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Coming of Age: The Future of a Post-soviet Evangelical Theology

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Systematic Theology or Poetry?

'The problem is that our pastors write poetry, theirs write the systematic theologies.' We all laughed heartily and continued eating. I was sure that he was right. This must be the problem. After all, this observation disparagingly comparing current Russian/Ukrainian evangelicals with their western counterparts was made by a prominent Ukrainian Evangelical Christian leader and seminary president. Actually, it was simply a fleeting tongue-in-cheek comment, a mixture of humour and exasperation. For me however, it has become a small verbal icon illuminating the current condition of theology and theological education in post-Soviet evangelicalism.

Ukrainian/Russian Church leaders writing poetry rather than more discursive or specifically 'systematic' forms of theology—how sad, how shameful! But is it really? Is this really a problem for the post-Soviet evangelical church, for her theology, and for Christian living? Or, might this insight be the key for how to do Christian theology in a post-Soviet context? These questions are not easy to answer negatively or positively.

On the one hand, even a casual observer of post-Soviet evangelicalism will quickly discover that this expression of the faith is plagued

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with problems and inconsistencies, practical and intellectual. Many reformers from within and friends and critics alike from the outside often criticize this tradition for lacking a consistent, critically reflective and sophisticated biblical exegesis and theology. Certainly, my own experience with this church confirms that such criticism is not without warrant. Maybe a healthy dose of 'systematic' theology is just what is needed.

On the other hand there is no denying that these Christians – laity and leadership – as unsophisticated, enigmatic or even sometimes sectarian as they may be, have a genuine Christian faith that has been forged in prayer with scripture amidst real persecution and suffering and in obedience to God's call. There is simply no question that these folk have something important and necessary to contribute positively to Christian theology—their own and the rest of the world's. Indeed, they do have a theology, and maybe it is best developed and expressed poetically rather than systematically.

The question of which is better, systematic theology or poetry, presents an interesting dilemma. Would a shift in emphasis from writing poetry to writing more discursive or systematic theology really meet, or begin to meet, the vast theological needs (reflective and active) of the church and believers in the former Soviet Union? Possibly, but maybe not.

Before going further I want to be clear that I am not denying the need for a careful, reflective, critical, constructive, orderly and informed intellectual engagement with the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Every expression of Christianity needs theology with these characteristics. The question is not whether theology characterized as such needs to be done, or whether a discursive form is an appropriate way to go about doing theology.

The question here is rather how could or should the whole enterprise of theology be approached in a post-Soviet context? Where should the emphasis lie and what form should a theology for the post-Soviet evangelical church take? Likewise, how would a choice for one approach or another, i.e. poetry or 'systematic' theology, affect the content and practice of faith in that context? Here is a question of the method and categorical structure of theology as well as its content for method and structure inevitably influence the substance of the ideas.

There is currently a growing conviction among many post-Soviet evangelicals and expatriate theologians that it is time for post-Soviet evangelicalism to 'come of age' theologically speaking. The challenge is for these brothers and sisters to begin to experiment critically and constructively in the Holy Spirit with the Word toward developing a truly contextualised post-Soviet evangelical theology. In what follows I will explore what this might mean and what might be involved in this process. I likewise suggest some directions that this might fruitfully take. Ultimately, this will mean probing the significance of the observa-

tion that western evangelical Christians 'tend' to write specifically systematic theology while their eastern counterparts 'tend' to write poetry.

Further, a derivative purpose stemming from this exploration will be to suggest that, given the current context, post-Soviet evangelicals would do well to begin to dialogue theologically with others, rather than exclusively relying upon dialogue with or be under the dominance of mainstream conservative North American evangelical theology. Specifically, these partners would need to include among others, Eastern Orthodoxy, various contextual theologies, and, I believe, postliberalism. (This article is specifically interested in the last of these.) This call to broader dialogue however, does not mean that these post-Soviet Christians should lose their distinctive identity as evangelicals. On the contrary, what is needed is for them, in dialogue with others, to finally find it.

A Contextualised post-Soviet Evangelical Theology

To begin, what do I mean by developing a truly contextualised post-Soviet Evangelical theology?[1] What is meant by contextualisation? The idea of contextualisation can mean many different things for both mission and theology. Currently, as for example with some radical feminist theology, it often means an almost total reinventing of Christianity for a specific group or culture. At the other extreme however, as for example with some evangelicals, it can imply the conservative approach of primarily 'translating' a given formulation or expression of Christianity into another culture or context. The problem with the former understanding is that these expressions of the faith are often so divergent from scripture and tradition that they in essence cease to be Christian. The problem with the latter approach is that it fails to recognize as contextually determined the very presupposition that it is possible to start theology with an objective or 'given' expression of theology.

Of late many contemporary theologians and missiologists have come to understand that all theology is by nature contextual. Every formulation of theology reflects within it something of the context in which it is developed. Every expression of theology, whether consciously or not, has been significantly and necessarily shaped in content and form, intellectually and practically, by the concerns and thought-forms of its setting. Indeed, this realization that 'objective' formulations of theology are neither possible nor desirable is what gives theology its power as a vehicle for the Word of God to a given people at a given place and time. So, as Stephen Bevans has argued, 'contextualization is part of the very nature of theology itself'.[2]

> Theology must be intrinsically linked with a specific social and cultural situation. In fact, building on the 'sociology of knowledge,' liberation theologians would

1 For an interpretation of various approaches to contextual theology see: Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

2 Bevans, p. 1.

> argue that all theologies always are linked with and shaped by a specific social and cultural milieu. In the words of Dermot A. Lane, 'Knowledge is not neutral or value-free. Instead all knowledge tends to embody the social circumstances and conditions of its time.' In other words, knowledge always tends to reflect the vested interests of the knower. Vested interests vary considerably from one society and culture to another; consequently, knowledge will reflect this variance.
>
> Such a theory of knowledge can and sometimes does lead to relativism—the idea that knowledge is so conditioned by social, political and economic realities that it is impossible to rise above them. Liberation theologians do not embrace this kind of deterministic and reductionist view, however… [They suggest that] each person must gain awareness of one's own vested interests and subject them to scrutiny and criticism. By becoming suspicious and critical (dialectical) in relation to the dominant thought-forms of one's own culture, a person's knowledge can rise above this social-environmental conditioning… So theology is always contextual, never universal. What is developed in one place, whether Rome, or Tubingen or New York, cannot be imposed on every other place.[3]

One need not be a Liberation theologian to embrace these insights. Conclusions like these about objectivity and theological method ultimately grow from the realization that human knowing is always less than perfect and is to a large degree necessarily dependent upon factors arising in the knower's context. 'As our cultural and historical context plays a part in the construction of the reality in which we live, so our context influences our understanding of God and the expression of our faith.'[4] Liberation Theology may have been among the first expressions of the faith to grasp this, but stemming from the demise of enlightenment epistemology, many theologians are again coming to see as proper the subjective aspects of the theological enterprise.

Such subjectivity is not the death of theology or of truth as some might imagine however. Recognizing the contextual nature or subjectivity of theology (indeed of all knowledge) does not mean that theology is now hopelessly subjective and no longer able to speak of God and things truthfully as they 'really are'. Nor must such an understanding signal a denial of revelation as the prime source and ultimate test for all theology. Rather, such an observation about the nature of theology is simply the recognition of an unavoidable condition of theology.

By nature theology is a human enterprise, even though it works with God's revelation to us. It is incarnational in the sense that it brings and holds together both human and divine reality. Indeed, this is why theology can meaningfully be a vehicle for God's Word to us at a particular place and time. The point is simply to recognize the contextual nature of all theology as a given, celebrating and embracing contextual contributions to it where appropriate and criticizing and reforming the context where necessary. This ultimately means that there will be different particularised or localised the-

3 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen, *20th Century Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), pp.214-15.

4 Bevans, p. 2.

ologies depending upon one's context, but that there must be a real sense that these theologies are a part of genuine Christian tradition.

The problem for Soviet and post-Soviet evangelical theology, however, has not been the lack of a context or the lack of the context's influence upon it or church life. Rather, the problems for Soviet and post-Soviet evangelical theology, its shortcomings as a theology, have been subtler. Among other things, they have stemmed from Soviet and post-Soviet evangelical theology's own lack of identity, and of late, its lack of confidence and acceptance of itself as a unique and particularised expression of theology. That is, ironically given its usual dogmatism, its inferiority complex in relationship primarily to Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Protestantism, both of which contribute to her own unique identity. The difficulties here, similar to those in any family, seem to be those faced by the youngest child who while maturing seeks to establish her own identity and uniqueness in relationship with and in contrast to her more dominant brothers and sisters. Puberty is a painful time.

To take this further, these shortcomings can be traced to Soviet and post-Soviet evangelical theology's lack of conscious self-awareness and self-critical analysis of its own theological constructs and practices. Until recently it has simply not had the tools or the opportunity for this reflection, which is essential for the natural maturing process. So far it has in many ways been like the young handicapped child who, although admitting that she has needs, nevertheless still believes that she is the centre of reality and is always right. However, as she now seems to be entering puberty and even overcoming many of her earlier handicaps, or coming of age, she feels the pains of insecurity and tends to react in sometimes contradictory ways. She is only now learning the skills necessary for the kind of self-awareness and self-critical analysis that will help her as a theology both come to accept herself as she is, to imperfect as this may be, and grow through some of her weaknesses.

In short, many weaknesses of Soviet and post-Soviet evangelical theology can be argued to have come from its failure to come to grips intellectually and existentially with the totality of contexts that have and do contribute to its life as a tradition (Russian, Soviet, Protestant, and Orthodox).

Such conclusions however, are not meant to be 'stone-throwing' criticisms. Given their context with all of its restrictions and limitations, Soviet and post-Soviet evangelicals have done admirably well. Rather, these conclusions are simply interpretive observations offered by a sympathetic outsider. A cruel and harsh existence until recently made such a self-understanding next to impossible. Nevertheless, if a mature post-Soviet evangelical theology is to emerge out of both the triumphs and ashes of the past, (one able to serve its own people and Christians worldwide) then these identity issues will need to be addressed seriously. Indeed, the dilemma of whether to write system-

atic theology or poetry is indicative of such a struggle and will probably be answered only in the self-identifying process.

What do I mean though, that post-Soviet evangelicals will need to come to grips with their context and the forces that have uniquely shaped them? Since its beginnings Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicalism has suffered an identity crisis similar to that of all Eurasian institutions: Is it eastern or is it western? The answer is that it is genuinely both. Nevertheless, whether accidental or not, western (often North American 'conservative') evangelical theology, both in its category/structure and content, has formally dominated this Church. This is partly due to an often-necessary dependence upon its western counterparts for theological resources – concepts, materials and teachers. It is also partly due to an often prevalent western evangelical insistence that only its questions, forms and content taken together form a truly Christian and evangelical theology; a universal theology.

However, new contextual realities are beginning to call for new ways of thinking. Ten years on from the fall of the Soviet Union, and ten years into this current wave of mission into these countries many are saying that the stage is now set and that the time is now right for post-Soviet evangelicals to 'come of age' theologically. Initially this simply will entail a discovery of who they actually are (rather than who others, Evangelical or Orthodox say they should be). From this self-awareness they will then be in a position to suggest in which direction they might or ought to head for the future.

Importantly however, this 'discovery' does not mean that post-Soviet evangelicals need to reactively reject their past or present partner relationship with western evangelicals. Nor does it mean that they must become hostile and reactionary to the form/content of the western tradition that has for so long nurtured and helped it. Rather, what this process means is that it is time for post-Soviet evangelicalism to mature and thus to truly become itself. Only then will it truly enter as an equal theological partner into the worldwide fellowship of Christian believers; both challenging others and being challenged by them.

Practically, to achieve this maturity post-Soviet evangelical theology will have to come to grips with its own unique identity by critically evaluating the conservative western evangelical theology that has often dominated it. It will have to understand the context within which this sister theology developed. Such a coming to grips with its identity will likewise inevitably mean that post-Soviet evangelical theology will need to enter into a close dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theology which has also shaped it and formed it culturally, intellectually and in terms of its spirituality.

Having said this however, there is no reason why post-Soviet evangelical theology needs to limit its dialogue to those with whom it is already related. It need not become isolationist in its growing process. It will also be important for it to seek

other dialogue partners, especially those with which it already has some affinity, if not relationship. Other contextual theologies like Latin American Liberation theology or Asian theology might offer insights into the triumphs as well as the pitfalls of doing theology in context. Some of these might even be doing theology in a context similar to that of today's post-Soviet Christian. Post-Soviet evangelicals will need to learn from such people even if in the end they become critical of many conclusions they have come to.

Additionally post-Soviet evangelicals will need to engage other more traditional approaches to theology (those not self-consciously contextual). Given their intellectual and geographic location, engaging European theologies like Moltmann's 'Theology of Hope' might be both revealing and helpful. Again however, the goal here will be a dialogue and critical appraisal of these theologies in their contexts rather than simply the adoption and translation of them into Russian. Specifically, the method and approach of 'postliberalism' (its North American and related European expressions) could be a quite fruitful dialogue partner for post-Soviet evangelicals. My reasons for suggesting this will emerge in what follows.

Systematic Theology: Western Evangelicalism in Context

Now, having considered what a contextualised post-Soviet evangelical theology might mean and what kinds of enquiries might be necessary for a move toward it, I want to evaluate the idea that western evangelicals (conservatives) tend to write 'systematic' theologies, rather than poetry. The brief analysis that follows should help post-Soviet evangelicals both to understand a part of their own identity, and to begin to question whether or not they should, or might want to, continue to model themselves after their slightly older western brother.

To begin, we must consider the claim that western (often North American conservative) evangelical leaders tend to theologise by writing 'systematic' theologies rather than say, poetry. Of course, this is a generalisation and as such it is only meant to be true only generally. Conservative evangelicalism in general and western/North American conservative evangelicalism in particular is a long-standing and multifaceted theological and ecclesiastical tradition, incorporating many movements like pietism, Reformed scholasticism, and revivalism. Thus, any stereotype of it is bound to be less than comprehensive. Likewise, there is North American evangelical poetry, devotional literature, hymnology and the like. Usually however, these are considered to be something other than proper 'theology', and often, though not always, they do fail to show the depth of reflection and rigour that is thought to usually characterise theology.

This being so, it is generally correct to characterise conservative evangelicalism, (particularly the North American variety which has been so influential in Soviet and post-Soviet evangelicalism) as favouring theology (when it does) that is primarily

cognitive, logically systematic and often dependent upon some heuristic device for its cohesion and structure. This has been particularly (although by no means exclusively) so since the rise of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, given this debate and the other related 'contexts' in which the theology developed, it was both necessary and to a large degree inevitable that this theology would primarily be constructed along cognitivist and systematic lines.

As Stanley J. Grenz helpfully summarises in his 1993 programmatic book *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*:

> Despite the orientation toward spirituality characteristic of the movement as a whole, contemporary evangelical thinkers generally engage in the theological task with eyes focused on epistemology or the cognitive dimension of faith, rather than toward our shared piety. Evangelical theology tends to move from the conviction that there is a deposit of cognitive revelation given once for all in the Bible… As a result, many evangelicals view the task of theology primarily as systematizing and articulating the body of doctrine they assume to preexist implicitly or explicitly in Scripture.
>
> Klaus Bockmuehl speaks for evangelical theologians in general in declaring that the task of systematic theology 'is to produce a summary of Christian doctrine, an ordered summary or synopsis of the themes of teaching in Holy Scripture. We are to collect the different, dispersed propositions on essential themes or topics of the OT and the NT and put them together in an order that fits the subject-matter at hand.'[5]

On this account the theological enterprise is primarily an intellectual activity undertaken by trained technicians who seek to gather-up 'rightly' exegeted doctrinal propositions from the Bible and then seek to organize them formally with the primary help of logic onto a coherent system – and the system itself often then functions as the heuristic key for the continuing process of 'rightly dividing the Word of truth'. The dual test for truth in such an undertaking of theology involves firstly, judging whether one's exegesis is objectively 'correct' according to certain 'modern' scientific canons of hermeneutics, and secondly, judging whether one's logic is correct. Thus, while not denying the value of other forms of Christian expression like poetry, the sermon, devotional literature, drama, story and the like, 'theology' in this view has come to be seen more as an objective science of exegesis and logical systematisation. Thus, in the words of Grenz,

> Conservative theologians, whether Calvinist, dispensational, Wesleyan or Arminian, fall into step with the assumption that theology is 'the science of God' based on the Bible. Just as the natural world is amenable to the scientist's probings, they argue, so also the teaching of Scripture is objectively understandable. Systematic theology organizes the 'facts'

5 Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), p. 62. For further examples, and, a more detailed examination of this approach in the history of conservative Evangelicalism see particularly Chs. 2-6 and Ch. 7 pp.220-229., in: Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era,* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

> of Scripture, just as the natural sciences systemize the facts of nature. Consequently, the correct theology is a crystallization of biblical truth into a set of universally true and applicable propositions.[6]

Now the limitations of this essay do not allow a full evaluation or critique of this understanding of theology. This has been done elsewhere in sufficient detail.[7] Rather, I want here to probe briefly the claim that such a 'scientific' and systematic understanding of theology necessarily and inevitably came to dominate western evangelicalism. That is, I want to consider why, due to context, this is the particularly appropriate way for western evangelicals both to do theology and understand its nature. Admittedly this is a very complex exploration and here I will be able only to sketch the contours of a few ideas. However, I believe that these few general illustrative points will suffice to make the point.

Evangelicalism generally has its roots in western Catholic theology and particularly in the Protestant Reformation. Western theology in both of these traditions has always been somewhat more rationalised and less mystical than its eastern counterpart. As such, it has likewise always emphasized the cognitive and rational ability in the search for theological universals[8] (although modern Protestants—conservative and liberal—have taken this tendency to extremes). This is what Bevans means when he claims that, 'Classical theology conceived theology as a kind of objective science of faith.'[9] He meant this of all western theology and he was not referring specifically to post-enlightenment theology as one might expect. This is the first contributing factor to recognize.

Next, this tendency toward the rational and cognitive in conservative mainstream evangelical theology can be further traced from the part of its heritage steeped in Reformed theology. It can be seen emerging in Calvin (a lawyer). It developed through Protestant Scholasticism. It is evident in the theology of Westminster, and it made its way into North America with the Puritans and people like Jonathan Edwards. It later came to prominence in places like Princeton Seminary with the theology of Hodge and Warfield, and through this it became the backbone of conservative theology. This is not to deny the pietistic, and less Reformed roots of evangelicalism. However, the more theological side of mainstream evangelicalism does

6 Grenz, *Revisioning*, p. 65.

7 In addition to Grenz, *Revisioning*, chapter 3, see also Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism*, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996). Likewise, Grenz has developed further his critique of the modernist, or, rationalistic and foundationalist premises with which much conservative Evangelical theology is constructed. See for this, *Beyond Foundationalism*, co-author John R. Franke, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and, Ch. 4 in John G Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) These are specifically Evangelical responses to the perceived problem. Also I mention here that 'postliberalism' in general is a critique of this understanding of theology.

8 It should be noted that this desire for universals probably came as much from the practicality of needing unifiers for a diverse 'Christendom' as is did from purely speculative philosophical or theological reasoning.

9 Bevans, p. 1.

seem to own more to its Reformed roots than to either its pietistic, revivalist or other roots. This is even true of Dispensationalism, which is often contrasted with Reformed theology.

Parallel to this specifically theological heritage, the Enlightenment with its epistemological scepticism and resultant empiricism and rationalism likewise set an intellectual context in which cognitive and systematic ways of doing theology would be natural, if not inevitable. The Enlightenment is the soil in which contemporary Protestantism and thus evangelicalism grew.

Now one might be able to see how this would be true for liberal Protestantism, with its tendency to absorb rather uncritically modern Enlightenment beliefs. But could it be true of conservative evangelical or fundamentalist Protestantism which is essentially a reaction against modernism? Nancy Murphy in her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* has convincingly argued that both conservative evangelicalism (at least in North America) and the liberalism that it was fighting are essentially modern constructions. She has demonstrated that they can exist only in a thought world where modern Enlightenment assumptions are to a large degree accepted. This should come as no surprise. Contemporary conservative North American evangelicalism, particularly the brand that has so influenced Russian and Ukrainian evangelicalism, forged its current identity and many of its particular doctrinal formulations (i.e. inerrancy) against the backdrop of and in direct battle with liberal Protestantism. For this battle to take place there had to be enough common ground for the fight. Arguably, since conservative evangelicalism was the combatant often lacking confidence and the supposed intellectual high ground, it often ended up accommodating, or to state it more positively, contextualising itself to modernity.

This does not mean that it 'went liberal' in the same way that Classical liberalism and the mainline denominations did. However, it does mean that it often both fought on their intellectual turf and developed intellectual weapons that would be effective for fighting in that context. In this sense, it could be argued to have 'gone liberal' to a degree, or, at least to have borrowed many of the foundational tenants of liberalism with which to defeat the liberals. What are these borrowed weapons? One can find a willingness among many conservative evangelicals to accept to a significant degree: 1) The modernist criteria for genuine historicity. 2) Modern epistemology's standardisation of truth depicted as rationally organized objective 'facts' in the search for objective universals. 3) Foundationalism. 4) Modernity's overly propositionalist understanding of the nature of language. 4) A form of Cartesian anthropology leading to a 'strong' individualism.

The point here is not to throw stones at the achievements of the previous generation of evangelicals. Conservative North American evan-

gelical theology has been a powerful contextualised expression of theology in its own context. Its emphasis on system, the individual, and cognitivist rationalism fits well both within its theological heritage of Protestant Orthodoxy and within the intellectual and apologetic contexts demanded by modernity. Nor does pointing out these accommodations necessarily mean that conservative North American evangelicalism is outdated and thus to be abandoned (although it does need some reform).

The point is that as an expression of theology evangelicalism has always been much more particularised / contextualised and much less 'universal' than it itself has often thought. Although it might be, or at least have been, an appropriate form of contextual theology in North America or even in Northern Europe, it may not be appropriate in another context like the former Soviet Union. What needs to be carefully considered by this generation of theologians is whether conservative North American evangelicalism is the best model for a post-Soviet evangelical theology that was conceived and has grown in a very different intellectual, cultural and religious context.

I do not believe that it is the best theological model for the post-Soviet context, notwithstanding the important relational and resourcing links that post-Soviet evangelicals have with conservative North American evangelicalism's missions, churches and theological schools. Nonetheless, I do believe that it will continue to be an important theological dialogue partner and that its institutions will be needed as partners for many years to come. The penetrating question here for North American evangelicals is whether they are theologically and emotionally mature enough to have such relationships without necessarily insisting upon the theological dominance that they are accustomed to? At the very least the concerns that I am outlining should begin to challenge tacit assumptions of some that conservative North American evangelical theology is the only truly orthodox theology (and as such should be the only dialogue partner needed) and that its particulars should simply be 'translated' into the post-Soviet context.

Post-Soviet Evangelicals: Poets?

With this in mind I return to the question of whether it in fact would be better for post-Soviets evangelicals to develop systematic theology rather than poetry. I refer here to what conservative North American evangelicals mean by systematic theology since this is the kind that most post-Soviet evangelicals tend to read, are trained with, translate and attempt to copy.

First however, is it actually true that Soviet and now post-Soviet evangelicals tend to write poetry rather than more discursive or systematic theology with the characteristics described above? Generally the answer is yes, but with important qualification. Overall, theological life in the churches tends to take more 'literary' than 'scientific' approaches. Nonetheless, one does find that

even during the Soviet era there were pastors and church leaders who were concerned with writing more discursive theology. As Walter Sawatsky has argued when speaking of the Soviet era: 'The major substitute for a seminary has been *Bratskii Vestnik* [the journal of the Baptist denomination]. General Secretary Karev and his assistant Mitskevich devoted major effort to filling this journal with high-quality didactic articles.'[10] Likewise, during this period Soviet leaders also produced a discursive and more systematic theology, or theology textbook called *Dogmatika* (although this is not systematic to the same degree and in the same way as North American systematic theology would be.)[11]

Having acknowledged these examples however, it is important to remember that the believers developing these were strongly influenced by and tended to adopt without much question western theological method. They had accepted that British and North American Dispensationalism and Keswick spirituality were the evangelical norm. This theology was passed on to the churches through *Bratskii Vestnik* and *Dogmatika*, but also through the official correspondence training course used to train leaders.[12] This of course demonstrates that there have always been those in the movement who want something more than simply poetry.

Likewise, to move more into the present, there are a host of theological colleges and budding theologians who are interested in writing textbooks, exegetical commentaries and systematic theologies. That the tradition (or at least its more formally theologically trained members) now wants to do its own theology is certain. Yet, this desire raises the question of what kind of theology, or what method would be most appropriate in the context.

Even the casual observer in a worship service would begin to sense that post-Soviet pastors and their churches (those not primarily in the newly developed academies) do prefer something like poetry to 'systematic' theology. A sermon that grabs the emotions and spirit is much more desirable to many of these folk than a rational discussion of theology or an exegesis of a biblical passage that breaks the passage down and analyses its smallest parts for the sake of mastering its truth. Even my students, before they become westernised in their theological orientation, tell me that at times the western evangelical theology presented in class is for them too rationalistical / scientific, too building-block-outline oriented, and in content and form simply not alive nor spiritual enough. For some years I assumed that this was another lazy-student ploy to get them out of the hard work of 'real' and rigorous theology. Now I am not quite so sure that this is always the case.

This general preference for literary and poetic method over rationalistic structure could mean several things.

10 Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Kitchener Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), p. 331.
11 Sawatsky, p. 344.
12 Sawatsky, pp. 17, 340-41.

It could mean that these students, pastors, and churches need to 'grow up' and desire the meat of the Word rather than simply its milk. Doubtless, this is sometimes the case. Or, it could mean that we teachers and trained pastors need to do a better job of showing the church member that a sustained theologising is actually important and relevant. This too is doubtlessly true in many cases. However, it might also mean more significantly that an overly systematic approach to theology simply does not fit the post-Soviet (Russified) cultural and church context.

Why might this latter be the most significant reason? There are several points to consider. Anglo or northern Europeans who work regularly with Russians, who know the Russian language and who know Russian literature (popular and classic) recognize that Russians 'know' in a different way from our knowledge. Intellectually trained Anglos and Germanics tend to think like an arrow—that is, in straight logical lines toward a specific end. Russians, however, don't think in this way—they are Slavic culturally and linguistically, and tend to have a more Asian thinking pattern. It might be described as more pictorial or 'iconic' thinking. In terms of a directional patterns it might be described as a corkscrew spiralling and narrowing toward a conclusion or group of conclusions.

This group of conclusions (sometimes seemingly contradictory) can be held together in tension as true with little difficulty. This is because the movement in the process of thinking and concluding allows such complexity in a way that more rationalistic tests of truth do not. This does not mean that Russians are irrational or illogical, or, even that they have a supposedly different logic, as if that were possible. It does however, mean that thinking and knowing to them involves much more than logic, and that reality is understood as more complex than simple logic or straight thinking in propositionalist terms can convey. Truth and knowing is simply a more complex process than a logical ordering of propositions can grasp.

One finds this 'Russian' style of thinking and knowing evidenced in normal conversation with Russians, in more popular prose or newspapers and, importantly for our discussion here, in much of their serious literature and philosophy. Given this way of thinking, it is not surprising that Russians tend to consider that some of their best and deepest thinking and their best philosophy is found in their more narrative or artistic literature—Dostoevsky for example. Even their discursive philosophy tends to read like narrative or at times like poetry. This probably accounts for why the untrained (usually non-westernised) post-Soviet evangelical pastor or lay Christian would find it more natural to express himself theologically in poetry, testimony, sermon or song rather than in a more 'systematic' form of theology.

Of course Russian mathematics and science tend to be more systematic in their structure and thinking. This is understandable, given the nature of these disciplines. However,

for deeper subjects like probing the depths of human meaning / existence or theology they do tend to adopt less systematic genres for both exploration and expression. Indeed, spiritual poetry, Orthodox icons and the apophatic method of doing theology are good examples of how this kind of thinking works itself out in theology. For example, I doubt that Russian evangelicals could ever have worked out the doctrinal formulation of inerrency as has been done in North America. Their understanding and experience of life and language would simply not lend itself in this direction. An extremely propositional and atomised view of language simply does not fit within their worldview. We can see this already in the one main theology that Soviet evangelicals produced. 'The *Dogmatika* affirmed biblical inspiration. It rejected the dictation theory of inspiration, as well as a verbal inspiration theory that did not allow for a recognition of the individual writer's memory, intuition, judgment, and character. But it was an affirmation of the Bible as divinely inspired and infallible.'[13]

In the introduction to his book *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia,* Donald Nicholl summarises well the understanding of Russian knowing that I am describing here when he says: '(T)heories and doctrines are not, after all, the most helpful means of shaping human beings to confront the issues of life and death. But models are: whether in the form of icons or biographies of the saints, especially when these are set in the context of a liturgy where the chorus of human voices raise the spirit of the worshipper.'[14] Through art, story/testimony, and singing – these are the ways that Russians both think and know.

Of course, there are post-Soviet evangelicals who would argue that despite this natural cultural and linguistic tendency, what they need is something like the systematic theology described above. And, although it is doubtful if they would feel this way were it not for training from or contact with the West, it is nevertheless now a fact that they have had such contact or training and that such thinking has become a part of their experience. Since no culture is a monolith, and since culture is always growing and changing through its contacts with other cultures, a case might be made that such systematic theologising needs to become a part of their culture, regardless of whether average pastors and churches seem ready for it.

To this I would like to respond as follows. There is doubtless the need for post-Soviet evangelicals to undertake a sustained and rigorous process of doing and writing theology. Likewise, there is doubtless the need for post-Soviet evangelicals to write theology for training their own church folk, church leaders and theologians. However, it is highly doubt-

13 Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals,* pp. 334-35. (Footnoted: *Dogmatika*, pp. 161ff. especially p. 167. Essentially the same argument in I. I. Motorin's article, Bratskii Vestnik 3-4/55, p. 67.)

14 Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), p. 9.

ful that they need a theology or methodology for doing theology like the systematic theology described above. Apart from the general critiques that can be offered against such an method, the entire way of thinking employed therein is not natural for them and as such, the approach will continue to alienate these believers from both Eastern Orthodoxy and secular post-Soviets. Possibly average church folk would never identify with such an approach. If it does not sound right, look right, or feel right the chances are it might not be right for that context.

That post-Soviet evangelicals tend to write poetry rather than systematic theology may not be the real problem at all. This is especially true if we mean by systematic theology the kind of theology that is characteristic of conservative North American evangelicalism. That post-Soviet evangelicals tend to write poetry may be an indication of what kind of sustained and rigorous theology waits to be done. This may indicate the best future for post-Soviet evangelical theology.

Postliberals and Post-Soviet Evangelicals Together

With this in mind I now turn to the last area of discussion in this essay. If the situation as I have described it thus far is accurate, then one of the best dialogue partners for post-Soviet evangelicalism may prove to be a movement that has come to be known as 'postliberalism.'

Postliberalism, is not associated with any particular denomination. Nor is it a tradition in the same sense as evangelicalism. Rather, it is a methodology or movement among theologians that 'seeks to reverse the trend in modern Christianity of accommodation to culture'.[15] This specifically means the accommodation to modern culture or modernity (culture formed by the Enlightenment), which has been a prominent feature of Liberal theology. Postliberalism however, is not any longer simply a reform movement within or growing out of liberal theology. Rather, it has become a broader creative and constructive programme for theological exploration in light of the demise of modernity. For this reason it has become an appealing dialogue partner for Evangelical theology in recent years.[16]

Who are the postliberals? 'While significantly influenced by the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Barth, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger and others, the originators of the distinctive "postliberal" agenda and label were Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Their students, creative and provocative theologians like William Placher, Stanley Hauerwas and George Hunsinger, have further developed these key ideas.'[17] Often postliberalism as a label is associated with Yale Divinity School in the US. However, there

15 Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L Okholm. eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), p. 11

16 *The Nature of Confession*, which grew out of the 1995 Wheaton Theology Conference is evidence that evangelicals have realized the potential value of interaction with postliberal methodology .

17 Phillips, *Nature*, p. 11.

are also many theologians in Europe like Colin Gunton and Trevor Hart that in parallel broadly share the movement's concerns, including a repudiation of modernity (including modern epistemology) and a revitalisation of and return to biblical narrative in theology.

Essentially postliberalism is a theological methodology that is committed to removing modernity or liberalism (explicit and implicit) from Christian life and thinking. This is its negative function as a movement. Its positive function is to call Christians to return to the Bible so that Scripture rather than say, philosophy, can form Christian thinking, actions and community life. Specifically for postliberalism this means returning to the Bible but not as if it were a collection of propositions to be dissected, broken down, objectively mastered by the reader, and then extracted from their literary forms for logical organization into a system that we can call theology. (This is the liberal approach.) Rather, a postliberal return to the Bible involves a call to read it more as a narrative, as literature, and thus as a whole which we can ourselves enter into and be formed by.

> Postliberalism includes a theory that explains the loss of Scripture's formative authority and the church's correlative accommodation to culture as well as a strategy for cultivating Christian identity. As Hans Frei's pathbreaking *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) showed, modern theories of biblical interpretation find the meaning of the text in something more basic and foundational than Scripture—a universally accessible reality. Whether meaning was found in eternal truths that the text symbolized (as for liberals) or identified exclusively with the story's factual reference (as for conservatives), both displaced the priority of Scripture. Scripture no longer defined the church's social world in a normative way. 'The great reversal had taken place: interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.' When another authority was found, Scripture's world-forming narrative was fragmented and eventually dispersed.
>
> This shift in understanding—the loss of Scripture's grand narrative as well as its christological center and unity—impeded the biblical narrative from shaping the community of disciples. Increasingly, Scripture became a strange book that was closed to the laity and under the control of the academic elite…In place of these modern theories of interpretation, postliberals propose a 'classical' hermeneutic in which the scriptural world structures the church's cosmos and identity.[18]

Here is a critique of not just classical liberal hermeneutics but also of traditional conservative evangelical protestant principles of interpretation, systematic theology, and even missiology. Conservative evangelical biblical exegetes and theologians, like the liberals, have often tried to 'get behind' the scriptural stories or narratives to find the eternal truths or principles that are assumed to be the Word of God. It is thought that these truths exist abstractly with God, who encoded them in the particular biblical literature. Thus the task for exegesis, systematic theology and missiology is to dig these timeless abstract universals out of the text, organize them systematically, and then re-encode them into some contemporary setting.

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18 Phillips, *Nature*, pp. 11-2.

Postliberalism rejects this approach to doing exegesis, theology and mission. Broadly it says that the message is the story rather than something that is hidden behind it. The narrative is the important and necessary formulation of the depths of the message. To de-particularise and abstract the message out from the narratives (or other genres) into a supposed 'universal principle' with logic or modern/critical exegetical methodology is to destroy both the integrity of the message and its power as the Word of God to transform the Christian community and believer therein.

Of course, narrative hermeneutics and approaches to doing theology are much more complex, diverse, and more nuanced than described here. Nor is this narrative/postliberalism without its weaknesses and shortcomings (some of them quite serious).[19] However, for the purposes of this essay, trying to show its potential as a dialogue partner for post-Soviet evangelicals, its general concerns are clear. Postliberalism wants to emphasize: 1) The Bible as scripture and central for forming Christian life and community, 2) The accessibility of scripture to all Christians, 3) The literary nature and wholeness of the bible and thus the need for a theology that embraces rather than destroys this nature, 3) The dangers of liberalism and modernist approaches to Christianity, and related to this 4) The need for a contemporary theology that genuinely gets us beyond modernity.

Since postliberalism is a movement striving after these general characteristics, I think that it becomes clearer why I have suggested that it might be a particularly appropriate dialogue partner for post-Soviet evangelical theology. In my experience of living in Russia and teaching and working with Soviet and post-Soviet evangelicals, I have found that many of post-Soviet evangelicalism's concerns (either explicitly or implicitly expressed) are quite similar in both ethos and content to those developed or being developed within postliberalism.

Firstly, Soviet and post-Soviet evangelicals are, as Walter Sawatsky has described them, 'a Bible movement' whose approach has always been, 'to read the Bible and put into practice its plain and simple message'.[20] Secondly, post-Soviet evangelicals lean culturally and intellectually toward more literary or narrative approaches in their thinking and knowing. They tend to write poetry rather than 'systematic' theology. And thirdly, post-Soviet evangelicals

19 See Alister McGrath 'An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism' in *Nature,* pp. 23-44. Likewise, Stan Grenz' recent thought, in working toward a specifically Evangelical and yet postmodern ('postliberal') theology, has offered important challenges to postliberal formulations. See for example, *Beyond Foundationalism,* pp. 51-54. Yet illustratively, Grenz here models the kind of evangelical / postliberal dialogue and interaction that I am suggesting would be valuable for post-Soviet evangelicals. While his theology does not ultimately take the more narrative or 'poetic' form as might prove to be the case for post-Soviet Evangelicals, it is nevertheless a conscious attempt to take evangelical theology, here western, beyond the same kind of limitations highlighted by post-Soviet concerns of conservative evangelical theology—e.g., a theology shaped by rationalism and prone toward abstract and intellectualised propositionalism.

20 Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals,* pp. 337-39.

(like their Eastern Orthodox neighbours) are very wary of western enlightenment liberalism and its influence upon theology, even upon western evangelical theology. I have many times heard them accuse western evangelicals (including me) of being 'liberal' because of our emphasis upon logic and systemisation. Often they have lacked the sophisticated arguments to explain what they are sensing. However, as this essay attempts to demonstrate, there may be more to their criticism than some of us have previously considered.

Now of course postliberalism, as it has been developed so far, is predominantly a western construct. As such, its methods and conclusions need to be evaluated in that context just as any other theological method and programme needs to be evaluated in its context. And in doing this, many of its specifics may be shown to be flawed, inadequate, or at least to be foreign to a post-Soviet/evangelical context. However, I am calling here for a dialogue to begin and not for an uncritical adoption of its method and conclusions. I am calling for this specific dialogue because I believe that it will help clarify for post-Soviet evangelicalism many issues that are actually internal to it. The result of such dialogue I suspect will be that western postliberalism and post-Soviet evangelicalism will be helped and moved forward by the interchange.

Conclusion

In conclusion I simply want to state again that I and others believe that it is time for post-Soviet evangelicals to come of age theologically. It is time for these believers to hammer out a more contextualised post-Soviet evangelical theology, and to do this consciously in context. Whether this theology ends up taking a more systematic form (systematic as described in this essay), a more poetic or literary/narrative form, or indeed some other yet undiscovered form remains to be seen. My hope is that his essay has simply contributed something helpful to this process.

Proclamation

Preaching recounts the dialogue between God and humankind,
Exposing our reticence to hear and reluctance to respond.
Christ-filled words become saving logology,
And God's gracious vehicle to call the dead to life.

by Garry Harris, South Australia (used with permission)