

Losing the Identity: On Pentecostal Theological Education in Russia

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The social change taking place within the Pentecostal churches of Russia reflects the crisis of contemporary society that is often considered to be a result of secularization. This change is particularly apparent within the Pentecostal educational institutions, their faculties and students, as well as the programs they offer. In this presentation, the author addresses her own concern that has grown with her years of lecturing and teaching at Pentecostal Theological Seminaries (Church of God - ETS-Moscow; Assemblies of God - Moscow Theological Institute) and at St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute (BTI), and her tutoring at the Open University of Israel (OUI).

With its recent changes of leadership the Russian Orthodox Church is turning anew to Biblical Studies¹. The main Russian Orthodox schools work on developing the liturgy and strengthening historical memory, with special attention to the last century. Worthy of particular note are their new educational and research programmes linked to the formation of new departments and new faculty bodies. This response of the Orthodox Church to the cultural changes of contemporary society, demonstrate its realization of the need for intellectual and spiritual awakening.

By contrast, Russian Pentecostalism is gradually losing its self-identity and its strength, which was mainly derived from the central role it gave to experiential theology. Here are some examples:

Why is it that the Pentecostal church leaders who are responsible for organizing formal Pentecostal education often prefer to turn to secular institutions for programmes in Philosophy and Religious Studies?

Recently (at the end on June 2010) the ETS-Moscow organized a special activity called "the organizational-activity game²", designed to involve Eastern European COG leaders in open discussion and interaction with the school's leadership and faculty on the urgent problems of Theological Education. Alexander Utyakov, the COG overseer of Siberia, for example, is just one of the leaders who recently got this new secular Christian education in Philosophy. Contrast this with Vladimir Kovinev, the COG overseer of the Eastern Ukraine, worked hard for his M.Th. and now the blessing of his formal theological education is obvious not just for him personally, and the resulting recognition of Pentecostal churches by the local authorities, but also for his ministry to the secular world. So will this new style of education be helpful for the Christian ministry of our time? It is well known that philosophy, the traditional dialogue partner with theology, has today been replaced by sociology. Orthopraxis replaces Orthodoxy³. One is led to ask why it is that church

¹ The author serves as a secretary of the Russian board of the IBT (Institute for the Bible Translation - www.ibt.org.ru) and is aware of the recent developments in the sphere of Biblical Studies and Bible translation. See also Desnizky A. "New Hermeneutics" and the perspectives of the Orthodox Biblical Studies" at <http://bogoslav.ru>

² <http://www.fondgp.ru/gp/biblio/rus/50>

³ *Tipei J.* "Communicating the Gospel to Postmodernity: Practical Guidelines" // Postmodernity - Friend or Foe? Communicating the Gospel to Postmodern People: Theological and Practical Reflections from Central and Eastern

ministers no longer wish to study theology? Is this in some way a legacy from the prejudices of earlier times? During the time of persecution higher education in general was considered a sin by the underground Pentecostal Church. Or is it perhaps because there are no specialists of sufficient academic stature at the Pentecostal Schools themselves who can win their respect and appreciation?

Being a participant myself in the "organizational activity game" I was surprised to learn that the COG leaders are not interested in the growth of evangelism and missions among the faculty members and students in areas such as writing papers for publication in secular journals, presenting their work at conferences, involvement in scholarly theological discussions, etc. The faculty members of the ETS are never asked to write a report of their scholarly activities (monographs published, papers presented, prizes won, new courses developed, etc.). Contrast this with the BTI where such reports are requested from all faculty members, or with the Moscow State University, where this requirement extends to every doctoral student. This is a sign of academic excellence or at least a mark of progress in scholarly development.

Where then are the Pentecostal academics who are currently writing articles in the main areas of study (Biblical Studies, Theology, etc.) or who are working on books or who, at the very least study books in the areas so crucial for the development of the Pentecostal identity?

Instead of digging into our national history and its Christian heritage (including recent Pentecostal history) Theological Seminaries are choosing to follow a secular pattern of Psychology, Business/Leadership, and related disciplines. The "organizational-activity game" is merely a sad reflection of the shift that is going on in contemporary culture - from analysis to entertainment⁴.

For Russian Pentecostalism it is more than ever vital today to claim our roots in Patristic tradition, especially in the writings of Gregory the Theologian, Isaac of Nineveh and Simeon the New Theologian⁵. Eastern spirituality was always rooted in spiritual experience! There is also a desperate need for Pentecostals to re-evaluate the challenge of the Russian religious philosophy that enriched the contemporary western Christian thought (see J. Moltman, W. Kasper, J. Zizioulas et al.)⁶.

One of the great saints of the Russian church, Seraphim of Sarov (18th-19th centuries CE) considered prayer, fasting and works of mercy to be only the means, not the end of the Christian life, which he saw as *the acquisition of the Holy Spirit*⁷. Keith Warrington, writing about theological education in 2003, emphasized that pedagogy has more to do with learning, than it has with teaching⁸ - I believe there is no learning without teaching and we need to dedicate ourselves to life-long learning to excel as His true disciples in teaching ministry. Let me remind you of the achievements of the spiritual elite of Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple: the national tragedy which was at the center of the Jewish religious life. They were able to give to their nation new orientation points, by developing the new Hermeneutics, which in

Europe. Unrect (2009): 159-185.

⁴ To be creative such activity has to be well prepared in advance and takes a lot of time from those who are taking part in the process. See the reports of the nine study groups in the preparation for the Edinburgh 2010. *Edinburgh 2010. Vol. II. Witnessing to Christ Today* (Daryl Balia & Kirsteen Kim, eds.), Oxford, 2010.

⁵ Zaprometova O. "Experiencing the Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal reading of the Early Church Fathers: Part 1: Gregory the Theologian" // *JEPTA* 29.2 (2009): 4-13 and "Part 2: Isaac of Nineveh and Simeon the New Theologian" // *JEPTA* 30.1 (2010): 1-19.

⁶ Secular sociologists have noticed that in general Protestant movement is becoming more Russian, especially with the growing numbers of intellectuals who are becoming more actively involved in ministry. The authors are emphasising the role of St. Petersburg's communities in the contemporary movement for "Russian Protestantism". Струкова А., Филатов С. "От протестантизма в России к русскому протестантизму" // *Неприкосновенный запас*. (2003) 6/32. (in Russian). Strukova A., Filatov S. "From Protestantism in Russian to the Russian Protestantism" // *Reserved Funds*. (2003) 6/32.

⁷ Burgess S. *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1989). P.79-83.

⁸ Warrington K. "Would Jesus have sent his Disciples to Bible College?" // *JEPTA* XXIII (2003): 30-44.

turn led to the formation of the new Theology (Rabbinic Judaism). In their deconstructed world they were creative in placing the Torah in its true context as a cornerstone - the new religion started with Scriptural interpretation!

Recently I have been teaching Old Testament Theology in an ecumenical setting (one of the BTI's summer upgrading programs) - summing it all up with the Lord's Prayer and focusing on the central roles of experience and relationship! We must also turn again to the centre of the Christian life, namely the Eucharist, and to the relationship with the Trinity that should be reflected in the development of the Pentecostal liturgy - only then shall we richly experience the Mystery of God in His Holy Spirit. This is not just the Russian Orthodox tradition, even the Russian Baptists remind us that "one must not forget that knowing God is a process that transcends the framework of rationality" and that theological education (the knowledge of God) is also a mystical phenomenon⁹.

Many other questions also demand answers:

1. Why are there almost no students from Christian backgrounds at our schools?

Is it perhaps that there is no desire to evangelise? Or perhaps we do not see the need to be better prepared to address the challenges of the changing world cultural context¹⁰? Or is this just a general reflection of postmodernity with its secularism, pluralism, individualism and consumerism?

Some of my first year students (ETS) offered me their reasons: There is often, they said, no experience of conversion and no longing for the Truth in the second generation Pentecostals. Do we also see this as the problem?

May I quote the recent **Edinburgh 2010 - Common Call**: "... to witness to Christ today by sharing in God's mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit" - it is a renewed sense of urgency!

In 2003 Matthias Wenk wrote in JEPTA that although Pentecostals in central Europe tended to be anti-educational and anti-intellectual, a certain shift has been taking place¹¹. - Is this true? Is it widely accepted that we have to equip the new generation for ministry? It is clear that society is desperately searching for new orientations points, for new values - and this is surely not a phenomenon unique to Russia.

"We are called to authentic dialogue, respectful engagement and humble witness among people of other faiths - and no faith - to the uniqueness of Christ". The Theological Education World Study Report (2009) presented at Edinburgh 2010 highlights "a conviction which has been a key element in the understanding of ecumenical theological education ... that the theological education is the seedbed for the renewal of churches, their ministries and mission and their commitment to church unity in today's world"¹².

"We are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems and power, and to accountable use of power structures."

"We are called to work together in new forms of theological education ... to challenge each other to grow in faith and understanding..."

⁹ Vorozhtsov V. "Theological Education in Modern Society" // *Theological Reflections* 8 (2007): 181-200.

¹⁰ Just one of the examples of a recent serious scholarly work in Theology written by a young Hungarian Lutheran scholar brought up as a persecuted minority in Romania: *Nagy D. Migration and Theology. The Case of Chinese Christian Communities in Hungary and Romania in the Globalisation-Context.* Zoetermeer, 2009.

¹¹ Wenk, M. "Do we need a distinct European Pentecostal /Charismatic approach to theological education?" *JEPTA* XXIII (2003): 58-71.

¹² *Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in the 21st Century.* Pointers for a new international debate on Theological Education. Full version. 2009. P. 5.

Do we respond to this call? What are we doing to develop critical reflection skills in the future leadership? To give you an example: one of our graduates: Dima Nazarenko - the youngest overseer in the COG of the Eastern Ukraine - told me with a grateful heart: 'What you have taught us is to think (analyze, reflect)!' This is what we needed to learn and are still learning. Isn't it true for us all? It was certainly recognized in the document A Statement by Pentecostal Participants at the Edinburgh - 2010 which said that our challenge today is 'To build bridges, to reconcile the whole of God's creation in Christ and to do this across denominational and confessional lines. But how can we begin to do this without proper theological education?

At the end of July, I led a round-table discussion on the issue of Theological Education in an ecumenical setting (one of the programs of BTI¹³). This program is open to secular students as well and is building bridges between the Churches (Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Messianic Jews) and the secular world (sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, biologists, etc. attended). This year one young Muslim lady also joined our discussion. Of course there were many problems to share, and we did not underestimate them, but the answer was unanimous - We need Theological Education!

Regularly, as a part of the Comparative Religions course, I take my ETS-Moscow students to the Russian Orthodox Seminary and Academy in Sergiyev Posad, to one of the Moscow Synagogues and to a Mosque - to introduce them to other religious settings, and to help them to appreciate how well rooted they have to be in their own understanding of Scripture, Church History and Culture, and in Comparative Religions if they are to minister to this world with its urgent need for meaning.

Alexei Bodrov, BTI's rector, said that theological and religious education can and must play a defining role in fortifying the position of Christianity in contemporary society, by deepening awareness of our own tradition, and in developing dialogue with other religious traditions. Theology is born and developed in dialogue¹⁴. Here again we see the central need for building bridges! If we are to enter into any sort of dialogue with a secular society, and culture and with science, we have to be equipped! BTI is a theological school which offers new forms of theological education such as "Summer Theological Institutes" and "Theology and Science" to provide wider ecumenical experience as well.

2. Is this a problem of the church itself or is it a problem of the theological schools?

May I share with you the results of one research project of the EAAA (Euro-Asian Accrediting Association), the organization that regularly organizes conferences, meetings, programs and seminars for those involved in Theological Education in the former Soviet Union? Taras Dyatlik (M.Th. Leuven, Belgium), coordinator of the EAAA Research Center observed in his recent article that "... local churches and pastors have displayed **less and less interest in higher theological education**"¹⁵.

Pastors themselves frequently expressed concern that in theological institutions, God tends to be studied more as an object than as a Person, whereas it is being in relationship with Him that constitutes the very basis of spiritual life. (It is important to note that Eastern evangelicals are much more inclined than are Westerners towards mystical theology).

¹³ <http://www.standrews.ru>

¹⁴ Bodrov A. "Mission and Theological Education in Contemporary Russia" // *Postmodernity - Friend or Foe? Communicating the Gospel to Postmodern People: Theological and Practical Reflections from Central and Eastern Europe*. Unrect (2009): 217 - 230.

¹⁵ Dyatlyk T. "What Expectations Do Pastors and Local Churches in the former Soviet Union Have of Higher Theological Education at the Beginning of the 21st Century?" // *Theological Reflections* 10 (2009): 97-119.

A good number of pastors identify two specific subjects that they would like to see in the curriculum of higher theological institutions: Firstly, Spiritual gifts to help students better recognize their individual gifts for evangelism, social ministry, teaching, etc. and secondly: Worship. Musical and worship skills are greatly needed today by ministers everywhere. Many pastors expect therefore that students in seminaries will study Christian music and worship, along with its history, as required subjects in order they might be better prepared to serve as effective ministers.

The author concludes his report with the following commentary: "the growing tendency to focus increasingly on internal church ministries, rather on reaching out to non-Christians. ... [means that] **less and less consideration is giving to such ministries as evangelism and missionary work.**"

As we may see, greater freedom for the Gospel, so long awaited in Russia has not brought revival, it has instead brought new problems such as emigration, confusion, church splits, and false teachings. However, one may also identify positive signs: things such as the number of theological schools and meetings such as this one. Pentecostalism has its growth problems, not least the one we are dealing with - theological education!

3. Why are short term practical courses (on Marriage and Family or Counseling for instance) more attractive to the majority of church members than courses which would deepen and enrich their Christian faith?

I believe this is due to the losing of our Pentecostal identity as well. I was surprized to find that the problem of identity is discussed by the Metropolitan J. Zizioulas in one of his books, - a collection of articles on "Church and Eucahrist" - recently translated from Greek and published in Russia¹⁶. It is interesting to note that I wrote the proposal for this meeting before I even heard of this book. Metropolitan Zizioulas is concerned about the Orthodox identity crisis. The same is true for the Charismatic movement and its representatives, who are trying to analyze the Pentecostal, Charismatic and the Third Wave (or neo-Pentacostals) theology¹⁷.

It was Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, who mentioned at one of the EPTA conferences (at Iso-Kirja): that Pentecostals have paid little or no attention to the theological basis of their education!!!¹⁸ There is some difficulty in establishing Pentecostal identity! There is much to be learned from ecumenical encounters! Almost all academically trained faculty members in Pentecostal institutions are trained in non-Pentecostal settings and most of them (in Russia) are **without Christian roots**. They came to the Lord only in the 90-ies, started to work with American missionaries and were the first to be sent by them to study in the USA).

4. Why, when the majority of the applicants at the first interview express a desire to know the Bible better, are they not ready to read the Scripture properly, preferring to spend time with modern techno-gadgets such as mobile phones or the internet?

I addressed the question to my first year students and got their answer - they are quite sincere in defining the Bible as their priority, but they do not realize that its study is hard and challenging work. Compare this with the secular programs in the Biblical Studies at the OUI where I was a student and a tutor. To gain 6 credits of the BA course 'Introduction to Biblical Studies' a

¹⁶ *Митрополит Иоанн Зизиулас*. Церковь и Евхаристия. Сборник статей по православной экклесиологии. Богородице-Сергиева Пустынь, 2009. Metropolitan J. Zizioulas. The Church and the Eucharist. (in Russian).

¹⁷ *McAlpine R*. Post-Charismatic? David C. Cook. 2008. P. 19.

¹⁸ Kärkkäinen V.-M. "Pentecostal Theological Education in a Theological and Missiological Perspective" // JEPTA 30.1 (2010): 49-62.

student has to read 12 volumes of A4 format pages (ca. 2400 pages). It is incomparably with the Bologna's requirements for a BA degree or for American' M.Div./M.A. At Moscow State University, students studying introductory courses on Jewish or Ancient History have to learn how to write original papers from their first year of study.

The ETS students, especially those, who come directly from rehabilitation centers or practical ministerial experience, confess that it is hard for them to adjust to the requirements and they are willing to have some other parts of the courses (not Biblical) as electives to enable them to concentrate more on the Scripture. We introduce Study Skills and entertain students with "games", "encounters", Biblical Geographics, Counseling and Marriage, but they have no time for Bible reading!

In the 90ies before the Perestroika to be a minister meant spending years in prison or in Siberian camps. Now we need to reinterpret our faith for the next generation not just with words, curriculum or sermons, but rather with our own lives by our dedication (including everyday sacrifice) to His calling to theology and teaching, to the academic excellence of our schools and by going deeper into Pentecostal theology to find the place where true Christian spirituality is formed!

Thus, Reformation's "Sola scriptura" - is not for a contemporary Pentecostal, neither is Russian history and culture with its rich Christian traditions (I am speaking about the analysis - from the Church Fathers to the Russian religious philosophy). After 70 years of Marxist ideology and the years of perestroika with its freedom for everything (and all the -isms included in post-modernity) we realize that instead of growing in Spirit and Truth (John 4), the Pentecostals in Russia are losing self-identity¹⁹.

To be a prophetic voice to the world, to give new orientation marks to those who are lost we have to develop our Pentecostal Hermeneutics. Why not to learn from those who are older? Let me conclude with two quotes from Orthodox tradition: one from a contemporary British scholar and the other - a famous 19th century Russian missionary:

"For this reason the whole notion of hermeneutics as the "restoration of a lost meaning" sounds rather strange to Orthodox ears; for Orthodox scholars patristic exegesis cannot be just a premodern approach belonging to a different (and superseded) world, instead it is a living tradition with which subsequent interpreters stand in a relationship of direct continuity. Behind this methodological premise stands a fundamental theological presupposition about the activity of the divine Spirit, which in Orthodox thought is not limited to the original biblical authors but continues through the whole process of interpretation, understood thus as a synergistic or theandric [sic] process given shape by the Tradition of the Church".²⁰

Metropolitan Makarius calling Russian women to higher education to be missionaries in their contemporary society addressed to them in 1902 with the following words: "To be a missionary is a special calling, taking into consideration the variety of cultures and languages in our country, but the same mission is waiting for you in our own society. Some part, may be even the majority, of our contemporary educated society has stepped back from Christ in such a way that the time is coming to start a mission for bringing the Gospel of Christ into this

¹⁹ "We have to accept the fact that, as elsewhere in the world, many Russian Christians nowadays feel themselves 'homeless', moving from one church to another as religious institutions become marketing agencies and religious traditions become consumer commodities. Feeling and being 'at home' in this sense, is a gift and a call from God. We are immersed in a post-modern identity crisis". *Zaprometova O. Bitter and Sweet Tears: Exploring the Spirituality of the Eastern Church Fathers in the Light of Post-modern "enthusiastic Christianity" in Russia.* (in print).

²⁰ *Crisp S. "Orthodox Biblical Scholarship Between Patristics and Postmodernity: A View from the West", in Dunn, J. et al. (Eds.), Auslegung der Bible in Orthodoxer und westlicher Perspektive (Akten des west-östlichen Neutestamentler/innen-Symposium von Neamt vom 4-11 September 1998), Tübingen (WUNT 130). P. 129.*

society.”²¹

To equip the new generation of Pentecostal leaders through Theological Education, seeking and building His Kingdom, we have to renew and develop our value system (rooted in Scripture, founded on Pentecostal Hermeneutics and deepening through the Trinitarian experience). This will require self-assessment, primarily of the our own spiritual experience and of our dedication to His calling [*pathos*]. Then we must pursue the academic excellence that will include self-analysis and the analysis of our programs [*logos*]. And of no less importance is the scholarly community (am speaking about pentecostal scholars) - **we need mentors to help us to develop our theological skills** for we, in Russia, are young in Pentecostal theology (and theological education). Such mentoring could perhaps be via an on-line program given without charge if this would not be too much to ask [*ethos*].

So I would like to present the idea of such a joint project as a Trinitarian experience, in which *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* are interwoven in a *perichoretic* way²². Theological education could be reconized as a true mission of the Church!

²¹ Запрометова О. "Провозвестниц великое множество" // Роль христианки в современном обществе. Доклады участниц первой межденоминационной конференции. Москва, 6-7 июня 1997 г. (in Russian). Institute for East-West Christian Studies (1998): 9-11.

²² Запрометова О. "Духовный опыт / переживание как путь к всеединству. Вызов двадцатого века" // *Соловьёвские исследования*. 25/1 (2010): 104-111. (in Russian) Zaprometova O. Religious Experience as a Way to 'All-Unity': Challenges of the 20th Century; *Moltmann J. Sun of Righteousness, arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*. London. 2010. P. 152-169.