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THE CHANGING FACE OF CHURCH AND MISSION IN EURASIA¹

By Mykhailo Cherenkov

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Up until now, post-Soviet space has been a blank spot from the perspective of the universal Church. Everyone knows about Mr. Putin. Some know about his friend, Patriarch Kirill. But no one sees beyond these political symphonies of Christianity, much like those who cannot see the forest for the trees. When the talk is about Christianity, then the focus is on the gilded domes, photos of well-fed priests, recollections of defending traditional values, as well as vague notions of Russian spirituality. Rarely are concerns raised about Christian mission, and this despite the fact that, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., this territory was seen as the most promising in terms of missionary activity.

I do not think that today easy answers exist for such questions as: What is the basis of the strategic significance of this region for the history of global Christianity? Why is this region worthy of our interest? What are the reasons for investing in the development of its local churches and ministries? Most of the answers to these questions lead us back to the memorable date of the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., when the “Evil Empire” collapsed and the Iron Curtain fell, when vast expanses of Eurasia welcomed those who sought to spread the Word of God. A quarter century has passed since then, and the memory of those times is fading. Indeed, not a single memory will remain of those times.

¹ The above article by Mykhailo Cherenkov and William Yoder’s my response appeared in *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, Vol. 24, No. 2 edited by Prof. Mark Elliott in Kentucky. William Yoder changed a big and small mistake in my response as originally published. These two corrections are in bold. Published in OPREE with permission of Mark by Elliott, editor.

The situation in the former Soviet Union has changed considerably. In lieu of aggressive atheism, what now prevails are no less aggressive manifestations of the traditional titular religions: Orthodox Christianity and Islam. In place of *perestroika* (restructuring or reformation), we are now witnessing the return of the KGB (rechristened FSB), that does not seek to reform, but rather to reconstruct the Soviet empire.

In the Wake of Ukraine's Maidan Revolution

Another significant event in the region has recently rocked the whole world: Ukraine's rejection of Russian tutelage in its Maidan Revolution of 2014 and the subsequent war waged by Russia against Ukraine. As much as Russia would like to transform post-Soviet space into Soviet territory, forces are at work trending against a revived Soviet Union.

With Ukraine, Europe might once again become Christian. With Europe, Ukraine might once again become European. Ukraine without Russia might finally become Ukrainian. Russia without Ukraine risks entering into barbarism, going dark, losing face, and embracing brutality. Without Russian Orthodoxy, the Ukrainian religious map will be different. Russia without Ukrainian Orthodoxy loses its special status.

Mission Misques

As it turned out, the main efforts of missions went to the maintenance of the spiritual communities that were inherited from the Soviet Union. For national elites of the former Soviet republics, such Christian ministries and churches were seen as residual forms of colonialism. Evangelism in the Russian language points directly to Moscow as a cultural and religious center,

even without consciousness of the political implications of witness exclusively in the Russian tongue.

Today, many have criticized Western missions for disseminating not so much the gospel as Western culture. But at the same time, the reverse is true: consciously or not, Western missions supported Soviet-era structures and communities which are bound by Soviet history and today's Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union. With the Maidan Revolution as a backdrop, the map of Eurasian Christianity reflects a variety of divisions. Russia aspires to preserve or recreate sway over Soviet successor republics that are nevertheless reluctant to take orders from Moscow. Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic states are oriented to the European Union. Georgia is fearful of Russia. Armenia is more fearful of Turkey. Central Asia is trying to manoeuvre between Soviet-era overlords and resurgent Islam. All these post-Soviet republics speak their own languages and revere traditions that they are retrieving from the pre-Soviet era.

It turns out that Christians who dreamed of the end of the Soviet Union and the advent of religious freedom, who persevered in the hope of a new life in a post-Soviet era, did not think through viable alternatives. They were products of Soviet enculturation more than they cared to admit. They did not have ideas of their own about how society could and should be changed, including through missionary efforts, Christian education, and social service.

Church Divisions

Today, churches have become hostages of disparate political regimes and are now seriously divided along several lines. Some prefer order, while others prefer freedom. As regards biblical projections of end times, some are pre-millennialists, while others are post-millennialists.

And some are wedded to existing church establishments, while others envision a new outworking of the Kingdom of God.

Events in Ukraine have intensified these divisions. The return of religion to the public space has not brought unity to the Russian Orthodox Church. Rather, as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, the Moscow Patriarchate fears loss of control of its numerous Ukrainian parishes and their income. The engagement of churches in social and political issues has led inevitably to the question: Which side is God on?

In almost every post-Soviet country, the church enjoys the highest trust of the population. No ruling power can resist taking advantage of this fact. On the one hand, Christian churches may now participate in the formation of a renewed vision of cultural and social life. On the other hand, the public and parishioners are increasingly disappointed with political Christianity. The highest confidence in the moral and spiritual authority of the church exists alongside distrust in its political positions. In search of spiritual support, people are drawn to the church, only to discover that it already has been politicized; it already has been bought and paid for.

New Versions of Orthodox and Evangelical Faith?

In Russia widespread nominal belief has become infected with an explosive mixture of nationalist-Orthodox-Stalinist beliefs. Believers who oppose this trend have been marginalized and either survive on the fringes of an unholy, new church-state amalgam, or cherish a simpler faith beyond church walls in what amounts to a spiritual internal exile.

In this regard, we can talk about post-Soviet post-Orthodoxy—the end of the Orthodox tradition. Atheism disrupted long-held spiritual tradition and compromised the institutional church. If Christianity does make a comeback, it will encompass a return to its pre-institutional

beginnings, and to the gospel in communion with other Christian traditions. This is so because Orthodoxy without catholicity is not imaginable, and without reformation, it is not feasible.

Stalinist Orthodoxy has exhausted itself. But in Russia, evangelical Christianity, as well, has failed to materialize. Evangelical Christianity, created in the image and likeness of Orthodox sectarianism, is condemned to follow after the Russian Orthodox Church on the same path with little influence. Alternatively, a new demand exists for new versions of Orthodoxy and Protestantism, which could help each other to revive authentic forms of Christianity in today's environment of almost total disillusionment with church institutions. Disappointment with the Russian Orthodox Church and with Russian Protestantism can give birth to a quest for authentic Christianity; the allure of power and spiritual triumphalism can give way to repentance and humility.

Russian Christianity is in a deep crisis and is not likely to be able to offer anything even to its own parishioners, much less to society at large. Furthermore, it has absolutely nothing to offer other Christian traditions or neighboring countries. There is no longer room for illusions about the mysterious Russian soul and the spiritual depth of its Orthodoxy. Those who foster naive ideas of the messianic role of Russia are cruelly deceived because Russia has not emerged as the source of spiritual awakening in Eurasia. It is only by shedding its imperial ambitions and false messianism that Christian Russia will succeed in undergoing its own renewal and serving its neighbors.

In terms of spiritual witness, what can be done for the diverse peoples of Eurasia? We can honor and respect their unique cultures and encourage creative, original approaches to Christian mission, and at the same time include them in enriching global communication. The

peoples and cultures of Eurasia should be part of a larger, global Christian community, overcoming Soviet-era isolationism in part by opening the door to completely new connections.

Eurasia is the unbreakable, indivisible unity of Europe and Asia. Its value is not in a separate, exclusive path, but in its points of East-West intersection. It is precisely these points of intersection that can give birth to the future of Christianity in the wake of the demise of the secular, Soviet experiment.

RESPONSE TO MYKHAILO CHERENKOV, “THE CHANGING FACE OF CHURCH AND MISSION IN EURASIA”

By William Yoder

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Outsized Generalizations

I am struck by the generalizations in Brother Mykhailo’s article. For example, in reference to the post-Soviet Union since 1991, he claims “not a single memory of those times will remain.” This assumes that the world’s historians will be struck with massive amnesia. Much is vague: How were Western missions in Russia “bound by Soviet history”? Do these missions behave differently in Ukraine? Russian parishioners are “increasingly disappointed with political Christianity.” But Ukrainian Protestants are also extremely political on Facebook.

Cherenkov is often hard to decipher. What is the new evangelical order coming into being in Ukraine? How is it different from North American evangelicalism? I think, for example, of the Charismatic movement’s “apostles” and “prophets” touring through Ukraine prophesying the demise of Russia. Cherenkov claims that “Eurasia is the unbreakable, indivisible unity of

Europe and Asia.” But Eurasianism is the ideology of Alexander Dugin and other Eastern-oriented, Russian nationalists.

Cherenkov writes: “Russian Christianity . . . has absolutely nothing to offer other Christian traditions or neighboring countries.” Is that not arrogant? Pope Francis met with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill in Havana on 12 February 2016. Apparently, the Vatican takes Russian Orthodoxy much more seriously than does Ukrainian Protestantism. Cherenkov expresses concern for inter-church relations, which is laudable. But he does not extend his support for cross-denominational efforts to Ukraine’s largest church body: the Ukrainian Orthodox ChurchMoscow Patriarchate. Precisely because this church is well-represented on both sides of the East Ukrainian divide, it is best-equipped to foster reconciliation within Ukraine.

A Civil War or a Proxy War?

For Russians, Cherenkov’s charge of “war raged by Russia against Ukraine” is pure propaganda. How can this not be a civil war? The territory of what we now call Ukraine has been divided roughly along the Dnieper River for over a millennium. Actually, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is both a civil war and a proxy war. It is true that the vast majority of those fighting on both sides are citizens of Ukraine. But it is also a proxy war because Russian citizens and a few others are fighting on the side of East Ukrainian separatists, while U.S. citizens, Canadians, Poles, and Balts are fighting on, or otherwise aiding, the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. Further complicating the issue, Russian citizens (Chechens) are fighting on both sides in the conflict.

Cherenkov writes, “In Russia, widespread nominal belief has become infected with an explosive mixture of nationalist-Orthodox-Stalinist beliefs.” True, such tendencies exist. One

propagator of such views is Moscow's Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, dismissed by Patriarch Kyrill in December 2015.

Support for War and Support for Peace

In Ukraine, Patriarch Filaret of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate has made inflammatory remarks regarding the people of Russia, calling for a holy war. Both his church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church have officially gathered funds for the purchase of ammunition. The Greek Catholic faith, strongly repressed during the Communist era, survived through its exile existence, mostly in North America after 1945. That faith was compromised by its support for the Ukrainian fascist movement during World War II and its genocide against Poles. Greek Catholic priest Mykhailo Arsenych, for example, has made extremely fascist statements in recent years. Indeed, he belongs behind bars.

I think, as well, of U.S. Senator John McCain describing Russia in February 2016 as “the enemy.” By way of contrast, just after his visit in Cuba, Russian Patriarch Kyrill pleaded for reconciliation between his country and the United States. Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists, as well, are making moderate and conciliatory statements, for example, those made by the denomination's President Alexey Smirnov in an interview published in Moscow's *Protestant* on 17 March 2015. Russians regard the enmity against them as artificial, a creation of powerful circles in the West struggling for even greater economic and geo-strategic advantage. How prophetic it would be if, instead, evangelicals in Ukraine and Russia would raise their voices jointly in the name of reconciliation and peace.

Russia or NATO to Blame?

Cherenkov claims Russia is seeking a “reconstruction of the Soviet empire.” I see no indication of that in the Baltics or on the border with Poland. On 5 May 2005, Vladimir Putin reported on German television: “People in Russia say that those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart. And those who do regret its demise have no brain.” Someone struggling to resuscitate the Soviet Union would speak otherwise. NATO, on the other hand, broke its 1990 oral agreement in which it promised that it would move “not an inch” eastward from Germany. It is now poised in Varna, Estonia, less than 150 kilometers west of St. Petersburg. The Soviet Union gave up its East European sphere of influence, while the U.S. did not keep its part of the deal. Mikhail Gorbachev will resent until his dying day that breach of good faith. Russian behavior in Ukraine (2014) and Georgia (2008) needs to be understood in this context.

Cherenkov is wary of the idea of Russian messianic aspirations and warns that “Russia without Ukraine risks entering into barbarism.” However, it is very difficult for Russians to attribute a saving character to Ukrainian society. The Russian perspective is that the violent revolution on Maidan in February 2014 occurred less than ten months prior to elections that were scheduled for December and that were to include international monitors.

Fascist “Browns” and Communist “Reds”

Ukraine has millions of Western-style democrats, some of them evangelicals, but it also has a problem with its ultra-rightist “browns.” Before 1941, as well as after 1946, the West’s concrete actions lent credence to the slogan that “brown is better than red.” That position has enjoyed a mighty public revival in the Baltics and in Ukraine since 1990. Revisionism was

obvious on 7 January 2015 in Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk's strange comments on German TV: "Russian aggression in Ukraine is an attack on world order and order in Europe. All of us still clearly remember the Soviet invasion of Ukraine and Germany. That has to be avoided."

But not all fascism was Nazi: World War II also featured Italian, Croatian, Slovak, and Ukrainian fascists, among others. Russians correctly prefer "red is better than brown." The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was morally far superior to a victory of brown over red.

It would be good if Cherenkov could explain the role of Ukraine's Secretary of National Security Oleksandr Turchynov, who is a Baptist, among the semi-fascist Azov Battalion in the war-front city of Mariupol. (My period was changed to a question mark.) Reports claim he is a commander. In addition, Ukrainian Pentecostal pastors such as Gennady Mokhnenko clearly support the semi-fascist Right Sector.

In closing, it is hardly innovative to attempt to recreate American-style church conditions in Ukraine or elsewhere. It would be much more creative to give serious thought to ways evangelicals could thrive and grow in the less-than-ideal setting of Eurasia.

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