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REMEMBERING CANON MICHAEL BOURDEAUX, FOUNDER OF KESTON INSTITUTE

By Walter Sawatsky

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Through a regular email prayer letter from Mission Eurasia,¹ its Director Sergey Rakuba and his close colleague Dr. Michael Cherenkov, I learned of the death on March 29, 2021, of Michael Bourdeaux, and his funeral on April 12, 2021, in Oxford. Bourdeaux's persistence over many decades to make known the appeals for prayer, for assistance in making known the plight of prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union has continued, in spite of many changes and transformations over the decades. Even today the harassment of believers not conforming to Russia's current state-church close integration and its banning of the Jehovah's Witnesses denomination since 2017, and ongoing violations of religious rights in Central Asian states continues. In those earlier days of the 1970s major newspapers such as the *London Times* and *New York Times* gave front page coverage to news releases on human rights violations. Today that would be rare. Bourdeaux's memoir makes clear, as described in Mark Elliott's "Reminiscences on reading One Word of Truth..." [also published in this issue of OPREE] that Bourdeaux never forgot a calling to "be their voice." There are many new scholars addressing the topic, but the decline of newspapers, of denominational publications and their reduced staff due to economies, has those voices less easily noticed. Nevertheless, a sense of calling and capacity for persistence remains a hope.

I was nearing the writing of a doctoral dissertation in the spring of 1973 on a remarkable bridging of East and West during the reign of Tsar Alexander I (1801-1825), by means of a multi-striped Pietist movement, the European Director of the North American Mennonite relief and service agency called Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) visited us in Minneapolis, MN, with a calling. Peter Dyck was very familiar with mission societies appealing for money to help suffering Christians in the USSR and East European socialist republics, including the smuggling

¹ Mission Eurasia is now a largely indigenous ministry, fostering a variety of ministries through funding, training seminars, supporting local social service initiatives. It developed from Deyneka Ministries, formed by Peter & Anita Deyneka as background support for post-communist local ventures to start new churches. Much earlier it had been the Slavic Gospel Association, founded by Peter Deyneka senior, one of a few missions described in my chapter on the long term respected missions.

of Bibles. Dyck and his organization cared in particular because at least 100,000 Mennonites were still in the USSR, widely scattered across Siberia and Central Asia. Many Mennonite immigrants from the USSR, like Dyck, were deeply troubled about their relatives and fellow believers. Dyck met with Bourdeaux to find out what the newly established Centre for the Study of Religion under Communism (CSRC) was really about. Bourdeaux painted an attractive picture of that organization's commitment to do accurate fact finding, double and triple checking reports they were collecting to be as accurate as possible, given the closed nature of Soviet society. So, Dyck was asking my wife and me, to serve as volunteers with Bourdeaux's centre. We were to start in September 1973. Before that I went to the USSR for the first time, since I had received a doctoral fellowship from the Canadian Government that included participation in the newly established Canada-USSR Exchange Program, similar to the American exchange program. So, I managed to arrange for a 2 month stay in Leningrad, with access to archival files, while also improving my Russian to basic fluency.

We arrived in London, with Canadian passports, but having to surrender our American green cards, because I had been a student in the USSR--an initial reminder of how more intense the cold war relationship was between USA and USSR, than was true for Canada, caught between those two neighboring countries. Michael and Gillian Bourdeaux welcomed us warmly, Gillian in particular helping Margaret with our new baby daughter find medical connections, etc. I went daily to the upper floor of the Bourdeaux house in southeast London (Chislehurst) where there were offices for Michael, and several other researchers. Our days started with each one reading through a half dozen Soviet newspapers, clipping and filing any articles related to religion and/or atheism. Then followed reading through the various underground news, called *Samizdat* (meaning self-published), covering as many of the religious confessions still present within the USSR, as well as other journals/books dealing with the entire East Bloc. A sudden major crisis for the Bourdeaux's and their two children came when Gillian was diagnosed with cancer. Gillian and the family valiantly fought a losing battle. Michael persisted with the Centre, relying on childcare assistance. Then he met Lorna, they fell in love, and Lorna came to be a partner in much of the work, and she survives him. At the time of the Great Transformation in 1990, they moved the center and their residence to Oxford.² Many of those researchers over the

² For a relatively recent update on Keston UK publications, and relationship to the archive now at Baylor University,

years also focused on specific topics, writing articles and books. I soon focused on what came to be called the Soviet Evangelicals.

The background to the “Detente” between east and west in the 1970s, is worth a few sentences. Britain, France, USA, and the USSR were allies during World War II, united in defeating the Nazi threat. The British embassy in Kuibyshev around 1942 had a handful of staff, the youngest of whom was Sir John Lawrence, who had learned Russian. One day, as he remembered it, a Russian officer knocked on the door to say that someone wished to talk to the British representative. Lawrence happened to be the only one available, who then received a gray bearded *muzhik* (peasant). When escorted into his office, this man declared he was Bishop Sergei, serving *pro temp* for the deceased Patriarch Tikhon, and he wished to send a message to the British Prime Minister. In so saying, Sergei transformed himself into priestly regalia and began his story and message. Stalin’s government, because of the fervent commitment of Russian peasant believers to fight for the Motherland, was going to open a few parishes to permit worship. The following year limited faith practice was also granted to the Evangelicals, provided they united into a single denomination called All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, and Pentecostals (AUCECB).

Post war John Lawrence began a career as journalist and scholar, fostering a British-Soviet friendship society, publishing a series of journals such as *Frontier* devoted to religious themes, especially Russian Orthodox materials. There were scholars in France, USA, and persons connected with the newly established World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 also attempting to gather information about religion in the USSR. As Mark Elliott notes in his *Reminiscences*, this included a long respected and well-informed church man, Paul Anderson, working with the YMCA during WWI, later with the National Council of Churches in America and the WCC. By the late 1960s, a Kansas historian, William Fletcher, had started a news service from Geneva, funding coming from member churches. That service lasted only a few years, Fletcher returned to teach in American universities, and published a very informative biography of the life of Patriarch Sergei, the one who had agreed to declare full loyalty of Russian Orthodoxy in 1926, but unable to really function, till 1943.³

Michael Bourdeaux, born in Wales, had studied in Oxford, reading theology. What made

Texas, see the website: <https://www.keston.org.uk/chairman>.

³ William C. Fletcher, W. C. *A Study in Survival*. (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

him distinct was the fact that he had done his military service by studying Russian. In the mid-sixties he had spent some months in the USSR, met with the monks and nuns (a very small number) at the ancient Pochaev Monastery in Kiev, who asked him to be their voice. Similarly, he had stumbled on persons in Leningrad at a Baptist church on the edge of the city, where some of the zealous youth handing out Gospel tracts on the streets had been arrested. One of them was a young woman named Aida. So, Bourdeaux, his friends John Lawrence, and Leonard Schapiro (history professor at London School of Economics) were getting early *Samizdat* materials during the Khrushchev campaign against religion, which spurred on Bourdeaux to establish the research Center for the Study of Religion under Communism (CSRC), with funding from British churches (who knew him as Curate).⁴ Lawrence, Schapiro, and Professor Peter Reddaway, all served on the CSRC council for many years. Already in 1974, the workload had expanded, so they bought a former school-house of the Church of England, southeast of London in the village of Keston. Thereafter the center was named Keston College. While I was still on secondment to Bourdeaux (1973-76) we had started *Keston News Service*, and a journal *Religion in Communist Lands*, with Bourdeaux and other staff, plus some scholars on short term research stints who then published their books.

My own linkage with Keston College and Bourdeaux changed in early 1977 when the Mennonite Central Committee sent us to an assignment in Germany as Research Scholar, where over the next nine years I attempted systematic interviews of recent immigrants from the USSR to Germany, learning a great deal about church life through the Soviet years as well as contemporary developments. I was fortunate to have taken a second two-month cultural exchange grant in 1974 based in Moscow. Already on the first round in 1973, and again in 1974 I visited the Baptist church in Leningrad, and also the central Baptist church in Moscow. My name was already known to the leaders in Moscow, who were initially very suspicious of my assignment in London with Bourdeaux, whose books on the Reform Baptist dissidents took their side, rather than the registered union.⁵ On both visits I and other Mennonites passing through

⁴ Bourdeaux also published a paperback on *Aida of Leningrad*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton), with long verbatim quotes from the court trial of Aida, where a friend had taken detailed notes on a white sheet hidden under the witnesses' clothes. That cloth document was preserved in the Keston archive, is presumably now at the archive at Baylor.

⁵ Michael A. Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*. (London: Macmillan, 1968), detailed treatment of the Reform Baptist resistance to Soviet religious restrictions.

reassured them that our intent was to get the facts straight, that we were non-partisan, except that we hoped to be helpful to all believers in the USSR, by drawing attention to their situation.

While based in Germany I began quarterly visits to Keston College to compare my interview findings with Keston's growing archive of documents, plus semi-annual visits to the USSR, using the Intourist route. So, the book project on the *Soviet Evangelicals*, started in Keston, was finally finished in 1980 and published.⁶ That ended my travels to the USSR, being treated as *persona non grata* from 1981 to 1988. My chapter on international relationships had described the role of the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs, and the staff member in the Baptist Union office heading its international office, who was distrusted, so their displeasure meant my not getting an entry visa. Baptist leaders who I met abroad during those seven years would apologize that they were still unable to secure me a visitor's visa. Fortunately starting in 1988 when celebrating the importation of the Barclay commentary in Russian translation series, I was part of a four person Mennonite delegation traveling to recently opened locations, and in Moscow, with a United Bible Societies delegation importing 100,000 Russian Bibles. We met with younger Baptist leaders for a Bible seminar, using the commentaries.⁷ From 1988 to 2012 I usually traveled twice annually to the USSR or its successor states, teaching intensive history courses in the many new seminaries and colleges, and following religious developments broadly, also with Orthodox scholars.

The Changing Situation

The reason for this personal story is to draw attention to several developments. Above all, both Bourdeaux and I as specialists on religion in the USSR and Eastern Europe, were learning a great deal, and so changed our thinking in various ways. Between 1977 and 1993, together with the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and MCC we worked closely with the leaders of the Registered AUCECB union, translating the William Barclay Commentary for lay preachers into Russian, passing the manuscripts back and forth, my role being to negotiate with the leaders the

⁶ Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals since World War II*, (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1981), now available from Wipf & Stock. A Russian translation in 1996, is part of a four-part CD series, by Euro-Asian Accrediting Association, Odessa, Ukraine.

⁷ This was a response to the Bible study with Baptist leaders while at a European Baptist Conference in Brighton, England, in which four sample translations were discussed, with the AUCECB leaders deciding which translation they preferred.

editing problems that arose. So, I came to know those Russian leaders as deeply pastoral in their concerns, and carefully walking a line with the officials from the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs, fostering a steadily improving quality in their correspondence course for preachers. After 1961 they had also been attending WCC committee meetings and Baptist World Alliance or European Baptist Federation meetings, and also learning much about church life in the West. Starting in 1956, official church delegations like the Orthodox and Evangelical leaders, were permitted to go through passport control via the diplomatic channel, so their luggage was less thoroughly checked for literature that was given them to take home. This may seem a minor advantage in terms of volume of literature, but it was through such travel that the manuscripts by Father Alexander Men reached a Uniate monastic and printing plant in Brussels and the subsequent multiple book copies in Russian helped shape the growing interest in Christianity among the Soviet intellectuals. While manning a book booth at an international book fair in Moscow in 1980, a relatively young priest (dressed in civilian clothes) showed great interest in Hans Kueng's major book on Atheism (English translation), so we arranged that I would meet him in the park nearby during my lunchbreak and give him the book. Not long after that book, translated into Russian, was circulating in Russian religious and intellectual circles.

The dissident Evangelical union of Evangelical Christian Baptists lacked such perks but had a vast corps of volunteers helping their projects. That included a secret printing press, (discovered three times, but always resumed work) with the printers constantly moving about. Believers from the Reformed Baptists, later also the independent ECB group of churches, and many from the Registered AUCECB helping buy and pass on through channels paper, ink, and also helping distribute the regular illegal journal of the Council of Prisoners Relatives. It was my good fortune at a series of meetings (2007-2010) held at the now destroyed (due to the war) Donetsk Christian University, that sought to foster reconciliation between the three divided Evangelical unions, to hear leaders acknowledge, at first in private among a handful of scholars, then publicly declaring their thanks for the assistance from the other unions. The disagreements over the proper approach to Soviet authorities remained, but a sense of the authenticity of other unions' pastors or active laity in their faith witness had increased. Since similar denominations in North America have generated even more church divisions than believers in post-communism now live with, I at least have learned to withhold judgment, but seek to understand and to

encourage in a hopeful direction.

The *Discretion and Valour* Book Project

Since Mark Elliott has presented extensive detail on Michael Bourdeaux and his team's achievements, I will highlight a few areas not yet spoken to.

While in London with Bourdeaux, almost immediately he took me along to the regular meetings of the British Council of Churches, who had started a project to produce a book on the state of Christianity in the USSR and other Eastern European countries. The most obvious learning for me was to become acquainted with more than a dozen representatives of varied denominations, and their channels of information. That included discovering the variety of ways that denominations kept in touch with their fellow believers in the USSR or Eastern Europe, and how their approaches varied. In the end British Church of England clergyman and gifted writer, later Canon Trevor Beeson was commissioned to work through the massive stack of background briefs, reports, key articles to produce *Discretion and Valour*.⁸ It sold well, including in America. For a second edition in 1982, Beeson contacted many of us to up-date data for recent years. The way of discretion and valor, so often treated as polarities, gradually through the many story lines, came to be understood as a necessary spectrum of options, where circumstances and opportunities helped determine approaches. At a conference in Moscow in 2011, to which the Baptists had invited scholars, including former atheist scholars, I met persons whose hostile treatment of believers I still recalled, who now went out of their way to say to the audience of 50 or so, that even though they had written falsely, given their assignments, they had always had a deep respect for authentic believers. Further, I watched old church leaders who had gone through considerable suffering for their faith, sit down over coffee or dinner with scholars still not believers, but telling each other stories, maintaining courtesies.

I started to imagine some of the conversations, that my interviewees had told me about, how they were called in for interrogation, chewed out for letting their youth groups be too active, and how they had answered that if you truly believe, you need to share your faith, but not speaking in anger.

When I started teaching church history at a Mennonite Seminary in USA in 1990, with

⁸ Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valor. Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press., 1982).

MCC still claiming one fourth of my time for relationships and completing projects related to the former USSR and eastern Europe, I was also invited to contribute articles to a journal, *Religion in Eastern Europe*, founded by Paul Mojzes, a Methodist from Yugoslavia teaching in Philadelphia. I came to know more closely the CAREE organization (Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe), having already attended a conference of the Christian Peace Conference in Prague, other Mennonites having participated since its beginnings in 1968 in Prague, with Paul Peachey active in many dialogue events. Its roots lay in the founding meeting of the WCC in 1948, where John Foster Dulles, then the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterians, soon after American Secretary of State fostering brinkmanship, had urged that the WCC fight communism ideologically, while Church of the Czech Brethren (of Hussite origin) theologian Josef Hromádka had called for Christians to seek dialogue between East & West. Hromádka was founder and leader of the Christian Peace Conference (CPC); theologians and church activists from the West and the Third World joined the CPC, also starting national committees. Once the Soviets invaded Prague in 1968, stopping the Christian-Marxist dialogues that were attracting considerable attention, its director Dr. Ondra was forced out. Hromadka died soon after, and with a re-constituted CPC, now led by Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Nikodim (and later Dr. Karoly Toth, Bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church) the tone changed. Many western participants withdrew, since at conferences the official statements were what Soviet authorities allowed, rejecting western critiques. An American CPC tried to continue, but a larger group of American Christian activists for east-west peace-making, formed CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationship with Eastern Europe), no longer members of CPC but still seeking dialogue and cooperation.⁹

That may be a long diversion but serves as a quick way of noting the changes in the wind, given the rise of revisionist Marxism (“with a human face”), the shared anxiety about the dangerous nuclear weaponry threatening mutual destruction, that followers of Jesus Christ could not endorse theologically, even if many felt their national loyalties required it. Within both the WCC and the CPC, and the research agencies reporting on religious freedoms, change was happening.

⁹ For a recent history of CAREE, see Joseph Loya, “For, Not of, the CPC’: Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe (CAREE) as a Study of Soft Power Peace Advocacy,” in Paul Mojzes, ed. *North American Churches and the Cold War*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018), pp.492-507.

Inter-Church Trust Building and Public Pressure Mattered

When the WCC held its congress in Nairobi, Kenya in 1975, at its opening gathering of member delegates from around the world, there was a packet of research materials sitting on the desk of each delegate. At Keston College we had been very busy presenting an appeal in English translation from Father Gleb Yakunin, calling on the Russian Orthodox Church to assist believers having their parish churches closed, to speak for believers rather than pretend all was well, when speaking abroad. Indeed, the materials covered the variety of confessions across the USSR and Eastern Europe. The materials had also been prepared by the Rev. Eugen Voss and fellow researchers from *Glaube in der 2ten Welt* (Faith in the Second World) in Zurich, and by Dr. Hans Hebly's research center in Utrecht. Further, a long-time member of the WCC Executive Committee, the Rev. Dr. Albert von den Heuvel (Amsterdam) gave an opening speech in which he declared that too long have we as fellow church leaders from the west who care about our brother church leaders in the east been silent about violations of religious freedoms, in particular about the prisoners of conscience. In good conscience we can no longer observe a zone of silence, even as we are critics of Apartheid in South Africa. The Soviet church leaders at first had threatened to walk out, but that was no longer serious leverage for what could be talked about. In the end the WCC resolved to request annual reports from member churches on the status of religious rights in their country. The research agencies had helped provide authentic data and would continue to do so. At another global gathering, in this case of the First International Congress on World Evangelization (ICOWE), also sometimes called the Lausanne Congress or Lausanne 1974, specialists like Bourdeaux and Voss spoke in workshops, getting the world Evangelicals to commit to both evangelism and social action.

Perestroika Eventually Included Religion

These were moments, but steadily things were changing. In the case of the Soviet Union, gradually the number of prisoners of conscience declined during Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. Then the celebration in 1988 of the millennium of Christianity in Rus (988) was allowed public events, that spread everywhere, with the official for the Council of Religious Affairs signaling what is not forbidden explicitly in law, can be allowed. By 1990 the Soviet *Duma* approved a Law on

Religion that provided for virtually full freedom of religious practice.

Some thought this was the end of the story. There was a seven year phase of what I have called “frenetic evangelism,” priests elected to the Duma, the flourishing of new schools for training clergy, the legalization finally of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, to mention a few. There was also an invasion of Christian missionaries from the west, too many of them ill-informed about the realities of Christian faith in eastern Europe, and lacking the cultural sensitivity and humility that is expected of a good missionary. There was a new round of dialogue on proselytism, but by 1997 in the Russian Federation, a new law on religion appeared, limiting foreign activism, public missionizing, and by 2017 the quite rare banning of the Jehovah’s Witness denomination as a whole, followed by imprisonment of preachers or young men conscientiously objecting to military service, including even torture, across the central Asian states and Russia. The steady tracking of such cases appears weekly in *Forum 18*, from Oslo, the name for what was once Keston News Service.

The passing of Michael Bourdeaux in these renewed anti-religious manifestations in the former Soviet Union regions, does make it obvious, that Bourdeaux’s persistence, even the “relentless persistence” that another scholar applied to the advocates of liberation theology in central and south America, or also how Apartheid ended in south Africa, is still demanded of people of conscience.

In publications such as *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (OPREE) online, for over 40 years, there have been many voices by careful scholars from within eastern Europe and Eurasia, but also from the West, from a broad spectrum of confessions, keeping us informed, keeping us caring for fellow believers seeking a variety of ways forward along that spectrum of discretion and valor.