Soul wars

by Walter Sawatsky in the March 21, 2001 issue

Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls, edited by John Witte Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux

The face of Christianity in the former Soviet Union has been transformed several times during the past decade. When the Soviet Union dissolved, it was common to speak of a spiritual vacuum needing to be filled and to report on the "harvest of souls" in Russia. Then came warnings about the methods of ignorant and inappropriate evangelists/missionaries. A United Methodist video about this era was titled "The Struggle for the Soul of Russia." It showed contrasting images of nondenominational baptisms in swimming pools and of multigenerational families lined up for baptism by an overworked Orthodox priest. Then the 1997 Russian Law on Religion put in place new restrictions on religious practice. Russian Orthodoxy received privileged status, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism were recognized in various geographic regions, and the Catholic and Protestant (mainline and evangelical) traditions that could show that they had been legally recognized during the Soviet era were permitted to apply for reregistration.

The law's purpose was to stop missionary activity, especially by new religious movements and undisciplined independent groups. Proselytism was threatening Orthodoxy and Russian culture, said many prominent Orthodox leaders. The right to religious freedom was once more being threatened, said many prominent Western legislators and spokespersons for mission agencies.

This book of essays presents part of the research findings from a major project funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, "Soul Wars . . . in the New World Order," managed through Emory University. That sponsorship accounts for the book's human and religious rights framework, though it transcends that Western legal viewpoint.

A shortcoming of the book should be noted from the outset: while the proselytism debate within ecumenical Christianity requires addressing the issues of missiology and ecclesiology, theologians and missiologists, especially from the Orthodox world,

are missing from this work. The WCC theological affirmations of common witness, which included a rejection of proselytism as a "perversion of witness," were easier to formulate in 1961, when the point of reference was the distant Third World. Now a renewed decade of mission within Europe has brought to the fore the long legacy of confessional strife.

But while not the definitive word on this subject, *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia* offers some rich perspectives. The essays by Philip Walters and James Billington provide numerous shrewd insights into the diversity of today's Russian Orthodoxy. For example, Walters notes the parallels between the pre-Soviet mission efforts that described Orthodoxy as a moribund tradition hopelessly tied to the state and the current descriptions of its tendency "toward schism . . . exacerbated by particular aspects of the Soviet legacy."

Billington, who notes the essentially religious imagery surrounding the moments of political crisis of the past decade, draws attention to the popular notions of miracle, providential intervention and moral recovery that set the promise and limits for Orthodox leadership. He describes the authoritarian nationalists who are seeking some return to a mythic status quo, and the younger reformers who are "working for a parish-based renewal of Russian society independent of the government and aided by a revived Christian pedagogy centered on the vernacular Bible . . . and a liturgy translated into modern Russian." This reformist vision has clear affinities with Protestantism.

The major Russian Orthodox voice from within is that of Metropolitan Kirill, especially in his speech at the WCC conference on world mission held in Brazil in 1996. Kirill spoke about the chaos and suffering his society has experienced this decade, and he articulated a missiology of inculturation whereby culture becomes "a bearer of the message of Christ." Kirill thanked Western churches for their past support but then complained about a "crusade . . . against the Russian church, even as it began recovering from a prolonged disease." He noted that some missionaries "behaved as though no local churches existed."

Kirill's solution for getting beyond the "ecumenical disaster" of proselytism is to base mission on what he calls "the fundamental principle of the early Christian ecclesiology: the principle of the local church"--that is, "that the church in a given place shall be fully responsible for its people before God . . . [and] that nobody anywhere shall ignore a local church."

The Witte-Bourdeaux volume is most fascinating for the way specialists on Soviet religion now read that history and assess the current situation. Aleksandr Shchipkov's review of recent sociological studies ends with charts and in-depth interviews demonstrating that a major portion of the population always retained some religious beliefs, but that these beliefs now cohere less along ethnic and confessional lines. According to recent mappings of religious adherence, more than 50 percent of the members of the Orthodox Church belong to national minorities other than Russian, and 43 percent of the practicing Catholics in central Russia are Russian, while around Irkutsk, in eastern Siberia, Catholic parishes are almost entirely Russian. The various Protestant groups are much more closely linked to specific geographic areas. And the Urals region is particularly susceptible to secularization and contains "an abundance of home-grown sects."

The proselytism issue takes on new dimensions when one learns that "the Christian heartland [from Pskov to Samara] and Christian Siberia are divided by two belts: an Islamic-pagan one and a 'secularized' one." Patterns of recent Christian mission have evolved out of the history of deportation and migration to the eastern frontier and out of specific new mission initiatives. On the basis of one statistical table Shchipkov concludes that in 14 of Russia's 88 regions, the number of Protestant churches exceeds the Orthodox. There "one may expect escalation in the conflict between these two Christian groups." Perhaps the author's most telling conclusion is that future interreligious conflicts may be due to the "massive breakdown in the religious and ideological assumption of an entire people" rather than to specific proselytizing activities.

It is still uncommon for Protestant missionaries to the former Soviet Union to engage in public self-criticism, but the essay by Mikhail M. Kulakov, president of the Russian Seventh Day Adventist Church, marks a striking exception. His denomination, which numbered 34,146 in 1990 and suffered from schisms under the Soviets, had tripled to 99,000 by 1994, having been strongly supported by the denomination's entire world body. As early as 1926 the Adventist General Conference had adopted a statement that recommended holding in high esteem people in other communions "engaged in winning souls to Christ," working with them in a spirit of courtesy. It recognized members' right to switch to another communion, and rejected any restrictions or geographical limits as "an abridgment of the Gospel commission."

Yet Kulakov also acknowledges Adventist suspicion of the ecumenical movement and a popular Adventist understanding of itself as "the only true remnant." His essay

ends with a discussion of such issues of Adventist mission in Russia and the clash between new converts and those who survived the Soviet years. Foreign assistance brought the denomination efficiencies and success, but did not really provide the resources for dealing with "a sea of human needs," for which cultural understanding was a prerequisite. Kulakov calls for building deep roots in Russian society and focusing on "an acquisition of the basic Christian understanding of God, the world and the human person," rather than on preserving denominational "otherness."

The emergence of sects and new religious movements has dominated the public debate about proselytism and the need for legislative restrictions on such missionizing. Sergei Filatov concludes that these movements remain quite marginal. For example, the Unification Church at its height in 1994 had only 5,000 members. Filatov is especially worth reading for the information he gives on indigenous new religious movements, especially the Great White Brotherhood, the Church of the Last Testament, and the Center of the Mother of God--each of which has invented its own form of paganism.

Filatov concludes that both Russian Orthodox leaders and many of the Western mission leaders who publish apologetics against the cults are making a mistake. Contemporary Russian society manifests a host of beliefs, but these beliefs are "complex, eclectic and changeable." Struggling against them is like "fighting one's own shadow."

The book also offers a systematic assessment of the 1997 legislation on religion and an instructive mapping of regional differences as provinces have struggled but generally failed to enforce limits to religious freedoms. It presents two sets of guidelines for foreign missionaries. In general these recommend being courteous and respectful of local culture and mores, but do not really address the deeper issues that Billington, Shchipkov and Kulakov have brought to the fore.

The research presented in this book finds Russian Orthodoxy's anxiety about proselytism disproportionate and misplaced. Indeed, the real issue of the "war for souls" has much less to do with interconfessional proselytism than it does with a realistic acknowledgment of the democratic nature of modernity that is forcing changes on all churches. A thinking society that welcomes religion is waiting to see what reformist impulses will shape the character of the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Islamic organizations of which they are or might become a part.