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# CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT AND A RUSSIAN CASE STUDY

By Mark R. Elliott

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In 1995 I taught a non-credit, night course in Russian church history in Moscow for what would become the Russian-American Christian University (RACU). It was memorable on many counts. The class was held in rented space on the old campus of the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University with, in the lobby, a larger-than-life sculpted bust of the school's namesake Congolese post-colonial leader. For decades this university had been the Kremlin's flagship institution for students from abroad dedicated to their indoctrination in a Marxist worldview. But by 1995 People's Friendship University was scrambling to survive in a market-driven, post-Communist economy, hence its rental of classrooms to even an evangelical startup university.

Making the location especially poignant for a course in Russian church history was the fact that in plain view, out our classroom windows, were the walls of the Donskoi Monastery where Bolsheviks had imprisoned Patriarch Tikhon until his death in 1925. Memorable as well was the chance to team-teach in dialogue with a friend, journalist and future Orthodox priest Yakov Krotov. Finally, I was teaching unusually attentive students as eager to learn as any I have ever taught.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The opening two paragraphs are excerpted from Mark R. Elliott, "Lessons from the Longshot Bid to Bring Christian Liberal Arts Education to Russia," *Christianity Today Online*, 17 February 2020.

RACU tracked with four of seven common characteristics of global Christian higher education, but not with three others.<sup>2</sup> Four global parallels to RACU's experience are the Western Christian impetus behind the founding of global Christian universities, the striking current growth of global Christian higher education, these institutions' curricular emphases upon computer and English competency, and the detrimental effects they suffer from state intrusion. Conversely, three common features of Christian higher education that had minimal or no impact upon RACU are online instruction, commercialization, and secularization.

As to the contrasts, RACU was too short-lived to be a party to the explosion of online delivery of instruction. On the other hand, Russian seminary sister institutions are moving rapidly into non-traditional, online education, with a major acceleration now underway in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor did RACU figure in the trend of commercialization in global higher education. To the contrary, it competed with, and stood in marked contrast to, the for-profit schools that proliferated in the cut-throat educational marketplace of post-Communist Moscow.

Finally, the threat posed to global Christian higher education by secularization had minimal impact upon RACU. For decades the academic consensus was that an abandonment of faith was an inevitable corollary to modernization. This process was seen to be most in evidence in two locales: 1) in the heavily industrialized and urbanized West, that is, in Europe, Canada, and, in a time lag, in the United States, and 2) in Communist states hostile to religion (the U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe, China, Southeast Asia, and Cuba). In due course secularization was expected to encompass the non-Communist global South and East as well.

However, countervailing pockets of reinvigorated Christian orthodoxy and burgeoning religious fundamentalism (Muslim, Hindu, and Christian) have called into question the inevitability of secularization. Still, in one arena, in higher education, the decline of a faith commitment has been an undeniable pattern in Europe, North America, and in some instances in

<sup>2</sup> This paper follows the definition for Christian universities used by Perry Glanzer of Baylor University: those institutions "that give a central, privileged place to Christian beliefs and practices in their mission statements, governance, curriculum, staffing, student body, and campus life." Perry L. Glanzer, "Privatizing God: Faith-Based Higher Education in Europe, the US, Canada and Latin America, 1950-2010," paper given at a conference, "Universities, Christian Identity and Political Power in World History since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century," University of the Andes, Santiago, Chile, 15 January 2020, p. 2.

other parts of the globe.<sup>3</sup> Libraries are awash with studies treating this banishment of Christianity from much of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, secularization gained no substantive foothold in RACU. Far from it: its mission statement, board, administration, faculty, and student body championed and exhibited a Christian faith commitment to the core and to the end. It is impossible to know for a fact, if RACU had survived, if it always would have been able to withstand secularizing pressures. What is beyond question is that, after a painfully short 18-year existence, but before any slow erosion of Christian identity and purpose could have transpired, state interference and restrictions proved fatal. Unfortunately, before its demise, one troubling illustration of state and societal pressure undermining resolve and threatening RACU's Christian ethos came in 2007 when the school's board chose to change its name from Russian-American Christian University to Russian-American Institute.<sup>5</sup>

As to phenomena of which RACU was a part, global Christian higher education owes much to Western missions. As Perry Glanzer (Baylor University) and Joel Carpenter (Calvin University) note, "While scholars often criticize the imperial nature of older Western mission work, it simply must be recognized that many of the earliest and most prestigious universities in countries around the world would not exist except for the creative energy and pioneering work of

<sup>3</sup> Joel Carpenter, "Introduction," and Perry L. Glanzer and Joel Carpenter, "Conclusion: Evaluating the Health of Christian Higher Education around the Globe" in *Christian Higher Education: A Global Reconnaissance*, ed. by Joel Carpenter, Perry L. Glanzer, and Nicholas S. Lantinga (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3 and 280; Glanzer, "Privatizing," 6, 10, 13.

<sup>4</sup> For two helpful historiographical discussions addressing this subject see Mark Noll, "The Future of the Religious College: Looking Ahead by Looking Back" in *The Future of Religious Colleges*, ed. by Paul J. Dovere (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 73-94; and Perry L. Glanzer and Joel Carpenter, "Nationalization and Secularization," a subsection of their "Conclusion: Evaluating the Health of Christian Higher Education around the Globe," 279-83. For the United States see George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and Samuel Schuman, *Seeing the Light: Religious Colleges in Twenty-First-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) to cite several of the more comprehensive works on secularization in the academy. For a sampling of studies focused on a particular confession or region of the world see William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education, A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robert Anderson, *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jessie Gregory Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges, 1850-1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); and Daniel C. Levy, *Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup>John A. Bernbaum, *Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia's First Christian Liberal Arts University* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 246.

Christian missionaries.” While too many mission educators conflated their evangelism and an uncalled-for promotion of Western culture, many others challenged colonial oppression of indigenous populations and championed universal human rights for women, ethnic minorities, and the poor.<sup>6</sup> RACU, likewise, came into existence as a result of a missionary impetus, although its founder, John Bernbaum, is a missionary-minded Christian educator rather than a missionary per se.

RACU also was a part of the groundswell of hundreds of new Christian universities that opened in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, confounding the secularization thesis that for so long prevailed among Western sociologists of religion. In Africa 73 of 86 Christian post-secondary institutions opened or gained university status between 1990 and 2010. In Latin America 120 of 139 Christian universities have emerged since 1950, and 32 of these since 1990. In India 31 Christian universities have been launched since 1980.<sup>7</sup> And 10 of the 11 Christian universities in Central and Eastern Europe opened their doors since 1990.<sup>8</sup>

### **Christian Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Confession</b>	<b>Founded</b>	<b>Students</b>
Hungary	Károli Gáspár University	Reformed	1993	5,000
Hungary	Pázmány Péter Catholic University	Catholic	1992	9,469
Lithuania	LCC International University	Christian (evangelical)	1991	650
Poland	The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin	Catholic	1918	19,000
Romania	Partium Christian University	Reformed	1998	1,350
Romania	Emanuel University	Baptist	1990	500
Russia	S. John University	Orthodox	1992	3,000

<sup>6</sup> Glanzer and Carpenter, “Conclusion,” 278.

<sup>7</sup> Carpenter, “Introduction,” 17 and 24.

<sup>8</sup> Glanzer, “Resurrecting Universities with Soul: Christian Higher Education in Post-Communist Europe” in *Christian Higher Education*, 170.

Russia	St. Tikhon University	Orthodox	2004	2,500
Russia	Azoksky Adventist University	Adventist	2004	400
Slovakia	The Catholic University of Rüzomberok	Catholic	2000	7,700
Ukraine	Ukrainian Catholic University	Catholic	1994	1,200

In sum, outside the U.S. and Canada 178 Christian universities came into existence since 1980, and the vast majority of these, 138, since 1990.<sup>9</sup>

In preparing its curriculum the Russian-American Christian University deferred to the urgings of Russian evangelical leaders. They requested programs in business and social work, disciplines not even present in Soviet higher education, but which Russian Evangelicals recognized as vital in the post-Communist era.<sup>10</sup> In this respect RACU mirrored offerings to be found in the majority of new Christian universities of the global South and East. Thirty-nine of 44 Christian universities founded in Africa between 1995 and 2010 offer majors in business, management, and commerce. For their part, many of the new Christian universities in Asia and Latin America offer programs in the helping professions, including social work.<sup>11</sup> RACU, like new Christian universities worldwide, also stressed the importance of computer competency and English for all its students regardless of major. More than half of new African Christian universities instruct students in information technology or computer science, while two-thirds of new Christian universities in Asia, Latin America, and Europe offer computer degrees.<sup>12</sup>

The stress upon mastering English is particularly pronounced. In the case of RACU, the high success its graduates have enjoyed in the job market is due in good measure to their computer literacy and English fluency.<sup>13</sup> Worldwide, new Christian universities offer not only English majors, but numerous courses taught in this international lingua franca. Instruction mainly or partly in English is the case in 83 percent of new Christian universities in Africa, 82 percent in Asia, and 100 percent in Oceania. Outside North America, 61 percent of instruction in

<sup>9</sup> Carpenter, "Introduction," 16.

<sup>10</sup> Bernbaum, *Opening the Red Door*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Carpenter, "Introduction," 22.

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, "Introduction," 22.

<sup>13</sup> Bernbaum, *Opening the Red Door*, 116.

new Christian universities is mainly or partly in English, whereas if the U.S. and Canada were included, the percentage would be even higher.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the theme of secularization attributable to government policy, state interference unquestionably exerts enormous force upon global Christian higher education, and in the end was the disability that forced the closure of RACU. Here again Perry Glanzer and Joel Carpenter underscore the point. Glanzer, writing in 2020, states:

The political threat can be fast or slow. In totalitarian countries, the destruction of Christian higher education is swift, as in revolutionary France or communist countries such as Russia or China. [Elsewhere] the threat...comes from government efforts to nationalize higher education. By nationalize, I refer to the effort to make the leadership, purposes, curriculum, and culture of a whole higher education system primarily serve the political ideology and interests of the state.<sup>15</sup>

Also writing in 2020, Carpenter puts it succinctly: “By and large, higher education has been seen as under state jurisdiction, existing for national aims and purposes. So...the long arm of the state is what matters for how one operates and what aims and purposes prevail.”<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, the nation-building exercise may not necessarily be consciously secularizing in intent; still, state requirements to conform governance, faculty, and curricula to the purpose of strengthening the nation typically have had the effect of homogenizing and marginalizing the Christian ethos out of faith-based colleges and universities.

And now for particulars of the Russian-American Christian University’s fateful confrontation with a hostile and unforgiving state.<sup>17</sup> For a few short years, less than two decades (1996-2011), an American-style Christian liberal arts university sought to sink roots in Moscow in what proved to be increasingly rocky and thorny soil. Explanations for RACU’s demise are easy to come by including an evangelical constituency limited in size and willingness to support it, economic instability (including the 1998-ruble crisis and the 2008-09 recession), a political order devolving from pseudo-democracy to authoritarianism, deteriorating Russian-American relations, growing xenophobic nationalism, and a declining pool of college-age youth. Above all, RACU could not overcome increasingly crippling state restrictions on private higher education

<sup>14</sup> However, only 32 percent of Christian universities in Latin America instruct mainly or partly in English because of the predominance of Spanish and Portuguese. Glanzer and Carpenter, “Conclusion,” 294. See also Philip G. Altbach, “The Imperial Tongue: English as the Dominating Academic Language,” Chapter 10 in *Global Perspectives on Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016): 140-45.

<sup>15</sup> Glanzer, “Privatizing,” 1.

<sup>16</sup> Carpenter to author, 28 September 2020. See also Glanzer and Carpenter, “Conclusion,” 279-83; 302.

<sup>17</sup> The remainder of this paper is excerpted and revised from Elliott, “Lessons from the Longshot Bid.”

and the lack of an established rule of law fueling and fueled by systemic and pervasive corruption. Though the school was predominantly evangelical, it made earnest efforts to develop positive relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, efforts that were successful with some hierarchs, but less so in the immediate neighborhood of its new building, barely opened before pressures on all sides forced its closure and sale.

Taking into account the overwhelming odds against RACU, two key questions come to mind: How did the school manage to survive as long as 18 years and produce ten graduating classes, and in the end, what difference did it make? RACU endured as long as it did owing to the enthusiastic support of elements of the U.S. Christian college network and very generous evangelical donors on and off its board. In addition, RACU held on as long as it did because of the competence and character of its founding president, John Bernbaum. His preparation for the post included a Ph.D. in European history, work in the State Department, decades of teaching and administrative experience with the Washington-based Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and a gift for networking and donor development. Just as critical to the enterprise were Bernbaum's abiding sense of God's leading and a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of energy, optimism, fortitude, and perseverance.

As noted, RACU was part of a rapid, multi-continent expansion of faith-based higher education over the past half-century. Compared to Asian and African newcomers RACU's imprint quantitatively was quite modest. With a student body always under 200, it was dwarfed, for example, by the 3,500 students of South Korea's Handong Global University, founded one year before RACU, or the 10,000 students of Nigeria's Bowen University, founded as recently as 2002.<sup>18</sup>

So then what justifies Bernbaum's *Opening the Red Door*, a book-length treatment of a Christian institution with such a limited lifespan and limited enrollment? For one, the saga of RACU's hard-fought, fleeting existence bears telling because it played out in Russia which, for good or ill, rightly commands the world's attention. In addition, RACU's promise and plight serves as a cautionary tale demonstrating the obstacles confronting any institution struggling to prevail in an environment of widespread corruption, economic uncertainty, and the arbitrary

<sup>18</sup> Carpenter, Glanzer, and Lantinga ably document the phenomenon in *Christian Higher Education*.



exercise of power. RACU battled constantly with corruption and bribery.<sup>19</sup> Refusing to grease palms meant protracted, energy-sapping delays in obtaining an educational license, accreditation, and construction permits, to mention just the most obvious hurdles in Moscow's bureaucratic morass. RACU gave witness to its ethical commitment through a persistent refusal to engage in bribery, which is nearly universal in Russian higher education: neither in admissions nor in the doctoring of test scores, final grades, or transcripts. Nor did RACU ever sell diplomas, although one enterprising fraudster did advertise a bogus RACU diploma for the equivalent of \$500.

RACU appears to have been one of only two Protestant higher education programs to have obtained Russian state accreditation (along with Zaokski Adventist University), a remarkable achievement given the partiality the state affords the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, in 2009 two developments rendered RACU helpless. First, the Ministry of Education abruptly changed a critical requirement for accreditation, rejecting the validity of U.S. earned doctorates in calculating the number of RACU faculty with higher degrees, making reaccreditation impossible. Second, the state revoked the non-profit status of all private universities, including RACU, making them liable for crippling taxes.<sup>20</sup>

Russian state infringements upon the free exercise of faith that led to RACU's closure in 2011 also jeopardize the country's Protestant seminaries. From the late 1980s to the turn of the century they enjoyed a dramatic resurgence, which must make the current, intensified government assault all the more traumatic for those in its cross hairs. From not a single Protestant seminary in 1985, by 1999 Russia was home to 71, and 137 for the entire former Soviet Union. In contrast, since the turn of the century many seminaries have been forced to close and many more are likely to close as schools face the revocation of educational licenses, forced suspension of admissions, and fictitious health, building, and safety code violations. "In sum, Russian Protestant seminaries are presently undergoing a trial by state inspection that threatens their very existence."<sup>21</sup>

Throughout its history Russia has exhibited a love-hate relationship with the West, repeatedly alternating between periods of slavish copying of western ways and indiscriminate

<sup>19</sup> For a global survey of challenges Christians face with bribery see Ronald L. Koteskey, *Missionaries and Bribery* (2012), which may be downloaded at no charge at [www.missionarycare.com](http://www.missionarycare.com).

<sup>20</sup> Bernbaum, *Opening the Red Door*, 199; Glanzer, "Resurrecting," 185.

<sup>21</sup> Mark R. Elliott, "Increasing State Restrictions on Russian Protestant Seminaries," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40 (No. 4, 2020), 3 and 28.

rejection of all things foreign. The clash of Westernizers and Slavophiles in the nineteenth century is but one of many examples of this phenomenon. Returning to the RACU ordeal, it was born during the fleeting ascendancy of pro-Western, reform-minded, Yeltsin-era higher education administrators who were then eclipsed by anti-Western officials unsympathetic to private institutions, Protestants, and liberal arts. As a result, the RACU educational model stressing faith-based character formation and the creative stimulus of the liberal arts has scant currency in Russia today. But that could well change in some less anti-Western, post-Putin era. In its short existence RACU's students came to appreciate the marketability of their new computer and English competencies, but also the school's spiritual stress upon lives lived with a servant's heart for others, personal integrity, and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Finally, RACU's unsuccessful fight for long-term survival also serves as a case study for any institution intent on pursuing a Christian mission in an unpredictable environment. To what extent should risk management inform decision making? Was it prudent to invest so much time, effort, and money in a Christian university planted where the rule of law is lacking? Was it hopelessly naïve on the part of John Bernbaum and his board and his donors to attempt such? Certainly in rational, human terms the odds against RACU were daunting. So to what extent are Christians to base their Kingdom work upon rational, human calculations?

For a decade plus I held a joint faculty-administrative appointment in a Christian college whose chief financial officer advised against support for RACU, even as other Christian colleges far less well-endowed did so. I was told that the idea of a Christian college in Russia was a poor risk with little prospect for success. The irony is that this same American college would never have come into existence had its founder exercised the same caution and risk assessment. To be sure, Christian giving of consequence requires employment of head as well as heart, as Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert argue eloquently in *When Helping Hurts*.<sup>22</sup> And it is not surprising that a financial officer would conclude that RACU was not a "safe bet." On the other hand, should RACU's stakeholders be faulted for attempting a Christian liberal arts university in such a strategic location? In God's economy the day may yet come when something like the Russian-

<sup>22</sup> *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor—and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009).

American Christian University, which in its brief life performed so credibly, will be recalled to life when forces of hope, liberty, and freedom of conscience regain ascendancy in Russia.