George Fox University

Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe

Volume 39 | Issue 6 Article 3

11-2019

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Recommended Citation

Sawatsky, Walter (2019) "Eurasian and Eastern European Evangelicals: Tested over Two Centuries," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 6 , Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss6/3

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EURASIAN AND EASTERN EUROPEAN EVANGELICALS: TESTED OVER TWO CENTURIES

By Walter Sawatsky

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Defining Terms: Evangelicals and Oppression[1]

The oppression of evangelicals has been a persistent legacy, but it has not applied to all of them. Therefore, we must begin by defining evangelicals and oppression. A further query to pursue is: what intensity of oppression has permitted creative survival?

Following the nonviolent moral revolutions of 1989, the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and the transitions to more participatory forms of government initially, which usually included freedom of religion, there was a too-easy assumption that oppression of Eastern European evangelicals had become old history. My working assumption is that this entails reviewing the past for the sake of greater clarity in facing our future challenges. This also requires careful differentiation between what we must consider real oppression and merely perceived oppression, such as groups now supporting right-wing populist and nationalist agendas of hate of the 'other,' because they still think of themselves as the oppressed ones–a persecution complex.

In February 2018, *Christian Century* editor David Heim opened his review of a book with the question: 'is the term *evangelical* meaningful?'[2] Mark Labberton, new President of Fuller Seminary, had just published *Still Evangelical*? In it, Labberton stated that popular evangelicalism had become "an amalgam of theological views,

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[1] "Evangelicals and Oppression: Eastern European Perspectives" was the title of the conference convened by the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam, at which this material was first presented in April 2018. Article originally appeared in *Baptistic Theologies*, vol. 10, 2 (2018).

[2] David Heim, review of Mark Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Carol Stream: IVP Books), in *Christian Century*, February 14, 2018, 45-48.

partisan political debates, regional power blocks, populist visions, racial biases, and cultural anxieties, all mixed in an atmosphere of fear." Heim added to that confusing picture by noting that, in 2016, 80 percent of white evangelicals had voted for Donald Trump as president. So, Heim asked, "how could a faith tradition devoted to the transforming power of the Gospel align itself so readily with a racially divisive bully whose life has been unashamedly devoted to greed and self-promotion?" In early April 2018, a group of progressive American evangelicals met for a "Red Letter Revival," a "revival of Jesus and justice," in order to protest such "toxic evangelicalism."[3]

Defining evangelicalism has now reached the point where many evangelicals hesitate to identify with those above descriptors. David Bebbington's history of British Evangelicals several decades ago identified four features: a conversionist view of faith, a substitutionary understanding of Jesus' crucifixion, a strong view of Scriptural authority, and an activist impulse to share the faith. This is widely considered the conventional definition, yet because evangelicals are now present globally, it is difficult to apply the label to evangelicals everywhere without taking into account the deep cultural, linguistic, and historical shaping that accounts for the rich diversity. That is particularly so for our subject, since in a widely-read survey of global evangelicals, the author appeared not to know of Slavic Evangelicals or persons of Eurasia's multi-ethnic peoples.[4] At the Capetown assembly of the Lausanne movement in 2010, their representatives were largely overlooked.

On the other hand, the late Billy Graham left us with two key legacies, so said his historian Grant Wacker:

> From beginning to end, Graham voiced boilerplate evangelical theology focused on a simple, non-sectarian call to faith... Whatever the stated text [of Graham's sermons] the actual text of every sermon was the same, John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world'... Graham practiced marital fidelity, financial transparency, honesty about numbers, and refusal to criticize others.[5]

Moreover, Graham did not remain static, but demonstrated a "march from a conservative to a progressive position on most of the key social issues of the day ...

[3] Ibid. They also stated that "in word, worship and witness, this 'revival of Jesus and justice' will stand in stark contrast to the distorted Christian nationalism that many white evangelical leaders have become known for."

[4] The reference is to Brian Stanley's *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013, vol.5 of A History of Evangelicalism).

[5] Grant Wacker, "Billy Graham (1918-2018): A Preacher's vast Legacy," *Christian Century*, March 14, 2018, 10-11.

calling racism a sin." Secondly, he left a legacy of 'evangelical ecumenism,' seeking to build bridges among fundamentalists, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and others. Still another key line from Wacker's testimonial was: "His ministry helped millions see that no matter how badly they had messed up their lives, Christ offered them a second chance."'[6]

Turning then to the reality that during the decades from 1945 to 1990, when large parts of Eurasia and Eastern Europe were not included in the dialogue among global evangelicals, other mental adjustments became necessary. One thing that quickly became apparent after 1991, was that the widespread prohibition of mission in the USSR and Eastern Europe had been lifted legally. This meant, that in very basic ways, there were and still are some hopeful signs that a widely shared understanding of *missio Dei* missiology unites across quite diverse barriers in that region.[7] Some of the dimensions of this challenge need our attention.

Here we will concentrate on the religious elements of oppression, but they have never been clearly separated from social and political issues between majority and minority cultures.

Ways of Thinking about Continuities and Changes

There are patterns from the past shaping world Christianity today, but for our Eurasian and East European focus, the shaping since the Protestant Reformation looms large. In contrast to Western Europe and the Americas' Western Christian formations and reformations, Eastern Christian formation and its spreading, as well as the more major long-term impact of a Muslim context, has made the Eurasian/East European evangelical story singularly unique, hence of greater potential significance globally for the future. After all, it was a key territory spanning the east/west territorial divide, during late modernity, when the north/south global divide was becoming much more crucial for the future of Christianity.

In too much of missiological literature, the imagined paradigm shift is primarily a shift of power southward which overlooks too much. That is, Christian growth in the 'Global South' has been outstripping the North during the past two centuries, and since the 1970s the West European and North American centers of Christianity have been in

[6] See also *Christianity Today*, March 2018, a special Billy Graham tribute.
[7] I have in mind the Central and Eastern European Association of Mission Studies (CEEAMS) that was formed in 2008, and its journal *Acta Missiologiae*.

serious decline. At the same time, growth statistics do not mean that decision-making power has shifted to the South, because of the drastic inequalities of economic power. The Eurasian story has been through at least a century of limits to economic power, and limits to Christian freedoms, that have begun to change.[8]

The West European First and Second Reformations developed as major state power shifts had emerged.[9] Eastern Orthodoxy was struggling to survive the collapse of Byzantium after 1453, and over the next several centuries the rise of a Russian empire, as well as the growing colonial power of a half dozen European empires helped account for considerable religious anxiety and unrest. The Reformations introduced a new legacy of Christian adaptation and resistance. By 1648, across Europe various confessionally Protestant and Catholic regions were either supported by the state (Holy Roman Empire) or were tolerated by local rulers who valued their religious minority population's industry, or they were oppressed by law, other Christian bodies, or manipulated by mobs. This left the impression that the Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Catholic traditions became state-supported churches, so that only the church tradition from the left-wing reformers remained as facing the hostility of state authorities, because they were committed to a separation of church and state. In actual fact, there were areas where Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic churches were living under state oppression. In other areas, they were at least tolerated as a minority of the population, and at some times, the state-supported churches assisted their fellow believers, or failed to do so.

Evangelical emergence as a more widespread movement came out of efforts to revive the intentions of the early modern reformers, whose new church traditions had lost their spiritual appeal. The Pietist Movement, clearly resonating with efforts of 150-250 years earlier, was the primary stimulus for the rise of the Protestant Christian mission globally. Also, Czech Brethren and English preachers, using portions of Scripture translated into the local language and spreading devotional books, drew inspiration from the sixteenth-century ideals and practices.

The evangelicalism that emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century became known as the Pietist Awakening on the continent, and as the Evangelical

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[8] There is a lengthier argument for East European evangelical experience during the twentieth century, as a paradigm for Christians globally, in my Menno Simons Lectures of 2014, published as *Going Global with God as Mennonite for the 21st Century* (Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2018).

[9] See Walter Sawatsky, ed., *Prophetic and Renewal Movements – The Prague Consultations* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Study #47, 2009).

Awakening in Britain and North America. There was both an evangelistic and an ecumenical character to these awakenings, which, emerging on such a large scale, brought new aspects to the whole evangelical spirituality. Peoples' responses to sermons were expected to be individual and visible–a moment in time when persons repented of their sinfulness and experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ, often as they were also reading the Gospels and felt their heart "strangely warmed," to use Wesley's description. The new piety an awakened person adopted had to be shared, urging one's loved ones and friends, then neighbors, to experience the joy of salvation. It did not necessarily mean leaving one's congregation or church tradition because it seemed lifeless, but rather to find others of like mind across the religious spectrum, forming coalitions to spread the Pietist Awakening.

Historians have described this awakening as the 'religion of the heart' instead of a rational agreement or consent to classic Christian dogma.[10] Human beings were always also individuals with thoughts and emotions, but a kind of paradigm shift had been in process since the early sixteenth century, steadily giving greater recognition to individual personhood than to tribe or nation. To think about 'Evangelicals and Oppression' in the twenty-first century forces us to pay attention to the tensions between the individual and the group, and how it appeals to personal experience and reasoned faith, as the basis of authority overshadows the long-established appeals to Scripture and living tradition. The strength and flaw of evangelicalism was its stress on the personal and its minimal appreciation of ecclesiology.

This Evangelical/Pietist Movement became the seed bed of an international evangelical movement, also actively missionary, skilled in institutional organization, with a non-hierarchical structure that allowed for rapid replacement of leaders who were imprisoned or killed. This is also true for East European evangelicals, helping them to navigate through years of communist and atheistic oppression in the twentieth century. However, we also know that evangelicals experienced oppression (from state authorities, majority churches, and from fearful and unfriendly fellow citizens) well before communist rule, and also after.

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[10] Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

The Communist Era and War on Religion in the USSR

A persistent theme in Slavic evangelical growth was its special divine mission to the West and to the world. The 1905 toleration edict in Russia made it possible for even the sects, as free churches were often named, to submit applications for legal recognition based on a constitution and confession of faith statement. In this setting, the Evangelical Christians in the capital, St. Petersburg, were dreaming of a vast missionary project–to win Russia for Christ. Once it was launched through organized evangelism and mission, Ivan Prokhanov spoke in print of a divine mission to the West, whose civilizations were perceived to be in decline.

Some new political parties began addressing themselves to the needs of the peasantry. What some of their thinkers noticed was that the sectarian groups differed from the typical Orthodox peasant, who was still scarcely better off since the end of serfdom in 1861. The sectarians relied on their religious structures that had been formed during the decades of oppression–prison and exile–for providing each other with mutual aid. Their leaders required less academic training than practical training with mentors. The sectarians' reputation for a better work ethic, since they avoided alcohol, was also noticed.

Following the October Revolution in 1917, the Bolsheviki were intent on a quick withdrawal from the war. Lenin's secretary, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, urged that the evangelical sectarians be allowed to prove themselves by granting them the right of alternative service, instead of service in the Red Army. Bonch-Bruevich and his wife had accompanied the pacifist Doukhobors to Canada and were personally acquainted with the leading Tolstoyan V. G. Chertkov and prominent Evangelical Christians. The decree to that effect of April 1918 made possible a united society of religions to oversee appeals for conscientious objector status of church members from the Tolstoyans, Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Molokany, and Mennonites to confirm the religious-based pacifism of applicants. Other elements among the Bolsheviki steadily undercut these efforts, as the new Red Army was employed against the White Army in the civil war. There were many cases where pacifist Christians were denied a hearing, were ordered into uniform or were immediately shot or sent to prison.[11] This produced a new list of martyrs whose stories helped account for the resistance the Baptist, Evangelical

[11] For details see Walter Sawatsky, "Pacifist Protestants in Soviet Russia between the Wars," in *The Long Way of Russian Pacifism* (Russian), ed. by Tatiana Pavlova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of World History, 1997), pp. 262-284 [English version available from author].

Christian, and Pentecostal Unions demonstrated in 1923, and again, at congresses in 1926 when they were finally forced to remove the pacifist clauses from their constitutions.

From a political perspective, those among the Bolsheviki who had hoped to work with the sectarian peasants, in spite of their religious commitments, lost influence because the religious commitments of the sectarians were not easily broken. When we consider the turmoil of the early years of communism in power, its commitment from the first to crush the Russian Orthodox institutions totally did not initially waver. Instead, atheist activists who organized the League of Militant Godless, which by 1929 had become a virtual arm of the ruling authority, steadily applied a blanket opposition to all forms of religious expression. So, the period from 1929 to 1937 became the most intense time of oppression when virtually all public expressions of religious worship and activism were crushed.

Scholarship has focused too long on what happened at the center (usually meaning around St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev), especially since we have become more aware through new scholarship from state archives across the Soviet Union of demographic changes in progress throughout the nineteenth century, becoming even more complex in the twentieth century. By 2010, new scholars were sharing their archival research findings in published dissertations[12] which explored and compared state interference in religion. Some scholars functioned as cultural anthropologists exploring minority ethnic groups and their language and culture. Invariably, whether such scholars were Christian or not, their approach was to contribute positively to the treasure of Russia's multi-cultural complexity.

The end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century was a period of massive people migration from west to east in Russia–quite similar to the well-known east to west migrations in North America. Evangelicalism emerged within a Russian Orthodox context, which included the emergence around the 1880s of an Orthodox Mission Society. The migrations, however, resulted in the presence of evangelicals in Siberia from the Urals to the Pacific due to the exiling of dissident or minority religious activists, and the deportations of peoples during World War II. By 1930, with

[12] Less known of new dissertations is A. V. Gorbatov, *Gosudarstvo i relgioznye organizatsii Sibiriv 1940e - 1960-e gody* [The State and Religious Organizations in Siberia 1940s-1960s] (Tomsk: Tomsk State Pedagogical University, 2008). His introduction cites other dissertations, and of the 21 archives within Siberia of special interest is his access to regional KGB documents in Kemerovo region.

Orthodoxy and its missionary arm crushed, the eastern half of the USSR was never able to generate a dominant Orthodox ethos. It became the region of the greatest spread of atheism, but it was also in those regions that the evangelicals flourished more readily than did Orthodoxy—given that the evangelical democratic non-hierarchical style and skilled reliance on communication channels were effective enough that the *Samizdat* journals and reports were quickly circulated. This was also the area where shortwave religious radio programming was more easily heard since, even for the atheistic government, to jam thinly populated vast regions was not cost-effective.[13]

After World War II, there was a slow emergence of differentiated ways of relating to the religious communities, the latter initially with deeply cowed leadership, nevertheless seeking to restore as much church life as possible. Until the death of Stalin, the oppressive hand of the Party at all levels still dominated. However, with the emergence of Nikita Khrushchev to key leadership, it was the more ideologically committed elements of the Party that attempted a renewed program to free the population from what it deemed superstitious and harmful vestiges of ignorance. It was the effort at a higher quality of 'scientific atheism' of a thoroughgoing education of the ideal Soviet man and woman, including at times the separation of children from their irredeemably fanatically religious parents, which became a phase of religious oppression much harder to resist.

Comparisons to the Eastern European Experience

The states of Eastern Europe, which became part of the Soviet sphere of power by 1948, had significantly different histories before submitting to communist governance. Throughout the nineteenth century, the empires struggled with imposing a church and state uniformity, such as the Hapsburg Empire that retained control over Eastern Europe when the Holy Roman Empire collapsed in 1806 during the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars. Emperor Franz Josef in the 1870s, given his own reduced religious sentiments, attempted to improve the lot of the serfs, and attempted to follow a policy of tolerance within his multi-religious empire. Also, during the nineteenth century, more of the Ottoman Empire's European lands came under the control of the Russian and

[13] Valuable for Siberian research is Andrei Savin, *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i evangel'skie tserkvi Sibiri v 1920 - 1941 gg. Dokumenty i materialyi* [The Soviet State and Evangelical Churches 1920-1941, Documents & Materials] (Novosibirsk: Posokh, 2004). Several others that followed on Mennonites are also available in English.

Hapsburg Empires, which meant the liberation of Christians was brought to a better status–Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

Comparing Eastern European evangelicals with those in the Russian Empire, we note some important differences. In general, the free churches or evangelical churches that emerged from Poland to Bulgaria were largely mission-initiated churches, in contrast to more indigenous initiated churches in Russia. That can easily be over-stated, since we must keep in mind that, throughout the nineteenth century, ethnic migrations out of Europe to America and to the Russian Empire's eastern regions enhanced both the multi-confessional complexity and the cross-fertilization of evangelical thinking. Again, as a generalization (with numerous exceptions), by 1948 the majority of the free churches across Eastern Europe were still dependent on financial, moral, and educational support from the missions, which continued during the communist era where possible. In contrast, starting at least by 1930, Soviet evangelicals had virtually no direct support from their Western counterparts. Indeed, it was in their interest to stress that they were not a foreign-controlled alien religion, but genuinely Slavic.

Between 1960 and 1976 in particular, for Soviet and Eastern European evangelicals, the ways of resisting, or the ways of finding a path of Christian faithfulness, were more complex. When in the mid-1970s, the British Council of Churches commissioned a book to convey to Western readers the religious situation in Eastern Europe they entitled it *Discretion and Valour*.[14] They drew on the variety of historical experiences since the time of the Reformation to point out that some Christians had chosen or been forced into the way of valor, which led to suffering and even to martyrdom; whereas others had followed a way of 'discretion'–possibly a rather British word–for it involved finding ways of seeming to obey state authorities and finding the moments to disobey with more impunity. Toivo Pilli's study of the Estonian evangelical experience for that time chose a similarly apt image: *Dance or Die*.[15] For many at the time, they were faced with such 'choices' as a response. This became a time

[14] Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour. Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, 2nd edn (London & Philadelphia: Fount Paperbacks & Fortress Press, 1982). Beeson was the gifted writer providing a common style, but the book was based on drafts from a cohort of experts, including staff from Keston College.

[15] Toivo Pilli, *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008, vol. 37 in Studies in Baptist History and Thought). Pilli conveys a process of identity re-shaping of four Estonian evangelical traditions, forcefully merged by communist authorities, calling the four dance steps: unity out of diversity, Word and Spirit tension, common goal for evangelism and mission, bearing fruit through ethical testing.

of deep division within Christian communities, which suffered under the reality of distrust and discord within their own ranks, and the ugly fact that state authorities were constantly playing Christians against each other by distorting what their fellow Christians had said or done. Since these tests included widespread use of torture and mistreatment, even if not as extreme as under the worst of Stalinism, persons were still broken down under the pressure–some permanently, while others found the way to recovery. How then to find forgiveness and reconciliation has continued to be an issue that has sustained church divisions, as was the case as far back as the time of the Donatists.

Divisions over discretion and valor were less sharp across Eastern Europe. In almost every country there were efforts to suppress religious practice, as in the Stalinist years, but with limited success. Catholic territories like Poland, the Slovak part of then Czechoslovakia, and even Hungarian Catholics were led by bishops strongly opposed to communism because of its atheism. By the late 1970s, with the election of Pope John Paul II (Krakow), Catholic *Ostpolitik* also showed readiness to negotiate with national authorities in recognizing the national sentiments of long standing. Such resistance was an encouragement to the faithful but did not ease their situation. Later, after the initial post-communist euphoria, that Catholic legacy of resentment has borne fruit in the emergence of hyper-nationalist political Catholic governments, which bode problems for other religious communities as secondary citizens and the blocking of sanctuary for new refugees. A similar tendency can be denoted with the re-election of President Orban in Hungary.

In the countries just mentioned, after World War II, some form of state financial support (though a steadily shrinking amount) for the former state churches continued. Given such arrangements, the Protestant churches (in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) were granted rights and benefits proportionate to their size. This did not apply to the evangelicals, the free churches who tried to survive by voluntary support in addition to foreign assistance. Thus, many of the theological schools and monasteries were able to continue with external support. In Romania and Bulgaria, as majority Orthodox countries with patterns of accommodation to Ottoman controls, the socialist state efforts with the control of leadership appointments were largely successful and less so of the popular renewal movements, such as the Lord's Army in Romania, the Catholic *Focolare* in Hungary and Poland, or the free churches. As legacy for the post-

communist era, it was the Orthodox in Bulgaria that continued to struggle with competing leadership synods to the present. In this context, there was a wide spectrum of collaboration of church leaders with state power, in part forms of discretion, but also outright careerist betrayal of churchly integrity.

It was the more Protestant majority of Christians in East Germany that presented a mixture of valor and discretion approaches. Aside from the Evangelical Czech Brethren attempting to avoid Cold War partisanship, the synod of the Kirche der Union (Lutheran and Reformed) in East Germany sought to maintain its cross-border union with the Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands (EKD) in West Germany until the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. Soon after, its East German leaders began stressing Kirche im Sozialismus (church within socialism) as its church-political stance. That is, it affirmed its understanding of Christianity as 'hope for the oppressed,' recognizing where it found common ground with Marxist socialist claims to strive for the good of all the people, and at the same time, like the prophets of old, to speak the voice of conscience on behalf of people where state policy and practice violated Christian norms.

Stasi files later revealed the broad network of surveillance under which churches and their leaders functioned. In one famous case, a theologian prominent in the group of five that negotiated the transition from GDR to a democratic state acknowledged that he had indeed been a regular reporter to the Stasi but had tried to do his best for the church and had too often failed in his intention. He lost his churchly job, and the respect of many, moved to West Germany, and gradually rebuilt his life and public trust through his openness. In other cases, the persons listed in Stasi files as coworkers did not find the way to repentance, forgiveness, and recovery–to use the Christian terms for what was happening, or failing to happen sufficiently, among church leaders across Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

Slavic Evangelicals and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The end of the Soviet Union story for evangelicals and state interference involved more complications. Perhaps it should have been possible to sustain the Soviet Union as a democratic state, since multi-party elections did take place and monologues in the Soviet media quickly changed to 'dialogue' by 1990. Even churchmen were initially elected to office as persons respected by the public, a line of argument that explained why the Polish elections of Spring 1989 gave the Solidarity Party a majority.

Among the societies that had sprung up were charity societies run by evangelicals across the network of Soviet republics. Clearly Soviet President Gorbachev and his closest associates were committed to a deep reform of Soviet society, but Gorbachev continued to believe it must be done within a Communist Party framework.

The deep roots of anti-Russian sentiments built up over the decades of Soviet (and even Tsarist) rule, turned out to be overwhelming. The fact that the three Baltic countries were among the first to withdraw from the Union was unsurprising, given the cultural and linguistic differences, even if many Russians had migrated to those regions. It was the way Yeltsin (as head of the Russian Republic) began stressing sovereignty of the Russian Federation, over against the USSR, which triggered the collapse of the USSR. This was replaced by a less binding Commonwealth of Independent States where each of the remaining former republics claimed their own sovereignty, making the 'commonwealth' primarily an economic union, although national currencies emerged almost immediately.

Why did the evangelicals so quickly join the trend toward national separation? The All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB), for example, dissolved early in 1991 to become a union of independent ECB unions. This came after a short period of sustaining a central office in Moscow, headed by a troika of former executive secretaries of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, plus directors of mission and education departments. Soon, in almost all the new states, the leader of the evangelical union was titled "president" as in the state system, leaving a small office with a new executive secretary facilitating communication between unions and overseeing a new church magazine.[16]

Specific developments are worth noting here in a brief overview. Firstly, evangelism and mission became the primary focus everywhere, initially with many new converts–some regions being more active, systematic, or successful than others. Secondly, there was an attempt to establish a theological college or seminary, but that rather quickly resulted in at least 40 such 'colleges' across the former territory of the Soviet Union. The head of the first of the seminaries (Odessa) then organized the Euro-Asiatic Accreditation Association (EAAA) to assist in accreditation, since this was not possible within the new state systems. Thirdly, a variety of approaches to addressing

[16] In 2018 this Euro-Asiatic Union of ECB Unions, still with an executive secretary but now based in Israel, had as new President the President of the Belarus Union, Leonid Mikhovich, now seeking to foster a renewed common vision.

societal issues emerged, usually by means of cooperation with service and mission agencies from abroad. Training evangelicals as professionals for social services became a delayed dream.

All three ECB 'unions' made evangelism and mission their priority, the independent ECB and the legally registered ECB traditions cooperating as much as they could. This was seldom true with the Reform Baptist churches that had been drifting–also thanks to external influences–into greater isolation from other believers. By following the division into national unions, the work of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation among the divided groups lacked centers to take the initiative. The reduction in shared gatherings, even within each union, also accounts for the minimal attempts to deal with the past.

In the wider society, the most problematic event was the economic collapse that soon followed the shift to rapid privatization without clear planning. Corruption came to dominate, even in the many new banks that sprang up. The massive inflation of the ruble (or equivalent currencies in sister countries), causing a black economy relying on the American dollar as cash, deeply affected the lives of all, including the evangelical church unions. So, the 1990s became the time of the influx of countless Western mission societies, or mere individuals bringing check books, the majority of whom were astoundingly ignorant of Soviet Christian history. A renewed Orthodoxy found itself threatened by the blatant proselytism of Protestants inside their churches. A crisis conference of leaders in the summer of 1994 produced some understandings toward restraint and respect between evangelicals and Orthodox leaders, both sides also lacking the finances for their tasks.[17]

In many episcopal regions, financial support got arranged with local entrepreneurs, soon generating suspicions of corruption. Among evangelicals, the corruption was less apparent, compared to the rapid way in which urban churches in particular became dependent on sponsors from the West for pastoral salaries and the financing of building renovations or new buildings—the latter at times driven by a desire to show off evangelical achievements. In the Baltic regions and Western Ukraine,

[17] The gathering, co-financed by the East Europe committee of the American National Council of Christian Churches, had a representative attendance of Orthodox and Evangelical leaders, plus some Western representatives. It resulted in open exchanges of issues of proselytism with a resolution to exercise more restraint and show more fraternal respect, but could not be continued regularly for financial reasons, and even the failure of Russian Orthodox and Baptist leaders to consult since 1988 was noted with mutual regret. Drifting apart was due to internal preoccupations with restructuring.

the influence of prosperity Gospel preaching by missionaries created discord and distrust. In general, the capacity for central church unions within Russia to continue creative programs was soon stagnant, except where outside supporters funded colleges, literature publications, and too often exercised controls over staffing and acceptable theologies.

The pattern of financial reporting during the Soviet years had long been a source of distrust among observant members. Congregations were expected to cover local costs, including pastoral support, then send a considerable portion of income to the office of the regional superintendent, and the national office of the ECB, Pentecostal, or Adventist traditions. Reporting was partial when making claims for increase or decline of support, rarely a comprehensive report of balanced books. After the transition, support for the central office dropped, as many of the Central Asian unions lost members to outward migration. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan soon withheld moral and financial support for ECB ecumenical links, including with the European Baptist Federation whose Western culture with women in leadership they rejected. The Ukraine ECB soon formed a close tie with its counterparts in Canada, enabling them to engage in active evangelism, even as organizations like the John McArthur ministries of USA conducted its own ministries, hiring the best local ministers as translators. Rare was the organization that regularly circulated full financial reporting.

The above-mentioned situation remains an obstacle to trust, even if there is an argument for keeping church activities below the radar in situations where corrupt authorities might demand payments.[18] Finding ways to 'do the dance' about money in corrupt societies with integrity could be helpful if Eurasian churches had opportunities to learn from Southern European regions, which had wrestled with such issues for longer. More likely, and perhaps more helpful, might be sharing experiences on financial issues with the many recent immigrants to Germany and the USA from their own traditions.

Factors to Ponder in the Context of Oppression: Now and the Future

There is a paradigmatic quality to the Soviet and Eastern European experience of oppression that can be helpful to Christians around the globe who have known

[18] A helpful and rare dissertation excerpt is Sergey Chervonenko (with Mark. R. Elliott), "Tithes, Offerings, and Stewardship in Russian Evangelical Churches," *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall 2017) 1-4, with Elliott's bibliographical postscript.

oppression, or who are back in such situations, to share wisdom with each other. The wisdom of North Americans in such a situation is simply not there. Yet the opportunities for leaders from Eurasia/Eastern Europe to meet Christian leaders from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are still very infrequent, not easily fostered. For the sake of the health of Christianity as a whole, this needs to change.

Ways in which such increased global interaction might merit attention. When we look back at the past century of Christian mission, the congress of 1910 in Edinburgh did not really anticipate much of what actually happened. Yet, by 2010, it had been taken for granted that the African continent had been transformed into a Christian continent, but with Islam rapidly expanding southward from the Sahara. The North American Christians had become the largest contingent of missionaries sent abroad. The Slavic Christian world, however, was unable to participate in that massive Christian mission impact on Africa, nor could it send missionaries to Asia.

During the era (1961-1991) when the International Missionary Council was holding global mission assemblies, the evangelicals who associated with Billy Graham were holding global assemblies on evangelization and mission, starting in Lausanne in 1974, with periodic assemblies thereafter until 2010. It is very difficult to claim that evangelicals in Eurasia and Eastern Europe benefitted from such gatherings, to the degree that Christians from the West and South did, but they were also not totally absent. In hindsight, what became more striking was that the Lausanne equivalent of a global congress on mission–Pretoria 2010–had mainly taken representation from Eastern Europe and Eurasia, some of its scholars engaging in critical reflection with each other in 2011. What seems lacking for the Eastern European side is a public review and assessment of those assemblies–the themes addressed and the ways in which such topics began to shape local action–in order to build a more active dialogue for the future. No doubt the extensive change in church leadership in Eurasia post 1989 explains the decline of contacts. In addition, a new generation of evangelical leaders without memories of such encounters has emerged, thus lacking a sense of urgency about moving toward more forthright and open discussions of differences. This helps account for an increased isolation of Eastern European evangelicals from global evangelicalism.

There is also the problem that has become more acute, of American evangelicals becoming more insular, having learned to view the New York twin towers attack of September 11, 2001 as of "global significance." That event, and the fearmongering that

followed, seriously limited American readiness to help finance global gatherings of Christian leaders. That insularity has included a drastically reduced diet of serious news for Americans about global developments.

Since both the mission and service workers for the bridging of worlds have been in a state of steady decline since 1989, is there a third alternative to reverse it? The global explosion of electronic and digital media has created training possibilities that could have been used more effectively. Access to online courses, seminars, and e-books is more available than ever before, but still too costly and needing better coordination. There is a world of electronic and digital communication that has expanded communication possibilities, which might be better utilized than it has been. This seems modest, but it is still worth noting that access to online seminars and courses is easier than ever before. Another reality, given the major outward migration of evangelical families from the former USSR territories to Germany, Canada, and the USA since 1987, is that such immigrants have much greater incentives to stay in touch with the 'old country.' There are many Russian-Germans who have been returning for short-term assignments to assist Russian, Ukrainian, and Central Asian church communities in their work and teaching. Teachers from Russia have been offering training sessions for their Russian/Ukrainian communities along the Canadian and American west coast, the funding also coming from the new American citizens covering the travel costs of teachers and contributing to other costs because the Russian and Ukrainian economies have remained stagnant. In missiological terms, the label 'reverse mission' fits for now.

A Lesson from Church History: Religious Minorities Matter

Persecution during the first three centuries of Christianity was sporadic and varied in intensity, yet by the time of Constantine, perhaps four million adherents had made the new religion a factor in terms of social order. Even after the 'peace of the church' following toleration in 313, that "peace" or "toleration" did not apply outside the Roman Empire, nor did oppression ever fully disappear within. Among the more major 'times of trial' were the bloody persecutions of the Church of the East, by then the largest expression of Christianity. The Syrian Orthodox tradition of millions as far away as India, was reduced to a few hundred thousand around 1200. There were centuries of conflict between Christian and Muslim cultures around the Mediterranean, and periods of co-existence and reduced oppression in specific regions. Since the whole world seems

to have noticed the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017, there are legacies from that period forward that are still worth keeping in mind.

One of the longest lasting “empires,” aside from the Byzantine, was the Holy Roman Empire (800-1806). Around 1500, the Empire was controlled by the Hapsburgs, but its structure was astonishingly fluid. It was an effort to unite a great variety of local forms of feudal governance by providing central legal norms, while the Western Christian church, under the Pope of Rome, sought to ensure a moral order. The big threat perceived in Martin Luther and others like him, was that the political and religious integration of society could be undercut. A century before, the reforming councils had heard reformer John Hus articulate his vision and had him burned at the stake. That did not stop the reforms in Bohemia.

It is widely known that the Lutheran Reformation was in disagreement, in conflict even, with Zwingli and Calvin’s reforms—never mind the split off group from Zwingli that was dubbed the Anabaptists, who explicitly avowed a separation of church from state. That ‘Radical Reformation’--appearing in numerous places--drew the attention of the authorities when in 1525 in Zurich, a few radicals ended their Bible study with the baptism of adults, rejecting their formal baptism as infants. By 1527 the imperial authorities had reacted by declaring the Anabaptists as uprisers or “revolutionaries” threatening the social order and ordered them to be executed. That law, and several more like it between 1525 and 1529, remained in force until 1806, though enforced only where possible. In some cases, local lords took the prerogative to grant specific religious rights to such religious minorities within their estates. After the defeat of the Hapsburg forces in the Low Countries, the Netherlands became a republic and the Dutch Reformed church, though a statistical minority, was recognized as the official church. This meant that the other churches gradually gained more tolerance. This made possible the disproportionately major role of the *Doopsgezinde*, which the Reformed and other Dutch church bodies played for centuries in advocating for their more oppressed fellow believers in Europe.

By the time toleration became more widespread after 1750, it had been the voices from the Enlightenment that provided the philosophical underpinning. Nevertheless, as recent studies in communication theory have made clear, the gradual

easing of pressure on religious minorities was not simply a top-down story.[19] There was a dialectic at play throughout the history. The breaking up of the feudal order through the formation of kingly sovereignty claims as well as the formation of nation states, including the shift from royal rule to elected parliamentary governance, steadily emptied the legal structure of the Holy Roman Empire of its power and authority. Similarly, the proliferation of Protestant traditions, also with the support from a Protestant Britain, forced the Roman church to surrender claims of control. This was a protracted development filled with exceptions, but my point to stress here is the factor, recognized rather late, that religious minorities played creative roles in securing their increased freedoms. Their device for communicating beyond themselves was to send letters of appeal to fellow believers outside their area, who could appeal to governing authorities and to the public to help change public opinion.

Ways of Discretion and Valor for Eastern European Evangelicals

The story in Eastern Europe and Eurasia is like that within the Holy Roman Empire, yet also different. With the defeat of the Byzantine army in 1452, the Byzantine Orthodoxy that survived was reduced to the status of the Christian *millet,* its patriarch (now called *ethnarch*) was allowed religious and legal authority over the Orthodox, whereas the Ottoman Empire constituted a fusion of political and Muslim religious institutions. Those who converted to Islam were absorbed, and those who remained Christian had reduced rights, including periodic persecution. North of Byzantium, the prince of Muscovy eventually secured greater sovereignty over other princes, and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch threw his support behind the Muscovite tsar in 1589. Yet, there were many dissenting movements within the gradually expanding Russian Empire.

Sociologically speaking, in Russian areas, as was true within the Western European world, the religious dissenters (or reformers from their point of view) tended to fall into two types. One type could be characterized as focused on legalisms: making the proper sign of the cross or removing Greek novelties from the true Russian liturgy. Others were more spiritualist. These should not be seen as polar opposites, since at various stages in their development, such religious minority groups were more legalist and sectarian or more spiritualist and libertarian. The Old Believer communities,

[19] Astrid von Schlachta, *Gefahr oder Segen? Die Täufer in der Politischen Kommunikation* [Danger or Blessing? The Role of Anabaptists in Political Communication] (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009).

consistently persecuted throughout their history to the present, had developed forms of community life that accounted for them becoming the basis for Russian industrial growth by 1850. Meeting in Moscow for a conference during the brief toleration era after 1905, its speakers advocated for stronger emphasis on quality of schooling for their children, greater control by elected representatives of parish finances, and even for the right of women to speak publicly.

This is relevant because the rise of evangelicalism took place over two centuries within these contexts. The differences between the Slavic world and the Western Catholic/Protestant world accounts for the pronounced sense of difference, or at least of differentiation, linking Eastern European Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and Pentecostals to aspects of an Orthodox ethos;[20] whereas the Western European Baptists were more attuned to the cultural changes of their context. What all have in common is their persistence as religious minorities, nowhere a culturally or politically dominant force in society. What they also have in common is that their alternative model of being Christian churches was noticed by the surrounding population.

During the second socialist phase (1945-1990) the Christian churches, including the evangelicals, followed multiple pathways that we must keep in mind. After 1945 Soviet territory had reached its greatest extent, including all of the Ukraine, the three Baltic states, Siberia stretching to Kamchatka, and all of the Central Asian republics. It was a multi-confessional state, still insisting on an atheist worldview as dominant everywhere, but having been forced by the threat of the invaders, to grant some level of tolerance to the believers.

The major disruption came when by 1958, in an effort to revive the purity of commitment to Communist Party beliefs, a second 'war' on religion, somewhat more subtle in style but massively subsidized, reduced to a third of the number of functioning religious societies (the secularized label for congregations or parishes), and concentrated on weaning the younger generation and the educated away from religious faith. This attempt at establishing control over a subdued religious leadership elite was resisted at the grass roots level, and the evangelical communities soon challenged the legitimacy of centralized leadership.

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[20] Constantine Prokhorov, *Russian Baptists and Orthodoxy, 1960-1990: A Comparative Study of Theology, Liturgy, and Traditions* (Carlisle, PA: Langham Monographs, 2013).

By 1945 there was an all-union council of Evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Pentecostals (later also Mennonite Brethren) established,[21] but the 'union' very soon struggled with disunity. The national congresses, when finally allowed to meet in 1960 and triennially thereafter, always had some variant on 'unity' as theme. Yet, the formation of a competing Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists, representing underground evangelicals, had signaled a major split in 1962. By the early 1980s, an independent union of ECB churches had broken with the Reform Baptist leadership (also in part opposing central intransigence) and sought legal registration without agreeing to state demands to limit their missionary activism.

Throughout this period, the Pentecostals chafed under the All-Union Council, finally deciding to form their own legally recognized union just before the end of the Soviet Union. The Mennonite Brethren, who had joined in 1966, also chafed with resistance particularly strong in Central Asia where an anti-ecumenical sentiment prevailed. Both the Pentecostal unions and the Seventh Day Adventist unions had formed unregistered (illegal) and registered unions, splitting over issues of state interference. This splitting of church traditions was not only an evangelical problem, but it was also within the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The heavy hand of state control over church life had resulted in dissident and competing groups of churches.

All sides experienced the disunity of the evangelicals as painful, because the general public dismissed them as sectarians, missing the message of unity in Christ that all those unions of churches were officially teaching. Once official state sponsorship of atheism ended, one would logically expect reconciliations between and among the divided unions. All of those divisions have persisted. A part of the post-communist story has been the shared mission/evangelism efforts to overcome disunity, or to hold conferences to get to a fuller story of what happened, including apologies and repentance as a way to unity. Among the adherents of divided unions whose members had managed to emigrate to Germany or America, those divisions usually persisted, even if individual members returned to fellowship.

We have just reviewed points to a persistence of church division in settings of oppression. The fact that easing of oppression, or its official ending, so seldom has resulted in reconciliation and renewal, is troubling. Does that striving for purity of faith

[21] The official name of the organization: All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB).

justify the divisions during times of strong oppression, and does it justify it in changed situations? Perhaps it is more accurate to say it explains the differences.

Agendas to Pursue for Integrity of Witness

The new century served to draw attention to the 'changing face of Europe.' One of the new challenges was the deepened awareness of the ethnic minorities that became more visible, and of new groups of asylum seekers and migrants. In June 2006, the EBF hosted a conference on *Ethnic Churches in Europe–A Baptist Response.*[22] The published essays are a good reminder of the complex set of issues that 'ethnic' label evoked. Paul Weller's keynote address worked its way through nearly a dozen sub-topics. Weller ended by citing Jürgen Moltmann's observation that the future shape of Christianity is "inevitably becoming that of a believers' church," and therefore raising ecclesiological, theological and missiological issues to consider carefully. Those challenges have only increased, for they are global in nature, not merely European.

Recently, a reviewer introduced a new word in a Muslim versus Buddhist context for South Asia, but it was clearly relevant globally. It is the word "majoritarianism."[23] The book reviewer described efforts in numerous regions by troubled governments, usually conservative, to enforce majoritarianism. It meant treating the majority population of a country as the desired norm, with religious minorities treated as second class, or, as in the case of the Rohinga in Myanmar, as undesirable, forced by violence to flee to Bangladesh or suffer mass killing. By the time of the more restrictive law on religion of 1997 in Russia, it too spoke of "historic" religions–naming Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism–versus the new religions that needed to justify their legal registration on the basis of a minimum size of local society. In the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, the variety of Protestant, Catholic, and other newer denominations were soon under more oppressive controls. Over the past decade, the weekly reports from *Forum 18* are invariably full of outright violations of religious freedoms in those Central Asian states, as well as in specific Russian oblasts. Russia itself banned the Jehovah's Witness church in 2017, a shocking and incomprehensible action. These are illustrations of majoritarian thinking, sending fear signals to religious minorities by banning one of the smaller religious minorities.

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[22] Peter F. Penner, ed., *Ethnic Churches in Europe. A Baptist Response* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2006).
[23] Mukul Kesavan, "Murderous Majorities," *New York Review of Books* (18 January 2018), pp. 37-40.

World public opinion, which once was attentive to such religious rights violations, has also been changing. Since the September 11, 2001 attack on the twin towers in New York city, the Bush administration's war on Iraq and Afghanistan, and the widespread use of 'enhanced interrogation methods,' American forces required landing rights in those neighboring Central Asian states and overlooked their hosts' mistreatment of peoples. It has meant that the voices of nongovernmental organizations from America have become more muted. More deliberate international Christian coalitions for solidarity and for assistance to the oppressed are now needed, even as those same organizations need to awaken the consciences of a too poorly informed public.

Why these indicators are of the waning of social compassion? My response is that we will need a deeper grasp of global inter-linkages. President George W. Bush, unaware of the record of abuse by the American military presence globally, spoke often about fostering democracy. Yet, as part of the sudden sense of threat to America, the Bush-Cheney administration began engaging in torture of captured prisoners. Bush's advisers began speaking of the international laws on warfare as outmoded, or as limiting the sovereignty of America. So, in spite of the numerous instances where the European court of justice challenged the legitimacy of the treatment of prisoners of conscience in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and even Kazakhstan, the governments of those countries ignored such international norms, as did the Americans.

Human rights historian, Samuel Moyn,[24] drew attention to what has been changing since 1991, moving away from forms of socialism in favor of market capitalism. French economist Thomas Piketty's wide-ranging statistical depiction of the worsening reality of the nearly inconceivable gap between the poor and the super-rich, became a major theme for historians and economists.[25] This focus on human rights (including religious rights) as worthy of major global attention, so Moyn now argues, caused observers to miss a major shift in correlations. When the United Nations Human Rights declaration was approved in 1948, it very explicitly linked human rights to social and economic justice. By 2018, unfortunately, it has become obvious that, increasingly,

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[24] Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Citing from an excerpt: Samuel Moyn, 'Human Rights are Not Enough', *The Nation* (9 April 2018), 20-22.
[25] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Arthur Goldhammer, tr. e-book, 2015).

human rights violations are now correlated to the dramatic decline in the economic strength of a country's middle class.

Another way of decrying the reality now so obvious among economists, is to note the contradictory interpretations of the end of the Cold War: the non-violent or velvet revolutions rejecting corrupt socialist economies in Eastern Europe and subsequent efforts to rebuild a responsible civil society, versus the way American society and government claim that it had won the Cold War by its massive threat of nuclear arms. That is the victory of redemptive violence thinking. That thinking caused American political leaders to assume singular global leadership in imperial style, most troubling under current evangelical support of President Trump's "America First" philosophy. It reminds one of the truism that empire thinking has always been the way of death, not of life.

A legitimate, deep, and persistent linkage between evangelicalism and oppression in Eurasia and Eastern Europe today–indeed anywhere globally–must be understood and circumscribed by the Gospel text from John 3.16: Billy Graham's persistent message that God loves everyone and is not willing that any should perish. It must be understood in the light of this message that Christians, recognizing the causes of global inequality as rooted in greed, refuse to support and bless policies at the local, national, and global level of political and even religious leaders whose thinking is based on redemptive violence.