baptist World Alliance, but it illustrates how many new religious entrepreneurs flew in to harvest souls in communist Russia, with the assumption that true Christianity had never before penetrated that godless region. American readers may not know the MacArthur ministries, or other such ministries that still control specific Russian/Ukrainian theological colleges, so may dismiss the critique as not applicable to their own programs. It would be wiser to think of North American Christian missions to the Slavic
world in general as far more shaped by decades of American anti-communist rhetoric, therefore needing to negotiate a long learning curve in order to fall in step with the diversity of long established expressions of evangelical Christianity that both survived and adapted themselves to Soviet realities. This book in hundreds of quotable sentences or even paragraphs then allows one to imagine a future alongside them.

Let me start with the authors’ rejection of “worldview” as useable concept. Appropriately the British author (toward the end of the book) addressed the “world view model of theological formation” and “concomitant neglect of the integrated formation of character” (153) most critically. In that ‘worldview’ meaning, a western (largely American) understanding of Christianity as consisting of “propositional truth claims”, gained by “intellectual cognition” did not fit the holistic understanding of life and faith in the Slavic tradition. What had happened after 1991, was that conservative, frequently fundamentalistic missionaries, even if also called “Baptist” like those in Russia/Ukraine, were thinking in a strict Calvinistic mentality. As the authors put it, such a “worldview” definition of Christian faith served to foster docile submission to the teachings of the American missionary. “Not only is [austere] Calvinism alien to the history and tradition of Christian theology and spirituality in this region, it also posits a false and servile doctrine of divine sovereignty which ... can easily morph into a pseudo-theological justification of unjust and tyrannical secular ideologies, such as Putinism.” (119) Further, citing lines from MacArthur in a footnote, that the “weak scholarship” of MacArthur merely resulted in fostering “animosity and mistrust” of Muslims [the subject of the book cited], and that style of teaching concentrated more on claiming to possess “sound doctrine” while focusing on attacking “liberals, heretics and charismatics”. Such a “worldview” could not lead to missiology and contextual theological reflection.
This critique seems well-taken, though rarely stated by post-soviet evangelical leaders as directly, but jettisoning “worldview” need not follow. As noted (also by Searles) the notion of worldview quite fits Slavic cultures, the Russian word *mirovozrenie* (world view or perspective) has a long history, except perhaps during the aggressive ideological phase of the Soviet Union, when its use was limited, lest it allow for diversity of worldviews. The authors go on to argue for a contextually sensitive missiology that is very attentive to changing contexts. Indeed the head of an Apologetics Center in Crimea, had already critiqued (a half dozen years ago) much of the swirl of evangelism and church growth claims, because too many of the new converts failed the test of a “transformed worldview”, meaning by that not only a concept widely used by Paul Hiebert (Trinity University, Chicago) but the criterion of changes in life style due to worldview transformation. A consciously inclusive worldview incorporating faith and life, where faith is more about relationships to God and other people, than about dogma, is essentially what the authors advocate. It is hardly exclusively evangelical, as the authors constantly point out as well.

What do they mean by ‘mission’, given its highly contested status today? Very early in the book they build up a definition. The word “implies not only the salvation of individuals from personal sin, but the wholesale transformation of society as well.” Where they locate themselves in contemporary global evangelical missiology emerges from a longer statement, that “mission is not primarily about engaging in evangelistic programs and activities, but is about the sending of God....Missio Dei rather than *missio ecclesiologia* is the defining essence of the Church... an incarnational act that makes the gospel visible to a world which God so loved and for which he sent his only son to die (John 3:16).” (7)

Further, they spell out a “shifting paradigm of mission” in the first chapter, (essentially more developed there than in the final two chapters bearing missiology titles) by means of four
stages of transition. The historical progression in Ukraine/Russia during the post-soviet era, proceeded thus: “... the needs of mission dictated the need for missiology”, the latter then wrestled theologically with how “church and kingdom” are bound together, as well as the ties between “community and society, mission and education, and religion and culture...” (10) The four transitions of thinking turning from “church-centered missiology” to “God centered missiology...mission is no longer limited to the established church, rather it signifies shalom in the kingdom.” A second transition away from specialized missions/missionaries to “a holistic mission, covering all spheres of life... all the people of the church to participate in the Missio Dei... an uncompromising commitment to work tirelessly in the struggle for social justice.” (11) A third thought progression was to call for the reform of “existing church structures” in order better to minister in a changing world. Fourth, to move beyond “short-term project thinking” and “exclusivity” toward “dialogue” and “truly biblical partnership” between “foreign and national movements” and “between Evangelical and Orthodox churches.” (12). The authors promise to speak often of “missiology of the kingdom”, “kingdom formation”, and “open Christianity”. To catch what is meant by the latter, one specific line states clearly that the purpose of Christian mission in an Orthodox ethos must be: “to convert the nominally Orthodox into the evangelical Orthodox, and not into Baptists Pentecostals.” (21) Another line implicitly evokes an argument by Catholic theologian Hans Küng, when they say that “on the map of post-Soviet religiosity” one can detect “an impressive growth ... in the simply Orthodox and the simply Christian.” (21) Finally, another key closing line specifies the Slavic evangelical missiology they seek: “... contextual missiology accepts the post-atheist and post-orthodoxy context as the medium for its formation and its ministry, but it perceives it critically and transforms it into the light of the Gospel and evangelical faith.” (22)
Some readers may find the consistent intertwining of theological education and mission strange, because of the reader’s context in the pragmatic action driven mission/evangelism western cultures, but when recalling the Soviet era, key obstacles to Christian practice had been the prohibition of mission and virtual blocking of serious theological training. Both writers, by their most frequent citations, convey how much their thinking builds on the series of conferences conducted at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS), not long after it moved to Prague. Organized mostly by Peter F. Penner and Parush Parushev, with papers published as books from Neufeld Verlag (Germany), or as part of a “baptistic theologies” journal from IBTS, their thrust as a whole could be summarized as “Theological Education as Mission” [title of one of the volumes]. That phrase becomes the focus in the final two chapters. The chapters preceding show a progression toward that end, when simply noting the chapter titles: 2. Challenges to Mission and Theological Education, 3. Emerging from the Post-Soviet Transition, 4. Building a Church Without Walls, 5. The Church After Maidan, and the final two chapters referred to above. That is, by now a considerable number of potential readers from the post-Soviet theological colleges will be familiar with this more holistic missiology, and the contributors at those conferences. Most frequently cited as the authors build their arguments, are long time scholars of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, including Soviet German immigrants to Germany since the 1970s such as Peter F. Penner and Johannes Reimer, as well as Mark Elliott and this reviewer (Sawatsky) and IBTS rector Parushev (whose east European background as Bulgarian, with a Fuller Seminary doctorate with McClendon as key mentor) as comparative thinker par excellence. More significantly, those “authorities” are linked with related quotations from the new scholars teaching in the theological colleges, whose doctorates, if not from the University of Wales or UNISA (Pretoria) via IBTS, are from British and American schools. That, hopefully, is
an evocative way of saying that during the Post-Soviet era, this community of theological and missiological colleagues have often met to converse - Searles and Cherenkov now seek to push toward a much more explicit re-focusing of that conversation as vital for the civil society rebuilding project, so often proclaimed during the transition time (1989-91) and too often missing the mark soon after. Indeed, the authors argue that there is a maturation of thinking among evangelicals underway, that now demands envisioning a “church without walls”, hopefully shocked into critical self-awareness after the Maidan events in Kyiv.

Will the envisioning spread and achieve visible realization? That seems more likely given the shock and continuing devastation of a Ukrainian/Russian *de facto* civil war in the eastern half of Ukraine, where the evangelicals had, and still have, their largest and most cohesive presence, already noted two decades ago as the third or at least fourth most influential religious community in Ukraine. It is more problematic when considering the vast spread of the Russian Federation, where communication between the pockets of evangelicals [also true for Orthodoxy at least east of the Volga] is a challenge, to say nothing of the steadily increasing restrictions on faith practice in all of the central Asian states, including Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, those engaged in thinking theology and thinking mission (the educators) have achieved a remarkable commonality (across numerous denominational diversities) so that if a re-envisioned understanding of mission, contextualized in a Slavic and Orthodox ethos, begins to impact the mentality of new theological graduates, already starting to enter many religious and secular service professions, the authors’ future hope seems on target. Not stated explicitly, except in terms of what western missionaries must adapt to - stay with the people, pay attention to social responsibility issues, and above all “witness to the compassion of Christ” (95) - are the stimuli scattered throughout the book, to seek to apply the critique (and hence challenge) of the too low profile of evangelical and
orthodox Christians to the western and southern societal worlds, toward socially responsible holistic mission.