

Educating Ecumenically

How does an appreciation of a broader ecumenical context help us?

Sergey Koryakin

When we talk about Russian Christianity, we have to deal with two major denominations. Around 41% of Russians identify themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church (however only 5% claim to have read the gospels, and only 2% regularly go to confession)¹. According to the same poll, Protestants count for less than 1% of the respondents². More accurate figures show that there are around 3,000,000 Protestants in Russia³ which equals to slightly more than 2% of the Russian population.

It would not be an overstatement to say that, in general, both denominations show a considerable amount of prejudice toward each other. Though there have been examples of collaboration in the area of biblical translation, interdenominational dialogues about religious freedom and persecution, there is a commonly shared feeling that the sides are not ready to work towards rapprochement with each other. Occasionally one can hear about the Orthodox getting together with the Protestants to have some tea and discuss their differences⁴, or a Protestant community studying Orthodox theology and preaching about Theotokos⁵. Overall, however, these moments of openness are few and far between.

From my own experience as a faculty member at a Protestant seminary, although limited in experience, I would say that 99% of my students are ignorant of real Orthodox faith and practice. Their opinion is mostly based on their encounters with the so called 'folk' Orthodoxy (a pagan mentality wrapped in religious piety), or on the news which is quick to expose bribery, nepotism and abuse of power among the Orthodox clergy. Sometimes they judge from personal experience, when local officials or even neighbors (many of whom consider themselves to be Orthodox just because they are Russian) make the lives of Protestant believers rather difficult by claiming to defend Orthodox Russia.

Needless to say, the Orthodox perception of Protestants ranges from total ignorance to open hostility. About 5 years ago, when I mentioned to a group of the Orthodox people that I was a Protestant working at a Protestant seminary, they were astonished: "Oh, really? Do we have many Protestants? And they even have seminaries!" Many of those who have actually heard about Russian Protestants have a rather narrow and prejudiced view, such as, "Protestants are sectarians and pro-Western sympathizers". So, there is a sense that each denomination holds its own long-standing bias towards the other and is not ready to recognize others as genuine Christians. I believe that this situation must be changed. It is time Russian Protestants and Orthodox both realized that they are not the only Christians on

¹ The Arena Project by the Research Service "Sreda" URL: <http://sreda.org/opros/arena-reliz>. The survey was done in 2012 and embraced 59900 respondents.

² According to the survey Protestants (Baptists, Evangelicals, Anglicans and Lutherans) and Pentecostals consist two different groups less 0,5% each.

³ Roman Lunin. Russian Protestantism: evangelical Christians as a new social phenomenon // Contemporary Europe. — Moscow: Research Institute of Europe of Russian Academy of Sciences, 2014. — № 3 (59). — P. 133-143. URL: <http://www.soy-europe.ru/2014/3/Lun1.pdf>.

⁴ Baptist church "Evangelie" (the Gospel) in the Moscow suburbs is a frequent participant in such meetings hosted by The Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Elektrougli.

⁵ A charismatic church "Kraugolny Kamen" (the Cornersone) is a good example of that. <https://psmb.ru/a/selah-vremya-tishiny-i-vslushivaniya-v-golos-bozhiy.html>

the planet, or even in Russia, and started taking into account a broader ecumenical context. It is high time they got curious and learned about and from each other. Iron sharpens iron, and I am convinced this engagement will serve mutual rapprochement. Let me list four reasons for this.

First of all, if Russian Christians really care about being faithful witnesses of God to the world, both Protestants and the Orthodox should study each other's traditions and work towards unity. Jesus prayed that His disciples "may all be one" as He and the Father are one, "so that the world may believe" that He was sent from the Father (John 17:21). Earlier in the gospel, Jesus put it differently by saying that his disciples will be known as such if they have "love for one another" (John 13:35). In other words, the world will have a very limited picture of Christ if it does not see unity and love among His followers. Do not get me wrong but at a certain point I stopped believing in the pious Protestant talk about "the invisible Church" and, therefore, "invisible unity" among the Christians. This very old Augustinian idea, developed among the Reformers, now serves many Protestants to justify disunity (even among each other) and unwillingness to change the situation. I believe that unity among Christians should be tangible, so that it may be perceived, appreciated and accepted as the way to learn about God's love. Of course, seeking this unity would require a serious theological dialogue and readiness to change some ecclesiological definitions (I believe this should also prompt the Orthodox theologians to revisit such concepts as "the boundaries of the Church", "canonical territory" and "proselytism").

The second reason for seeking rapprochement is in mutual enrichment and edification. On the one hand, Russian culture is saturated with Orthodox ideas and imagery. The Orthodox faith has shaped Russia in many ways; Russian history, literature, art, philosophy, folk customs – all have been markedly influenced by this faith. It would not be an overstatement to claim that it is virtually impossible to fully appreciate the works of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Leskov, or read the works of Soloviev, Berdyaev and Bulgakov without taking their Orthodox convictions into consideration. Unfortunately, many Western missionaries in the 1990s proved to be ignorant of the vast Christian heritage of Russia and quite often claimed to be the ones who would 'bring Christ' or 'bring the Gospel' to Russia, as if for the first time in history. Yet it is even more sad to see Russian Protestants who are not aware of their own culture. In Russian we call these, "Ivans who do not know their kin". With a better understanding of Orthodoxy, Russian Protestants can rediscover their heritage. By the same token, Russian Orthodox are utterly unaware of the riches of Western theological thought. Many have never heard of Barth, Moltmann, Rahner, Pannenberg... the list goes on. And even though they have heard of Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, and are ready to criticize them, they are very unlikely to have read their works and understand the origins of the Reformation. The Protestant focus on personal conversion and life in Christ could be appreciated; it could be used to awaken Russian believers to real, rather than folk spirituality, to Christian ethics and practices that are fitting for everyday life rather than a monastic community. This leads me to the third point.

The third reason for rapprochement would be a better understanding of the nature of spiritual life. On the one hand, Russian Protestants are well known for holding high moral standards, for being very zealous about practicing what they preach. Once I heard an Orthodox priest saying to his congregation in a sermon, "We should all be like, God forbid,

Baptists. They do not drink, they do not smoke, they do not swear. They have to drop these habits when they join the church. While we, Orthodox priests, have to constantly remind our parishioners that these things are bad and not to be practiced”. It is very true. By stressing personal conversion and commitment, Protestants hold the exclusivist position, “You cannot be a member of our church and live in sin”. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church in general tends to be more inclusive and, thus, more tolerant to human weaknesses. One can easily find examples when priests baptize people without teaching them the basics of faith or having them read the gospels.

In spite of holding high moral standards, however, the Russian Protestants seem to know little about the mechanics of spiritual life. They can hardly demonstrate any consistent teaching about asceticism or spiritual disciplines. That is why often moral behavior or emotional experiences serve them as a measure of spirituality, especially among the Charismatics. Here, I believe, Russian Protestants may draw a lot from the Orthodox tradition, while their way of life may arouse jealousy among the Orthodox believers and make them strive for better standards of morality.

Finally, the fourth reason for rapprochement is related to Bible and theology. Though the Sola Scriptura principle is believed and proclaimed by Protestants, there is considerable room for theological diversity among them. Some believe in speaking in tongues, while others consider it a devilish delusion; some practice infant baptism, while others think it is not biblical; some think penal substitution is at the heart of the gospel, while others think it is a culturally conditioned interpretation of the atonement, etc. It shows that there is no such thing as an objective reading of the Scripture. As William Blake put it, “Both read the Bible day and night, but thou read’st black where I read white”⁶. Our interpretation is always shaped by small denominational traditions, reason, and experience. Sometimes it seems that it would be much better to have one tradition, one mind, one experience that would inform our reading of the sacred texts and save us from doctrinal innovations. Here, I believe, Protestants may learn a great deal from the Orthodox. At the same time, the average Russian Orthodox believer is scarcely familiar with the Bible and is not acquainted with the methods of biblical interpretation. I think that the Protestant example of being daily shaped and guided by the Word may be a good model to follow. Thus, I see at least four areas where both traditions could benefit from each other.

If we speak about educating ecumenically, our primary goal would be in broadening the horizons of our students and, to some extent, changing – or at least challenging – their paradigm of thinking. The school where I teach does not have a particular vision for ecumenical education (with respect to the Orthodox tradition). We accept students from all Protestant traditions and try to foster an atmosphere of openness, mutual understanding and respect. As our motto goes, “We accept everybody but graduate Evangelical Christians”. The atmosphere we create allows students to come out of their denominational ghettos, so to speak, and to understand other fellow Protestants. If in spite of the differences they learn to treat other Protestant traditions and theologies with due respect, I believe this could be a good starting point in understanding and appreciating the Orthodox tradition.

As for the Orthodox tradition, every three years we have a course called, The Russian Orthodox Church, where an Orthodox professor teaches about history and liturgy of the

⁶ William Blake. The Everlasting Gospel.

Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, when we discuss theology in my class, I always try to reach beyond the classic Millard Erickson or Wayne Grudem volumes on theology. We talk a lot about the tradition of the Early Church. Following William Abraham's Canonical Theism proposal⁷, I try to present the heritage of the Church as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we learn to regard episcopacy, liturgy, sacraments, saints, icons and other parts of tradition not as human inventions added to a clear biblical teaching (as Protestants typically do), but as God's gift to the Church in order to guide the believers into the fullness of salvation and truth.

Of course, as I said, this approach requires changing the typical paradigm of thinking. First, one needs to understand that the Bible is itself part of the tradition and, therefore, it cannot alone validate or invalidate certain theological beliefs and practices. In other words, we cannot say, for example, that baptizing infants is wrong, because the Bible does not teach about it. The Bible itself speaks a lot about taking oral tradition seriously (Jude 1:3, see also 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Cor 11:2).

Secondly, one needs to adopt epistemological humility, that is, we should not start any intellectual, let alone theological, pursuit by assuming that we know it all. I keep telling my students, "Before you have your own opinion about another tradition you should, first, hear what it says, then understand it, then examine it, and then make your own judgment". Do not judge prematurely based on what you have heard from your pastor, or read in a brochure. This understanding will help you to approach another tradition as a learner, but not as a teacher or, rather, as explorer, but not as executor.

Historical facts, theological rationale, and personal experience – all are important when we learn about another Christian tradition. However, I believe that if we pursue ecumenical education, first and foremost we should be attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit. He alone can reveal our biases and strongholds. He alone can humble us when we become aware of our lack of love for other Christians, and He alone can guide us into all truth.

⁷ *Abraham W., Vickers J. E., Van Kirk N. B. (ed.). Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church. – Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008.*