

Faith for a change: Christ and culture in Moscow

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Almost every American seminary student knows H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of five ways of relating Christ and culture. I have often used Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* in the classroom. Presenting these ideas to students at the Russia United Methodist Seminary, however, was a new experience. Since *Christ and Culture* has been translated into good Russian, and I had the help of Oleg Makariev, a Moscow native, in teaching, translating the words was not a problem. But fitting the ideas into the Russian context posed some interesting challenges.

Niebuhr himself understood that he made his claims from a particular historical situation. He would not be surprised to learn that the possibilities look very different from a Russian perspective. In the Russian experience, Christ *above* culture, the magisterial synthesis of faith and reason that Niebuhr associates with Thomas Aquinas, offers a survival strategy for a church threatened with absorption or extinction.

Orthodoxy has never had a theological system comparable to the one Aquinas set out, but it did develop an understanding of the church's worship as an ordering of all of life in relation to a timeless plan, a framework within which worldly responsibilities could be accepted, understood and appropriately limited. This sense of the church as teacher, offering a wisdom that never varies but is always relevant, survived both czars who tried to turn the church into a department of the state and commissars who tried to relegate it to the museums.

The greatest threat to Orthodoxy today is that of being reduced to an expression of Russian nationalism—adopting the Christ *of* culture stance that many Western observers have mistakenly associated it with all along. Orthodoxy's tradition of ecumenical thought, beginning with Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) and continuing in the 20th century with Sergii Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky, sees Orthodoxy's mission extending beyond the bounds of Russian state and culture. Rediscovery of

this tradition by the Orthodox and by other Russian Christians may help Christianity sustain a role as teacher and reconciler in a more open and diverse society.

Meanwhile, Russian Methodists have little interest in the Christ *against* culture role which Niebuhr devises for embattled Christian minorities. Though many Russian Protestants trace their heritage to radical Reformation groups that found refuge in Russia and prospered there before 1917, Protestants have reason to be skeptical of the Russian figure who emerges in *Christ and Culture* as the prime example of Christ *against* culture—Leo Tolstoy. Russians love Tolstoy's novels, and they are used to learning their theology and politics from literature rather than from theologians and politicians, but Tolstoy's turn to pacifism, peasant culture, and a simple, rural life appears to them less as a witness to Christian distinctiveness than as a painful reminder of the failures of literary reformers. Writers like Tolstoy, they know, graphically depicted the corruption of Russian society in the decades before 1917, but never organized an effective response to it.

That leaves Protestants in Russia with what Niebuhr identified half a century ago as the two social possibilities that have always spoken most directly to Protestants: compromise or conversion. Luther or Wesley. Realism or Rauschenbusch. In Niebuhr's terms: Christ and culture *in paradox* or Christ *transforming* culture.

In theory these two models seem to present a clear choice between quite different ways of approaching the Christian life, but in practice most American Protestants oscillate between them. It seems that a similar challenge awaits Protestants in a Russia that is, like America, free and yet unequal, deeply spiritual and profoundly materialistic at the same time, open to the church's blessing but suspicious of prophetic justice.

Still, the choices are not quite the same. History suggests that American Protestants, despite their recent preoccupations with virtue and tradition, are probably just resting between their periodic commitments to social transformation (joining such causes as temperance, abolition, the social gospel and civil rights). Russians are more skeptical about social transformation and deeply suspicious of people who promise it.

I discovered that these Russian seminarians knew almost nothing about liberation theology, and when I tried to explain it to them, they took it to be an oddly establishment kind of reform movement. (In Russia, the use of Marxist social

analysis does not immediately certify you as someone who thinks outside the box.)

Choices depend on context and history as much as on theology. We can imagine a Russia in which an authoritarian government accepts religious pluralism and economic oligarchy in exchange for a free hand with the media and political power. Under those circumstances, Russian Protestants might well settle into a paradoxical relationship that accepts the government's "leading role" in areas where the government insists on having priority, while reserving judgment about the ultimate values to be served. Ironically, that Protestant future in a capitalist Russia would not be so different from the Protestant past in communist Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, we can also imagine a Russia in which the Wesleyan social witness of United Methodists and the Salvation Army links up with an ecumenical Orthodoxy to teach Russia what the early church knew about remembering the poor. Like the pastoral letters on economics produced by America's Roman Catholic bishops nearly two decades ago, such ecumenical social teaching would not prescribe specific policy choices, but it would insist that concern for the common good and the building up of community are requirements for any economic system. That would be quite different from the political manipulation of economic discontent practiced by today's Russian nationalists. Come to think of it, it would also be quite different from a politicized "compassion" that seems compatible with policies that only widen the social and economic gulf between rich and poor.

It is difficult to predict which way Russia will move, and churches will not control that choice of direction. Still, we may hope that the claim of Christ *transforming* culture will arise, not only because the Russian people need that transformation, but because we do, too.