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POST-SOVIET TRANSFORMATION FOR EVANGELICALS, 1991-2018: DEEPENING CAUSES FOR DISCORD¹

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Surprised or Seeing the Continuities?

During the great transformation between 1989 and 1991, the majority of American journalists were completely surprised by the transformations of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, since it contradicted their stereotypes so profoundly. Several developments within the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe turned out to be signposts for those with the eyes to see. Literary figures and philosophers circulating their thinking in *samizdat* form, or through the emergence of dissenting movements, pointed to the disillusionment with the grand socialist promises. Solzhenitsyn had already drawn attention in his Nobel speech to the power of truth in a climate where everyone was expected to live the lie. Czech playwright Vaclav Havel wrote an essay on the *Power of the Powerless*, also using Christian imagery to call for a societal moral recovery.² That the economies of the Soviet Union and many of the East European socialist states were slipping, rather than growing, was a spreading anxiety among the newer elite of the *nomenklatura*, including within the planning levels of the military. With the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary after a series of old and tired Party rulers, his speeches and writing inspired ‘new thinking’, as did his close adviser Alexander Yakovlev, who had been a Russian diplomat in Canada for a decade. These new leaders called for a restructuring of the Soviet Union, for new thinking, for greater attention to values and for the spiritual, instead of crass materialism.³

¹ Article originally appeared in *Baptistic Theologies*, vol. 10, 2 (2018). Reprinted with permission of the editor.

² Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s massive *Gulag Archipelago* had circulated in *samizdat* [self-publication], the Nobel Speech and his critique of state and church leaders circulated widely in many languages; Vaclav Havel’s *Power of the Powerless* was written at the time of the Charta movement of secular and religious dissidents, then became a widespread statement for the ‘velvet revolution’ in the Czech Republic, frequently reprinted.

³ Then American Ambassador, Jack F. Matlock Jr., “A Big Part in the Big Change,” *New York Review of Books* (23 June 2016), pp. 57-58.

Those observing the religious world did report a religious quest among the intelligentsia, by the mid-1970s flocking to a few reformist priests who spoke openly about a resurrection coming. The Reform Baptist movement, as well as dissident Pentecostals and Adventists, were not silenced by the 1960s' campaign against religion. Already by 1976, the appeals to religious freedoms guaranteed in Soviet law, and the Soviet Union's desire to be well regarded internationally, were having an impact. The number of evangelical prisoners of conscience began to decline toward the end of the 1970s and ended around 1985. Slowly, while state authorities over religion kept proclaiming there was no change in policy toward religion, the signs that the struggle to eradicate religious practice was not succeeding were mounting, so that some serious revision of the law on cults was anticipated. It came in 1990.

With that quick sketch, I am trying to indicate that the new religious freedoms were not simply granted by the authorities; it was much more a story of more believers claiming religious freedoms and acting on the implications, with the state authorities hesitating in enforcing controls. In many work settings, administrators were openly saying that their believing workers were more reliable, persons they respected, in contrast to the nasty propaganda against them. Those social shifts toward a different way were tied closely to Soviet and global responses to the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe and an earthquake disaster in Armenia that made possible foreign aid, including by religious aid societies. There was a call for the return of the word *miloserdie* (compassion) to Soviet society. Spontaneously up to a thousand *miloserdie* societies were organized and registered—invariably a mix of Orthodox and evangelical Protestant activists alongside secular people of good will.

Frenetic Evangelism, Fateful Transitions

From the vantage point of hindsight, it is possible to speak of the quarter century of post-communism in several phases. Here, I limit myself to developments among evangelicals and some Orthodox, and to note that there was an early desire to restore civil society, hence the emergence of nongovernmental civil society projects of great diversity. In early 1989, on my first visit since 1980 to the USSR, our delegation of Mennonite leaders arrived in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where we were permitted to drive as far as Tokmak and Rot Front, cities long closed to foreigners.

At the airport Andrei Barg, a Russian German minister in the main Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB) congregation, took me aside to drive me to the hotel, while other church leaders chauffeured my colleagues. We had met for fellowship more than a decade

before, so we had much to catch up on. His opening remark was, “they called me in a week ago, but I refused to go”. I knew who the ‘they’ were, the usual officials including the KGB, who had harassed him throughout his ministry. But, said Barg, they said this was not a request like before; they simply wanted to talk with him, they wanted to learn. So he went to a meeting that included the mayor, school principals, the police, and Party leaders. They told him that their city too, like elsewhere across the Soviet Union, was struggling with serious social problems. The list of woes included drug use, high divorce rates, and a rising crime rate. On the other hand, they all knew that the Baptist youth were not like that. They knew about how they organized visits to lonely senior citizens to sing and pray with them. The Christian families impressed them by their treatment of each other, plus their readiness to help the poor around them. Therefore, the purpose of their request was to ask him what the secret of the Christian churches was; could he describe what they were doing and why? Could some of his colleagues come to speak in schools, or at factories, and answer whatever questions the listeners had?

This was only one striking illustration of what began happening across the USSR. Not only did thousands of Bibles get imported, it had also been a year to celebrate the millennium of Christianity. In Karaganda, Kazakhstan, I chatted with an evangelical believer who told me about the Orthodox priest who had looked frazzled but excited and eager to share. A retired couple had come to him to ask for a church blessing on their marriage of long ago. With them came their children, a legally married couple holding an infant. First the parents asked for baptism, then the priest’s blessing on their marriage, before the priest performed a baptism of the infant, in each case taking enough time to explain what these rituals meant and to ask if they understood and affirmed them.

One Sunday in Moscow in 1990, I went to a nearby Orthodox parish for the morning liturgy where a bishop was presiding. After the highpoint of the liturgy—the Eucharist—the bishop came forward to deliver a short homily. “Most of you will have heard about the words Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and God the Father,” he said. “Today I am going to introduce Jesus Christ to you.” It sounded rather like that conversation in John 3 when Jesus explained the new birth to Nicodemus. In closing, the bishop invited visitors to come back next Sunday when he would introduce them to the Holy Spirit. How often have any of us had the opportunity for such basic teaching about Christianity as was then happening across the

Soviet Union? It seemed as if everyone had seen the *Repentance* film, and could not forget that closing line by the old woman: “What use is a road if it does not lead to a church?”⁴

It was indeed a time of frenetic evangelism. Simple believers, not just the ordained ministers, seemed to get phone calls or people grabbing their arm in public to beg them to come to their village, to their school, even to the prison nearby to talk about God. The Baptist paper as well as Semchenko’s *Protestant* magazine were full of stories—about holding singing and preaching services in the prisons where they once had been imprisoned for their faith; visiting patients in hospitals who were surviving in unclean conditions; hospitals being short-staffed, with low worker morale. Soon in many places, believers had become regular volunteers in hospitals and state-run orphanages and seniors’ homes.

Already in 1990, the Mennonite Central Committee was able to set up an exchange of healthcare professionals. The head of the largest hospital in Moscow, a psychologist from that ill-famed psychiatric institute in Leningrad, and in total about a dozen nursing care and medical specialists toured the USA together for two weeks, visiting both state facilities and many of the Mennonite hospitals, mental health centers, and retirement homes to share insights and experiences. On Sundays, the tour group members were taken to a half dozen different churches and had dinner with families. Six months later, my wife Margaret and I travelled with the American/Canadian Mennonite professionals, first to tour the former Mennonite settlements around Zaporozhye, Ukraine, plus of course Kiev, St Petersburg and Moscow, before each of the visitors was hosted for a week to 10 days in medical institutions in those capital cities just mentioned, but also in Odessa and similar cities. It was eye-opening on both sides, but in a number of cases, especially in the areas of social work and counselling centers that were just beginning, relationships of cooperation through mentorships continued for many years thereafter. It also served as a bridge between local Christians and such medical professionals, usually not practicing believers, to establish friendships and organize volunteers as needed.

Parallels and Differences in Eastern Europe

These forms of building new contacts and relationships were less dramatic across the East European countries, often having started earlier. The phenomenon known as citizen

⁴ The then Georgian Party Secretary Shevardnadze had permitted production, then as USSR foreign secretary encouraged Gorbachev to permit the showing of *Pokoiane* [Repentance] throughout the USSR. Tengiz Abuladze’s film was made in 1984, but the release was banned until 1987, because of its allegorical critique of Stalinist, and in more general terms, a totalitarian regime. It premiered in 1987 at the Cannes Film Festival.

diplomacy had started at least by the mid-1980s. Once Polish General Jaruzelski declared martial law around Christmas 1981, as a way to keep the Solidarity workers' movement within limits, President Reagan responded by imposing a sanction on the export of corn and soybeans to small farmers in Poland producing broiler chickens for urban residents. That winter chickens were quickly sold and such entrepreneurs became jobless; instead of chicken sandwiches, there were mushroom burgers for sale. Then a quick thaw along the Vistula River caused widespread flooding due to broken up ice. The German authorities soon after approved sending food relief to the flooded regions, and church agencies from abroad, such as Caritas, Baptist World Aid, and my own Mennonite Central Committee were sending relief supplies.

Most memorable were the many German citizens who obtained addresses of churches or social centers to which they delivered truck-loads of supplies from their own towns in Germany. Then German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher announced that all relief goods brought to the German post offices would be shipped to needy places in Poland for free. This was a reconciliation and forgiveness moment between Germans and Poles, after the horrible memories of Nazi occupation, displacement of people in order to settle diaspora Germans from the Ukraine, as well as the ethnic cleansing of Jews. Some years later, the Polish Catholic Bishops exchanged a reconciliation declaration with German Catholic bishops.

Elsewhere citizen diplomacy usually started locally. A group in a West European town sought out an East European town of similar size to establish a sister city relationship. That might mean sending football (soccer) teams to play a tournament, visitors hosted in homes, then a return engagement in the other town. In other cases, it was an exchange of hobby clubs, or even parish exchanges. I recall being a guest in a Protestant church in the Czech Republic more than a decade later, when their partner church from Munich presented a worship service with shared stories about church events in both places, followed by a warm fellowship around a meal before the Germans drove home for the night. By then such cross-boundary, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic links had become normal.

An exchange student we had sponsored to study at Humboldt University in East Germany kept a diary of events during the fall of 1989.⁵ It included excerpts from fellow student conversations, who were part of the Swords into Plowshares movement gaining

⁵ Mark Jantzen, *The Wrong Side of the Wall: An American in East Berlin during the Peaceful Revolution* (Newton, KS: self-published, 1993).

force, not only concerned for ending the Cold War stalemate, which had prompted so many ‘no future’ placards in demonstrations. They also went regularly to the Monday evening worship service in Leipzig, followed by a candlelight march in the middle of the city. Sermon excerpts were from the Sermon on the Mount, then a new best seller in West Germany, plus quotations from Martin Luther King and Gandhi. They sang songs from the popular *Kirchentag* gathering started by lay people after World War II, when church institutions had lost so much trust. Social justice, peace, and integrity of creation were common themes in those songs.

When the Berlin Wall came down, Vincent Harding, who had long headed the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, was watching events on television, surprised that the people were singing *We Shall Overcome* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.⁶ That set him thinking and realizing, as a modern historian, that the human and civil rights movement was much bigger than merely in the USA, that there was a solidarity globally that necessarily drew on the hope for the oppressed—the constant theme of Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others—and hope for the oppressed was in both the *Benedictus* of Zechariah and the *Magnificat* of Mary, and it was unmistakable in the life and teaching of Jesus.

So where was this taking the evangelicals of Eurasia and Eastern Europe? They turned their attention to marginalized fellow citizens. For East European Christians, as far back as the early nineteenth century, it was the Pietist Awakening that had led to the founding of long-term care hospitals for handicapped persons and for the mentally ill. Orphanages and training centers for street kids in the newly industrializing cities had sprung up. In areas where there were state churches or *Volkskirchen*, pastors, deaconesses, and other church workers were paid out of a church tax managed by the state. The two world wars of the twentieth century accounted for much of the destruction of such church-run institutions. It took half a decade before the formerly well-organized *Diakonisches Werk* of the Evangelical Church of Germany was finally able to resume activity for social needs inside West Germany, much less so in East Germany.

The recovery across the neighboring East European church world took longer. A key challenge for free or evangelical churches was to function without state subsidy, relying on freewill donations. By 1989, when all of the East European states abandoned their socialist forms of governance, many industries and state corporations that managed the economy now

⁶ Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

tended to shift to free market economies. The transition was not as drastic as the privatization process across the USSR, but it too did result in serious economic recessions.

So, in this context, one heard more frequently from the church leaders from Poland and Germany all the way to Yugoslavia, that the public began expecting the churches to care for civil society, at least for its marginalized people, to try to take on social ministries from the past, but now with voluntary funds. One can generalize that many Christians worked hard to assist their neighbors, but organized social services limped along, with international relief and aid agencies making major contributions during the 1990s, then a more widespread decline of charitable giving among developed societies became steadily more noticeable. This latter feature is now a common point of anxiety across the East and West. Given that the second decade of the twenty-first century has seen the growth of a populism characterized by increased xenophobia to migrants and to other minority groups, with right-wing politicians more openly engaging in hate speech, the societal oppression of minorities is rising. What might cause a recovery of societal capacity for compassion?

Coming to Terms with Less – 1997-2008

For the second post-communism phase I have arbitrarily chosen to cover the developments between 1997 and 2008. The revised Russian law on religion (1997) signaled the beginning of new (or was it renewed?) controls over religious practice, presented as an effort to block the foreign mission influence on Russian society. The Central Asian states produced their own contextually distinct laws that seemed like a return to the Soviet war on religion, but much more arbitrary. The changes in Ukraine and Mongolia were not as prominent, as was true in Eastern European states where the steady increase of majoritarian thinking was expressed more in nationalist or even racist tones, than specifically against religion. The beginning of a third phase during 2008 points again to the role of economic crises in shaping evangelical experiences, in particular the new isolationism over against the West (as then painted in the media in increasingly negative tones) and still no broad shared vision of the way toward a good and healthy society. Given the indicators of increased authoritarianism and corruption, it was not really a turn to the rule of law, it was a time for evangelicals and for many renewal-seeking Orthodox to turn inward, focused on ways to survive until the political and social winds might change, without a promising leadership waiting in the wings.

It was the contrasts between the euphoria of the millennium year, the high hopes that Russia, possibly all of Eastern Europe, would turn to God as source of hope and vision, and then the spreading sense by 2008 that the lights were slowly going out. In Russia, the Christian role in society was more obviously turning out to be used as sham: the hypocritical top politicians seen to attend worship, take communion, with Patriarch Kirill speaking more as voice for Great Russia than as church leader. By 2008, the enthusiasm for theological training began to wane. What might someone with a Master of Divinity degree do after graduation, particularly if that did not appear to include salaried pastoral work? In places, there was a backlash against returning seminary graduates who now sounded as if the theology from the West they had learned was the way of thinking all should adopt. One of those points of conflict centered on the teaching of eternal security that seemed alien to historic Slavic tendencies toward Arminian forms of Reformed theology.

In general, the value of theologically-trained pastors needed to be learned by congregations through experience. Even the emerging emphasis on pastoral care and counselling, and on more participatory ways of doing Bible study, and on the voluntary social services in the community were transformations needing a learning curve. Since the new ideas came from the schools and their teachers, to a great extent from foreign guest professors, what had not developed widely was group discussion and discernment at both leadership level and congregational level, to gain consensus for direction and change.

The Evangelical Role in Unfriendly Societies – 2008 into the Future

While teaching a short course, I was invited by Andrei Puzynin, then Rector of Realis in Kiev, to go for evening prayers to one of the new churches in Kiev, started by Western evangelical missionaries. It was drawing local professionals to become converted and apply their faith to their jobs as well as through a variety of community programs from the church. Puzynin flagged down a private taxi, its mirror holding an icon and a cross, so Puzynin immediately started to converse with the driver. It turned out the young driver had encountered Orthodoxy and then become a Pentecostal, but he was no longer active religiously. I was reminded of the American phrase ‘been there, done that’; now, he was jaded. They talked a bit about social and political changes; our driver had a university degree and, according to him, some of the changes were welcome, other aspects of the socialist system were preferable. So Puzynin invited him to come to the meeting where we were

going; he could even come later after his shift, because there would be a fellowship hour with the band playing, and the people were young like him and friendly.

Around 2008, Nikolai Kornilov took me along on a Saturday morning (I had been teaching at Moscow Baptist Seminary that week) to a gathering of pastors, all of them leading new evangelical congregations in the distant suburbs surrounding Moscow. We started with personal sharing, and after a while, I was hearing phrases that sounded familiar from pastors in the USA. Young parents were busy with jobs, trying to fix up their flats or apartments, spending time with their children and friends. They had been very enthusiastic as young Christians, doing many volunteer tasks in evangelism and social service, but now there was a change. Some were less frequent at Sunday services, needing to sleep in, tired from a busy work week. The years before there were always new people, the seekers, wanting to learn about Christian faith. That had ended; most were no longer interested, were returning to their usual Sunday rest times by washing the car and watching television. How were these pastors to encourage each other? At least they were sharing openly, some getting counsel from others on dealing with cases, but there was a pervasive sense that living out a congregation's faith witness was again onerous and slow.

That was one form of encountering an unfriendly society, its reversion to living as if religion matters little for their daily affairs. Was this true in other cities, especially areas across Russia where the comforts of jobs and availability of goods were more limited than was true in capital cities like St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Moscow?⁷

What was changing in cities and their hinterlands in many parts of the Russian Federation and Central Asia, was a societal shift back to the command economy that the *perestroika* era was to eradicate. Local officials at many levels reasserted their suspicion of alien elements, such as the evangelicals who had the closest ties with the West that political leaders were now warning against. The capacity for extensive church ministries in the community was being blocked: there was eventually (2015) even a Russian law prohibiting missionizing or evangelizing outside religious buildings, and more obstacles permitting the functioning of religious institutions.

⁷ Several scholarly attempts to assess the evangelical role in the post-soviet era have been published, that I warmly recommend since I lack space to cover them: *Forum 18, Dvadsat' let religioznoi svobody i aktivnoi missii v postsovet'skom obshchestve. Itogi, problemy, perspektivy evangel'skikh tserkvei* [20 years of religious freedom and active mission in post-Soviet society. Results, problems, perspectives from the evangelical churches] (Kiev: Dukh i Literatura, 2011, 28 contributors from Ukraine and elsewhere). See also Joshua T. Searle and Myhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope. Mission, Theological Education, and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

Franz Tissen, Evangelical Christian Baptists (hereafter ECB) President in Kazakhstan, is a long-time promoter of systematic expansion of evangelistic witness to every oblast in Kazakhstan, which resulted in numerous new congregations where worship then proceeded in Russian and indigenous languages. Tissen sent out an appeal, after the 2011 restrictive law on religion, to fellow believers now living in Germany, to pray for them since conditions for church practice were again more difficult. Congregations had to seek re-registration, with more stringent conditions to meet, such as size of community. *Forum 18* cited cases where the dissident ECB congregations that refused state registration, as before 1991, were being fined for unauthorized activities, leaders were arrested and given prison terms. The number of Jehovah's Witnesses refusing military service, and therefore arrested and sentenced to prison, was increasing from month to month. Then finally, in 2016, the Jehovah's Witness church in the Russian Federation was banned as an extremist organization.⁸ That action got noticed and reported in the West at least, with some dismay that a more authoritarian rule under Putin and his anti-Western rhetoric was reminiscent of old Soviet practices.

Yet the most severe treatments in the Central Asian countries seemed reserved for the most active Muslims, sentenced to severe fines and prison terms for having or distributing published Islamic theology by Said Nursi, for example, on grounds that such Muslim behavior was 'extremist' or 'terrorist'. So new or old forms of persecution of faith practice were returning, even the prominent Orthodox churchmen no longer protested. In October 2017 Kazakhstan's Religion and Civil Society Ministry published a draft of revisions to the 2011 Religion Law, with restrictions on parents' and children's freedoms, more restrictions on sharing belief, and more censorship. In so doing it was ignoring the legal recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It referred to a comparative table to show similarities and differences with such laws in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁹ That may sound bureaucratic, but what it implied was that Kazakhstan was still less actively controlling religious practice than was the case in traditionally more actively Muslim societies.

To stick with recent summaries of reporting of violations of religious rights, *Forum 18* in October 2017 reported cases of torture in city after city in Uzbekistan, which included beatings, freezing conditions, and sexual violations including raping of women—those

⁸ An online weekly newsletter *Forum 18*, March 5, 2018, reported 24 criminal convictions for religious activities in 2018 alone, with more imminent. *Forum 18*, January 31, 2018 presented a detailed list of "279 administrative prosecutions," 259 of them receiving punishments of fines, short term jail terms, temporary or permanent bans on religious activity, deportations, seizure of property and religious literature.

⁹ *Forum 18*, October 10, 2017, giving extensive detail.

reporting insisted on remaining anonymous because of likely reprisals by the state. Officials denied charges, some even stating that they would not be punished if reported. *Forum 18* also noted that a review by the UN Committee on Torture spoke of ‘torture or the threat of it’ as ‘routine’ in 2007. In that organization’s later concluding report of 2013, it spoke of

numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement... [that] leads to a climate of impunity for officials and the absence of the rule of law ...[plus] unjust trials with flagrant breaches of due process...¹⁰

In Tajikistan, nearly 2,000 mosques were closed and converted to secular uses in 2017, always with the claim that it was ‘at the request of local residents.’¹¹ There had been many thriving evangelical congregations in Uzbekistan during the last few decades of Soviet power, and a seminary/college was opened in the 1990s. Yet at a Bible School in Kazakhstan around 2007, where I was teaching, about a dozen students from Uzbekistan attended, since the school where they had studied was closed.

It was a new time of testing the quality of faith one claimed, of testing one’s readiness to show solidarity to oppressed minorities. Given the shift to independent national ECB unions, also true of other evangelical communities, the structures for information sharing were missing, and gradually, stronger evangelical communities in Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova were less able to send assistance, including literature.

The revised law on religion of 1997 in Russia occurred in the context of a politically inspired turn against the West, and its missionaries. The length of visas for foreigners in Russia was steadily reduced, until such residents were required to exit and return every three months, soon a financial impossibility for missionaries, less so for business persons. Many affected negatively by the new restrictions of 1997 sent appeals directly to the President without response, and the anti-West atmosphere was such that the Duma approved the restrictive legislation that included a variety of increased anti-terror surveillance measures, as well as close supervision of the missionaries’ activities. Soon, most of the mission agency offices in Moscow had closed, leaving the Russian evangelicals with a more pronounced sense of isolation and minority status.

¹⁰ *Forum 18*, October 12, 2017.

¹¹ *Forum 18*, February 26, 2018.

Evangelical Discord: Is There a Better Way Forward?

During earlier periods of faith testing under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev, too often this was followed by discord within evangelical circles. These were times when it seemed more certain what belonged to Caesar, to whom one could not give ultimate allegiance, and what belonged to God and one dare not violate one's conscience. So there had been patterns of capitulation to the atheist campaigns, and patterns of resisting and suffering the cost. In the post-war revival era, many of the new evangelical converts were really those who had surrendered to the forces of evil, who repented and found the gift of forgiveness, of divine grace, and increasingly the gift of Christian fellowship to help them face a society still seriously hostile to Christian faith.

Soon after Vladimir Putin was appointed by Yeltsin as his successor (1998), large sections of the Russian population, including evangelicals, became more aware of the close links between Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian state. Putin was shown on television taking communion in the Cathedral of the Savior, with Patriarch Kirill officiating. In connection with Putin's increasingly frequent references to a form of Russianness that included all 'Russians' in the 'near abroad' for whose welfare the Russian state had obligations, to the point of the right to interfere in the independent countries such as Ukraine for the welfare of the Russians there, an ethnic majoritarian emphasis seemed troubling. Early in the new century, Patriarch Kirill seemed to have changed his earlier inclusivist approach, to articulate a doctrine of Russian Orthodoxy. Whether this was in the vein of the surprising claim in Kirill's 1994 mission declaration about canonical territory that belongs to Russian Orthodoxy, or if he was feeling pressure from brother bishops to stay in step with President Putin's national notions is not clear. But it has been the Russian evangelicals, as fully Russian/Soviet in identity since at least 1950, who have struggled with national identity. According to Romans 13 understanding, some church leaders, such as Riakhovsky of the national Pentecostal Union and chair of the inter-evangelical council through which evangelicals negotiated with state officials, began sounding uncritically pro-Putin.

In Ukraine, there had been political divisions behind the demonstrations at the Maidan square in Kiev, soon known as the 'Orange' Revolution because of its non-violent style, including with clergy and lay Christian mediation between groups. When it became apparent that the Ukrainian President, whose electoral victory was under challenge, was corrupt by enriching himself and secretly negotiating for the Russian commercial union, the second Maidan demonstration became the focus for forcing President Yanukovich out, and he sought

sanctuary in Russia. Then followed the election of Poroshchenko (June 2014), a Ukrainian oligarch with a successful business, but with a prime minister with pro-American leanings, and during the interval the temporary state President was Oleksandr Turtchinov.¹²

Turtchinov had converted from his youthful role as Komsomol leader to baptism and membership in a Baptist church, where he took his turn as lay preacher, then also wrote three novels, similar in apocalyptic tones to the American *Left Behind* series President George W. Bush enjoyed reading. Among Turtchinov's main anxieties was the rise of a world government, as so many fundamentalist evangelicals have imagined the United Nations to become, or in Russia currently the rising influence of President Putin toward leader of a new Byzantium, a third Rome.¹³ Turtchinov, as deputy to Julia Tymoshenko, leader of the Fatherland Party, was very prominent during the Second Maidan demonstration, labelled 'Revolution of Values.' Next to the presence of Cardinal Husar (Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church) and Patriarch Filaret (of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kievan Patriarchate), Turtchinov as an evangelical was the more prominent politician. Soon after, he also headed the Ukrainian secret service for internal affairs, that is, Turtchinov helped establish popular recognition of Ukraine as religiously pluralist.

Yet when the Russian Baptist Union (RUECB) met in St Petersburg in May 2014, two months after the Maidan demonstration in Kiev had begun, it issued a condemnation of Baptists and other Christians in Kiev, with the line:

... we proclaim commitment to Biblical teaching, which does not accept the violent overthrow of legitimate authority, nor nationalism, nor the resolution of socio-political differences through means other than political negotiation. 'Do not join with rebellious officials.' (Proverbs 24:21)¹⁴

¹² For details I am relying on Mykhailo Cherenkov, "Die Geschichte vom "blutigen Pastor," *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Nr. 3, 2018, 20-22.

¹³ Alena Alshanskaya, "Das Erbe von Byzanz im geschichts-politischen Diskurs Russlands," *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Nr. 7/8/2017, 26-29. Bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov) as archimandrite and trained in filming, had in 2008 produced the documentary *The Fall of an Empire: Lessons from Byzantium*, where Tikhon used the Byzantine heritage to draw analogies to the Third Rome, that now Putin would pursue. There followed numerous articles in the Russian press, also a talk show on state TV. Tikhon continued writing in this vein for <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru>> in spite of then Patriarch Alexei II rejecting the analogy to Byzantium, until in November 2014 an academic conference on Moscow as Third Rome was held. The tone was anti-Western, Russia was to incorporate the other civilization, the other Europe. Vsevolod Chaplin's replacement in December 2015 as head of the Synod's department for church and society relations was Aleksandr Shchishchikov, a journalist. With the annexation of Crimea, Shchishchikov spoke of a 'polyethnic Russian nation' where various ethnic and social groups would be united in a Russian values matrix, as heritage from Byzantium. Soon after the Tsargrad-TV of Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofaev pursued this theme. Putin at Kherson in Crimea in 2015 declared it "the sacred source of the Russian nation and its central Asian states." When on 28 May 2016 the Mount Athos community celebrated the 1000 year anniversary of the presence of Russian monks at Mount Athos, Putin was assigned to sit on the throne reserved for the Byzantine Caesar.

¹⁴ Online Press Release #41, "Conclusions from the Crisis in Ukraine," 25 July 2014, Dr. William E. Yoder.

The second resolution from that St Petersburg RUECB Congress addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin, included the lines of gratitude “for defining and strengthening of the spiritual and moral values, to which the traditional family belongs...” Further they pray that Putin will have “the strength and courage to remain true to the struggle against manifestations of xenophobia and in the preservation of interconfessional peace in Russia.”¹⁵

To this the newly elected president of the All-Ukrainian UECB Valerii Antoniuk, in an interview in the RUECB news service, stated that “if a people speaks the truth, seeks justice, wishes freedom from corruption and desires honest living, then Christians are always called to support that.” As to the coup of February 2014, Antoniuk cited Bonhoeffer’s line that “obedience to tyrants is equal to disobedience towards God.”¹⁶ Anatoly Kaluzhny (Kiev), bishop of the Union of Independent Evangelical Churches in Ukraine, described the Russian Baptist gratitude statement to Putin for cultivating moral values in society as “the highest form of blasphemy. We know how he lives.”¹⁶

Truth telling was the moral power that accounted for the non-violent moral revolutions that transformed the former Marxist socialist states of Eastern Europe into more participatory democracies, all in that remarkable year of 1989.¹⁷ That was what Havel had in mind with his “power of the powerless”, a clear reference to the Apostle Paul’s remark in Corinthians: “when I am weak, then am I strong.” It was what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount about “the meek shall inherit the earth.” In the first edition of his commentary of Martin Luther’s Bible in 1521, Luther stated, “indeed, without violence.” After the Peasant Wars of 1525, Luther dropped the line from later editions, until the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1984 reprinted that first edition!

The truth telling is also “the liberation and the burden.” In the 1990s, there developed many Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, of which the South African one headed by Bishop Desmond Tutu seems the best known. In some countries in Latin America, Philippines, or the GDR, these heavy burden processes made a difference; in the regions of the former Soviet Union there was a phase of opening the archives, of rehabilitation of many falsely accused and long dead, until the population got over-saturated with horror stories. In a book, which includes photo evidence, published by Masha Gesson, she surveyed the mass graves for Jews and other unwanted marginalized peoples. The Memorial Society got

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Walter Sawatsky, “Truth Telling: The Liberation and the Burden,” *Journal of Church and State* Vol. 33 (1991): 701-729.

organized to dig up the dead, identify them, and bury them with respect. But the sad part is the way the Russian government had steadily placed more obstacles in the way of such memory work.¹⁸

As we have cast our glances across Eurasian and Eastern European evangelical activities, we have noted the ways in which even the internationally committed evangelical traditions have been sorely tempted by the god of nationhood, of wanting to belong, of ending the two centuries of marginalization. Evangelicals and oppression have been intertwined because everywhere it was a marginal movement of renewal and reformation, and now in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, state-sponsored majoritarianism appears to be winning. But those marginal evangelicals did not disappear, indeed, they now constitute almost the second largest block of Christianity globally, next to Roman Catholics. Wherever such evangelicals have sought to dominate, or even to ride on the coattails of socially dominant movements, they have lost moral stature. How to stand in solidarity with other free churches, how to help them recover their faithfulness, how we ourselves might recover the moral energy of compassion for the needy among us? Those are the challenges.

None of the split-away evangelical unions in the former Soviet Union regions have so far found the way to reconciliation, though thankfully there have been many serious attempts. Now one scarcely knows how to report the gap between Ukrainian and Russian Baptists, to say nothing of the way Georgian Baptists, attempting to be as contextually adoptive of Georgian culture as current missiology theory calls us to risk, were invited to leave the Euro-Asian ECB Federation. How does one get to that breadth of divine mercy of John 3.16?

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a few quotations from Christian leaders who worked very closely together in Maidan for months during 2014. Mikhaïlo Dymid, professor for theology and ecclesiology at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, tried to describe a responsible public theology, that he called the theology of Maidan.¹⁹ It was an emerging theology across the confessional boundaries, especially through frequent personal encounters, seeking to “grasp the theological meaning for social transformation” in their case to overcome the

¹⁸ Masha Geeson and Misha Friedman, *Never Remember. Searching for Stalin's Gulags in Putin's Russia* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2018).

¹⁹ Mykhailo Dymyd, “Die Theologie des Majdan,” *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Nr. 3, 2018, 14-16. Dymid, theology professor at Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv), presented an integration of public theology statement by Baptist theologian Mykhailo Cherenko, Greek Catholic Bishop Boris Gudziak, sociologist Ljudmila Fylypovytsh [all spelling from German spellings of Ukrainian. Author's trans. from German].

culture of corruption. It became a theology against the status quo, that is, each confessional representative's status quo. It was about finding "a Christian way to address social settings of need." One priest spoke of a new ecclesial consciousness, a unity around the Eucharist, where "there were no Greek-Catholics, Roman Catholics, or Orthodox... just Christians. That was completely open and public, that is what we must understand."²⁰

Above all, at least to my astonishment, they reached a political theology through prayer: "It is in prayer that the demonstrators themselves develop a political theology, in the way they formulate the ideals and contours of the civil society they desire." Archbishop Schevtschuk (Uniate) declared, "we are convinced that to pray for peace together with those, who in a peaceful way express their desire to live in a *Rechtstaat*, is an appropriate prayer request."²¹ And Ludmila Filipovich observed that Maidan

taught the people to listen to themselves and to others...to learn things they had never done before--it taught us to pray personally and collectively. Prayers changed their behavior, it conveyed to them ideas about reconciliation, and love, and respect. [Prayers] gave them hope, they united people.²²

Postscript

The historically savvy reporter on the Velvet Revolution, Timothy Garton Ash, described the aftermath when the dissidents had assumed power by a phrase recalling the years after the 1789 French revolution: *Après le déluge – nous*. It had become common in Slavic languages during 1989 to speak of 'them' (oni) as the distant other, those in power who should be blamed; versus 'us' (myi)—the people. A German slogan had been "wir sind das Volk" (we are the people)—a new identity discovery declaring responsibility for the *civitas*. As in post-revolutionary France, responsible peoplehood turned out to be fleeting.

Without minimizing the public theology and theology of collective prayers quoted above, it is prudent to cite a book review entitled *The Revolution that Wasn't*²² which this writer noticed upon returning from the conference in Amsterdam. Paul Quinn-Judge, a reporter on Russia since 1986, used two new books whose authors interviewed many participants in the Maidan "revolution," as well as leading persons in the so-called Donetsk Peoples' Republic. The result was sobering: leaders of those Russia supported "republics"

²⁰ Ibid., p. 15, Orthodox Father Rudeyko.

²¹ Ibid., Archbishop Syjatoslav Schevtschuk, head of the Greek Catholic Church. ²² Ibid.

²² Paul Quinn-Judge, "The Revolution that Wasn't," *New York Review of Books*, (19 April 2018), pp. 3638. The books were Marci Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2018); and Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2018.)

had “zero administrative experience and barely knew one another;” “Right-Sector” supporters did not support that group’s ideology but saw them as “the only structure that has not sold out and will not sell out.”

At the same time, many Ukrainians were frustrated by President Poroshenko’s “failure to address the systemic corruption that permeates all aspects of life.” The people had too easily trusted a small group of Maidan negotiators, who had “quickly moved into power after Maidan,” the demonstrators were marginalized, with “no regime change.”²³

That does not look promising for evangelicals in either Russia or Ukraine. The temptation to nationalism has not left them unaffected, but to negotiate a way of integrity within the corruption that “permeates all aspects” seems more personal and more daunting. It may help to recall how much corruption was the Soviet Union’s undoing, and how often people seeking out the evangelicals for their secret to honorable living, had noticed their costly discipleship.

²³ Ibid.