

Letters from Moscow: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Faith, Politics and the University in post-Communist Russia

Saturday, June 10th - first talk

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In these reflections on our years in Russia, there are three aspects that I hope to highlight: the incredible support we received from immediate colleagues teaching English for Philosophy students at Moscow State University; the amazing opportunities we had to network with Russian colleagues who were also working for real change at the time; and finally, an affirmation of Global Scholars Canada's policy of sending us out with the credentials and credibility that came from both of us having a doctoral degree.

It was indeed September 1995 when we first touched down at Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow, the event still deeply imprinted on our memory. And that first appointment came through our Global Scholars' parent organization, with some two dozen professors teaching, many in Eastern Europe. Since 1991 Dan Clendenin was teaching in the Department of Scientific Atheism within the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University, but he was ready to return to the USA, and asked that we replace him. We would teach in English for philosophy students who had already studied the language some ten years - but their acquaintance was largely passive. So, we were not to lecture, but use interesting philosophical articles to stimulate discussion. And we had good students. Adrian took on classes in political science and religion – both still embraced by philosophy – while I took general philosophy students, and often team-taught with colleague Genia.

We were given considerable freedom to choose appropriate materials and were not shy in presenting ourselves as Christian. That first year I used my ancient philosophy specialization to introduce "lives of ancient philosophers," with my favourites, Socrates and Plotinus, but also the Christian Macrina, sister of Cappadocian Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, praised for her life of wisdom. The discussion with students opened my eyes to the role of the Cappadocian fathers in the ongoing renewal of Orthodox Christianity. There was such a need to replace outdated textbooks oriented to Marxist Leninist ideology. So our colleagues asked us to write up the course material, so they could continue using materials that were quite new to them. They really appreciated our contribution in

introducing a new perspective in philosophy; we helped them write and edit new textbooks as well as to prepare applications for scholarships and research proposals.

These colleagues remained appreciative and supportive – but before the second year finished there was a class of students who grumbled about the Hellemans pushing religion; we were asked to use a more oblique approach. If we were Christian – were we Orthodox? If not, what were we? Sadly, Calvinist Reformed Christianity did not have a good reputation. Still, outside the classroom we experienced incredible openness in meeting colleagues who recognized the need for change: Konstantin Ivanov of Open Christianity in St. Petersburg, Moscow philosophers Vladimir Bibikhin and Sergei Khoruzhy, or Ancient Philosophy specialist Yuri Chichaline, who was also reintroducing gymnasium secondary education. These contacts were significant in pointing to the role of Christian Platonism in Orthodox theology before the Soviet period, and most important, for introducing us to Vladimir Solovyov, Russia's outstanding 19th century Christian philosopher. Of course, such networking became possible because we were learning Russian, which enabled us to participate in university meetings and conferences. We are grateful for the opportunity we had to learn Russian with excellent professors of Russian at the university. This was far more than a good trade-off for our teaching of English; and it opened important doors for us.

The re-election of Yeltsin in 1996 alerted us to the role of the "Russian Idea" - and got us started on an interesting project for our students. Yeltsin wanted to update the older "Russian Idea" connected with Moscow as "third Rome," i.e., for Christendom after the 15th century fall of Constantinople, and of Italian Rome in the fifth century. Journalists, philosophers, and historians were to present a new vision to bring ideological coherence for Russians, particularly because, as we realized, the constitution does not have a strong role. We asked our students to read, evaluate and summarize in English about fifty articles. From these we chose some twenty for translation into English, turning them over to class groups or individual students for translation. Again, we enjoyed wholehearted support from our immediate colleagues. Of course, this project pushed the students, who were more used to translation from English to Russian.

We recognized that the theme had an inherent danger of encouraging nationalism; and the project alerted us to the growing role of the Orthodox Church in politics, taking a role close to that of a state church. Yet we still considered the risk outweighing the benefits, for it gave a renewed focus on Russia's *Christian* past; for this highly secularized context, we felt that revival of the Christian

faith would ultimately safeguard the freedom of the person before God, as Rashkovsky argued. In those chaotic transitional years, the church presented a significant source of stability.

I will briefly mention a final project, the *Religion and Culture* discussion group which we started in the late 1990s. Again, with the blessing of our colleagues, we managed to find a room – space was at such a premium those days - and met about once a month, starting with Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture*, which had just been translated into Russian. Although we never had more than a dozen attending, the group attracted outstanding students, like Oleg, featured in our letters, and philosophy colleagues like Valerii Kuvakin. We talked through issues of "Philosophy and Apologetics" and examined the role of state religion in various political contexts. During those years the Orthodox Church was reasserting control of education at various levels, and some of our colleagues were considered for appointments through church authorities. We were particularly saddened to discover that colleagues felt they had to distance themselves, because association with expat non-Orthodox Christians (like ourselves) became problematic. We ourselves had little problem with Orthodox theology, and often enjoyed attending the liturgy, but had not seriously considered joining the church through chrismation; in the end, we realized that it might not have made much difference, had we done so.

At Moscow State University our situation changed when a new dean for the faculty of philosophy really wanted philosophy students to return to a traditional strong association with French and German as second language; his wife was German, and English had remained just too popular. One of the obstacles he created was nasty, taking away the small office which we shared, to store materials, and meet for lunch and coffee breaks. This single room accommodated about a dozen language lecturers for philosophy students. This was especially sad because our team of teachers had worked hard to renovate the place during our second year there. Yet the fact that, unlike many expats who came to teach English at the university in the 1990s, the Hellemans both had a philosophy doctorate, meant that there was no ready excuse to send them on their way. Our colleagues must have seen the handwriting on the wall, but they supported us to the end, and were sad to say good-bye. They are the real heroes of this story. And we are happy to pay tribute to their supportive role through some seven years in that challenging environment.