

Esau's Birthright and Jacob's Pottage: A Brief Look at Orthodox-Methodist Ecumenism in Twentieth-Century Russia

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The Orthodox Church has been a critical part of Russian society for more than a thousand years. Its role and status as a state church has dominated the Russian political, economic, and social life at times throughout the country's history. Despite several challenges, such as a Soviet attempt to eradicate religion, the Orthodox Church has remained a vital institution. Now, in a more liberalized post-Soviet milieu, the church's influence is growing again, continuing to exercise significant influence over Russia's economic, political, and ideological changes.

The 1990s brought new challenges to the Orthodox Church in Russia. One of these was the resurgence of non-Orthodox Christian confessions, including the Methodist Church—a denomination completely eradicated in Russia during the Soviet era. In light of recent religious laws and democratizing trends, the Orthodox Church in Russia has been forced to more directly engage the Methodists and other new and resurgent confessions. Analyses of Orthodoxy's ecumenical relationships with these confessions can be important to understanding Russian social change and development.

This article provides an account of the ecumenical relationship between the Orthodox Church (OC) and the Methodist Church (MC) in Russia during two periods of the twentieth century—the 1920s and the 1990s—with a focus on the latter, post-Soviet era. Comparatively, Methodism stands unique among Protestant confessions in its history of formal engagement with and support for Russian Orthodoxy. Two patterns emerge from this review. First, ecumenical dialogue with the Methodists appears strongest when the OC is weakest in organizational

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strength and influence. Second, ecumenical dialogue and tension with the MC is not primarily theological, but instead reflects social and political trends, especially those related to an emerging Russian democracy.

The Ethos of Ecumenism

Ecumenism is the engagement between Christian confessions with the goal of church unity. Ecumenism—and its understanding of unity—can be placed on a continuum ranging from informal dialogue to organic or institutional fusion. The Methodist Church has supported ecumenical efforts from its earliest beginnings.

The Methodist Church was a reluctant church, emerging from its Anglican “renewal society” structure only when forced to do so. This occurred when practicing Anglicans were left behind in America as the British vacated the colonies, taking their priests with them. John Wesley, the founder of the renewal movement, did not want to see any of these “renewed” Anglicans left without the benefits only the clergy could provide, such as holy communion and baptism (Norwood 1974). Taking matters into his own hands, Wesley formed a new ecclesiastical institution and sent his own pastors out into the American frontier. This new “Methodist” Church was almost wholly American in its foundation and its polity. Its structure, for example, was comprised of three branches of government. The MC also saw the Protestant principles of individual responsibility reflected in a burgeoning national democracy.

John Wesley was steeped in both Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic piety, and passed on this ecumenical heritage and appreciation to the earliest members (Tuttle, 1968). Methodism, today only a little more than two hundred years old, has already merged more than once with other denominations, has become a worldwide institution, and is actively involved in both ecumenical efforts and interfaith dialogues. The MC is an active member of the premier ecumenical organization, the World Council of Churches (WCC),¹ and single-handedly financially rescued one of the WCC’s regional counterparts, the National Council of Churches. Ecumenism combines Methodism’s theologies of ecclesiology (the nature of the church) and evangelism (the nature of transformation of individuals and systems). John Wesley’s ecumenical watchword (quoting St. Augustine) is well known to Methodists: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberality; in all things, charity.”

The Orthodox Church, on the other hand, has not been a strong proponent of ecumenism. This is largely based on what Orthodoxy understands as the defining principles of the Church. Dulles (1974) identifies Orthodox ecclesiology as predominantly “institutional.” Although this idea does not require organic equivalency with any human-made institution, there is still a need for the Church to be “visible.”² Orthodoxy is triumphalist in that it views itself as a “Society” in conflict with “society.” In the view of the Church, there is a constant fight between good and evil and Christ must win in the end. Orthodoxy’s structure is based on a strict hierarchy of religious authority, including constrained and particular rubrics for the Christian life. The institutional worldviews focus on origins, history, and succession, and therefore are highly conservative. Much like Russia

itself, this conservatism and loyalty to tradition has resulted in an authoritarian culture that is slow to adapt and suspicious of outsiders (Scorer 1996).

OC ecclesiology makes interconfessional dialogue difficult, even impossible at times, especially with Protestant denominations. As Dulles (1974, 147) suggests, "If one holds . . . that there is but one Church in the full theological sense of the term, and combines this with the affirmation that the Church is an organized society, then it follows that no more than one denominational body can legitimately claim to be the Church of Christ" (see also Barnes 2001). This is the basis behind the concept of "canonical territory," in which Russian soil is understood as an exclusively Orthodox domain (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 1999).

There seem to be no compelling reasons, therefore, for the Russian Orthodox Church to engage in ecumenical dialogue with the Methodist Church. However, twice during the twentieth century these two confessions worked together in significant ways. The first period followed the Famine of 1921, and the second occurred during the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s. These two engagements followed similar and important patterns.

Ecumenical Relations During the 1920s

The Russian Famine of 1921 was the cumulative effect of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and an ensuing civil war. Millions died, and the Bolsheviks made the church a scapegoat, as contributors to the famine by hoarding wealth. The Russian government confiscated church treasures and the OC's beloved leader Patriarch Tikhon was arrested on May 6, 1922. It was the first great church-state conflict of Communist Russia (Davis 1995; Malone 1995).

In the wake of this episcopal vacuum, an immediate internal challenge was made to the direction and structure of Russian Orthodoxy. Orthodox "Renovationists" had been supporters of change ever since the 1905 Edict of Toleration. Although there were different camps within this reform movement, the largest of these—the Living Church (LC)—gained the attention and support of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, trying to break the power of the church, were hoping for a schism.³ The Living Church accepted the Bolsheviks at face value, believing they shared a common social democratic philosophy. The majority of the OC clergy were soundly opposed to the Renovationist movement. Bolshevik maneuvering, falsified documents, untrustworthy confessions, and disunity within the Renovationists all worked to severely weaken and threaten the existence of the OC.⁴

During this time, the Methodist Church became very involved in Russian ecumenical affairs. The Methodists, already present in Russia because of the open-door 1905 edict,⁵ were greatly supportive of social democratic reform. They saw the possibility of forming a strong ecumenical alliance with the emerging Living Church. This was wholly reciprocated. Archbishop Antonin of the LC believed that the Methodist experience of American democratic formation would be helpful to the LC and the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolshevik recognition of the LC put a temporary end to religious persecution, and public interest in Orthodoxy

increased. According to Malone (1995, 45), the Methodists “stood ready to assist in the rebuilding of a new church free of the anarchy and rigidity of the past.” Although not without internal argument and controversy, by the end of 1927 the Methodists were on record as supportive of both the Living Church and the Bolshevik government.⁶

Yet the Orthodox schism did not produce a faction (including the LC) that found broad-based popular support. The LC quickly lost its influence, and a reorganized and healthier Orthodox Church emerged. The Methodists continued their ecumenical commitments, now with the OC. This involved a continuance of financial assistance from European and American resources, enough to reopen two OC seminaries in Russia (where all had been previously closed). OC leaders wrote in two unsolicited statements:

The services rendered . . . by the American Methodists and other Christian friends will go down in history of the Orthodox Church as one of its brightest pages in that dark and trying time of the church. . . . Our church will never forget the Samaritan service which . . . your whole church unselfishly rendered us. May this be the beginning of closer friendship for our churches and nations. (as quoted in Malone 1995, 50–51)

With the Living Church no longer in the picture, however, questions were raised both in Russia and abroad about the effectiveness of alliances between church and state. Methodists worldwide expressed a concern over the growing totalitarian elements in Soviet leadership, as well as the institutionalism of the returning OC. These questions and concerns quickly resulted in decreasing support of all kinds, not only for ecumenical efforts, but also for the Methodist “Russia Mission” itself. Faced with this environment, the Methodist presence in Russia quickly dwindled. The 1928 disbanding of the Methodist Russia Mission took place almost without notice, its few remaining members making their way to Estonia to join up with the churches surviving there. Mikhailov (2001) marks the end of the Russian Methodist Church as 1931, coinciding with the flight from Russia of “Sister” Anna Eklund, one of the country’s most influential Methodist missionaries.

On the other hand, the reunited Orthodox Church seemed to be gaining in strength and confidence without the aid of outside groups. The OC had survived the Bolshevik’s scapegoating and state-supported schism. However, as the OC emerged in the 1930s, antireligious movements increased and the church once again struggled for survival. The Russian government turned away from more democratic impulses, and in similar fashion the OC turned toward centralization and institutionalism as a way of surviving the decades ahead.

Ecumenical Relations, 1988–1994: Cooperative Efforts

The precursor to post-Soviet church development was the millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1988. Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, never a militant atheist, was growing more benevolent in his attitude toward the OC for a number of reasons (Cline 2001). Gorbachev viewed the church as a source of support to his burgeoning perestroika, and coupled this with his need

for international approval. He saw the Russian OC millennium as a chance to promote a new image of Russian liberality and human rights to a worldwide audience. The leader also had an eye toward the increased tourism associated with the Orthodox millennium, and its potential to aid the slowing Soviet economy.

Church-state relations improved (Cline 2001), beginning a reversal of the previous decades of church stagnation at best or decimation at worst. Following 1988, not only were old and new churches vitalized, but the OC was also allowed to re-engage in humanitarian efforts. All of this was greatly assisted by the religious reform laws in 1990, as discussed below.

Perestroika not only opened the door for strengthening the Orthodox Church, but aided other confessions as well. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (one of the factions of the 1920s schism) began to vie for status as the true representative of Russian Orthodoxy. Once again, strong questions were raised in religious circles about past OC leadership support of Soviet totalitarianism and persecution. Other confessions, especially evangelical Protestants, began to look at Russia as a field ripe for “godless Communists.” Soviet-OC relations were strained not only when Gorbachev courted the Roman Catholics, but also when Patriarch Alexei refused to support the democratic side of the August 1991 coup attempt. Despite earlier hopes, 1991 and 1992 were a time for the OC to admit its weakness as a Russian and spiritual institution.

Russia’s troubled economic reorganization during this period highlighted the country’s significant humanitarian needs. The OC held to its identity as a channel for aid that could serve as an alternative to the widespread corruption.⁷ However, their disorganization as an institution resulted in inefficiency, and the OC began to appeal for assistance from outside the country, including consenting to collaboration with non-OC entities. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Soviet Peace Foundation initiated many of these overtures and, similar to the events surrounding the Russian Famine of 1921, the MC in America responded with both humanitarian aid and OC clergy training.

In particular, two initiatives emerged out of this new collaboration between the Methodist and Orthodox Churches. The first was the creation of a 1991 Joint Commission on Humanitarian Aid, which represented the MC, the Soviet Peace Fund, and the OC. The OC did not feel it could officially sign on, however, likely due to its historical hesitancy to engage in ecumenical efforts with Protestants. There may also have been distrust of the role of the Soviet Peace Foundation, which had been viewed by some as a holdover of Soviet social institutionalism and control. Regardless, the Joint Commission’s task focused on food shipments,

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education of the clergy, and medical assistance. Hospitals throughout Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan received MC aid (Kimbrough 1995), with three hospitals in the Moscow region alone receiving nearly \$5 million worth of medicine.

The second of these ecumenical initiatives was an agreement for humanitarian aid distribution in the Moscow region. This was an unprecedented ecumenical partnership, which involved the MC and the Russian OC as well as the World Council of Churches, the Baptist Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Church, and the Lutheran Community. The MC was identified as the lead agency for these relief efforts, and the OC's Archbishop Sergei signed the agreement. The initiative was successful, and more than four million pounds of food was distributed between December 1991 and July 1992 (Kimbrough 1995).

In a remarkable action, private encouragement by OC leadership was given for the reestablishment of the Methodist Church in Russia. A formal blessing by Patriarch Alexei was part of a 1992 Methodist Easter service, involving a satellite link between Moscow's Red Square and the Broadmoor United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana (Istomina 1996). This was broadcast by television throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Patriarch Alexei also invited Methodist leaders to a private meeting at his home in December 1993, where joint ministry in the eastern regions was one of many discussion points (Kimbrough 1995).

Growing Tension

Although appearing to be a positive direction for OC–MC relations, the private setting of the December 1993 meeting indicated something other than just an intimate environment. It was an intentional shift away from the Easter 1992 public arena of Red Square, which had been met by Orthodox protestors despite Alexei's presence. Orthodox sentiment was now building quickly against “non-Russian” faiths. Kimbrough (1995) and Davis (1995) chronicle a rapid and intentional distancing by the OC from cooperation with Russian “sectarians,” that is, non-Orthodox Christians. A national OC newspaper article criticizing a 1993 Billy Graham Crusade in Moscow is representative of this. The article stated that Protestants were treating Russians like persons without their own “authentic religious roots, faith, or culture” (Kimbrough 1995, 106).

Three major reasons that account for this growing tension were the passage of the 1990 law of religious tolerance, the massive influx of religious organizations into Russia in the early 1990s, and the growing strength of the OC during this period.⁸

The 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations

This 1990 law of religious tolerance was similar to its 1905 precursor. Both emerged as parts of liberalizing and democratizing movements, and both served to weaken the role of the Orthodox Church in Russia. This weakness was not apparent at first, however. The 1988 OC millennium saw a rapid reversal of previous antireligious attitudes from principals of the Gorbachev cabinet and much of the Communist populace.

“Even famous atheists,” writes Davis (1995, 69), “deplored the persecutions of the past and hailed the cultural and political contributions of Orthodoxy to the development of the Russian spirit.” Minor laws that emerged out of the Supreme Soviet also restored some property rights (Cline 2001), reversing decades of policies that were intended to limit the role of religion in Russia. (Later the Yeltsin government would seek the favor of the Church by transferring many church properties from state to OC control and by providing resources for the restoration of important church monuments and properties across the country.)

Gorbachev not only wanted the OC to benefit from perestroika, but other Christian and non-Christian religious organizations as well. This was reflected in the 1990 law. Two of the clauses in particular were problematic for the OC. The first allowed non-Orthodox confessions the same rights as the OC in gaining converts, holding worship services, and engaging in other activities essential to the life of a religious organization. The second restricted the nationwide institution of the OC from becoming a legal entity. This had unintended consequences. For example, although the bill did allow ownership of property for religious purposes, without a legal national status it was unclear exactly who was the owner. When a local congregation or society disbanded, the property involved was not automatically available to the governing agencies of the OC. This fueled regional battles over property and influence, greatly dissipating the energy and resources of the OC.

The Methodist Church, along with other non-OC confessions, benefited from the 1990 law. The MC's presence in Russia during the early 1990s echoes the earlier pattern of the 1920s. In both instances the Methodists entered Russia as a response to liberalized religious laws and in support of a more democratic government. In both instances the MC first established its influence in Russia through humanitarian efforts (in cooperation with the OC whenever possible), then flourished as a religious organization in proportion to diminishing OC institutional strength.

Influx of Religious Organizations

The number of Protestant and other missionaries entering Russia from 1992–1994 is so large that it has been labeled an “invasion” (Tanton 1999). By the end of 1992, more than seven hundred “Western” religious organizations were active in Russia on at least short-term bases, and most of these missionaries are organized, well funded, and often ignorant or discounting of the OC. Larry Uzzell (1997) makes the following observation:

I think that Protestants, and especially American Protestants, have a lot to answer for in the way that they have poisoned the waters of religious dialog in Russia. Many Protestants have gone over to Russia . . . as if they were going into a land that had never heard the Gospel preached before, that did not have its own Christian history. They have done so without studying Orthodoxy. Sometimes I run into American Protestant missionaries who have never even read the text of the Orthodox liturgy or who have never set foot in an Orthodox Church before going to Russia. It's understandable that Russians react with great annoyance to that phenomenon, and I think the people who have behaved that way have helped to contribute to the religious repression that we're now seeing in so many of the provinces.

The disorganization of the OC in the late 1980s and early 1990s created an opportunity for non-OC efforts. Adding to this was the “piece-by-piece, stage-by-stage detachment of Orthodox communities in former Soviet republics” (Davis 1995, 104), causing the Russian OC leadership to expend significant energy and resources toward simple preservation and “re-Christianizing” the lapsed Orthodox themselves.

But there was another kind of awareness emerging. According to Davis (1995, 223), “the historical faith of Russia is Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy is deeply imbedded in the Russian soul. It defines a Russian’s sense of nation, history, and identity, even when the individual is not devout.” This mindset helped strengthen popular and political support for the OC following the fall of the Soviet Union. As early as mid-1991, OC publications called for a moratorium on foreign proselytizing. In 1993, even while in dialogue with the MC, Patriarch Alexei II began to make appeals to Yeltsin to halt the influx of religious organizations, and gained Duma support for legal restriction. Illegal activities by independent religious movements added strength to the OC’s position.

Growing Strength of the OC

Despite many challenges, the Orthodox Church’s growth and recovery in the early 1990s is significant. In 1986, for example, there were 6,794 OC societies registered in the Soviet Union (Pravoslavnyaya Moskva 1994). By 1990, there were 10,000, and in 1993 there were 14,000. Other critical arenas, such as the number of clergy students and convents, also showed increases.

With its gaining of strength, the Orthodox Church was able to turn its attention to solving internal problems and relying less on outside aid and assistance. This resulted in weaker ecumenical dialogue. Even though the MC was against proselytizing and is committed to supporting the work of the OC in Russia (Kimbrough 1995), the tradition of ecumenical talks between the MC and the OC soon became erratic. The Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Russia, Ruediger Minor, believes that since the mid-1990s the Orthodox church in general no longer acknowledges past cooperation, but now “feels offended by the Methodist presence in Russia and sees the Methodist presence as just one part of . . . a Protestant invasion into Orthodox territory” (Tanton, 1999). This view of Methodism is a significant departure by the OC from earlier and more cooperative initiatives and dialogues.

The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations

The growing tension between the Methodist and the Orthodox Churches peaked with the 1997 Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Whereas the 1990 law served to further more democratic impulses in Russia (Cline 2001), the 1997 law reflected a more conservative and protectionist approach. Robinson (2000) provides the following summary of the most restrictive clauses:

1. Differentiating between religious organizations and religious groups. Only the former will be given full rights.

2. Protecting the Orthodox Church as an “inalienable part of . . . Russian historical, spiritual, and cultural heritage.”
3. Giving second-class status to certain established faiths, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. They will receive “State respect.”
4. Banning activity by missionaries from foreign religious groups, unless they first obtain invitations from Russian organizations.
5. Denying status and rights to any religious group unless it has been operating in Russia for at least fifteen years. Only after fifteen years can they register with the government. They will have no guaranteed rights to publish, worship in public places, invite foreign missionaries or guests, lease buildings, establish schools, have bank accounts, conduct pilgrimages, distribute or import literature, hire employees, obtain deferments for clergy, or own property.
6. Permitting courts to suppress religious groups if they are considered to have promoted “religious dissension” or to have harmed the “morality” or “health” of people. These terms are open to very wide interpretation.
7. Denying faith groups “all-Russian status” unless they have congregations in at least half of Russia’s provinces or have at least one-hundred thousand members in the country and been in existence for fifty years.

Homer and Uzzell (1998) recount that in September 1996, the journalist Yakov Krotov criticized Vsevolod Chaplin, a priest representing the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department of External Church Relations. Krotov argued for reaffirming the 1990 law, as it was the most “American” and therefore most democratic. Chaplin argued that this was exactly the point for revision: an American model would not suit Russia.⁹

Chaplin’s argument, reflecting both regional concerns as well as the growing acceptance of an Orthodox religiosocial environment, heavily influenced the 1997 law. For example, the preamble to the 1997 law mentions the “special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia’s spirituality and culture.” The U.S. State Department’s 2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom in Russia suggests an even greater role: “The Russian Orthodox Church was involved actively in drafting the 1997 law on religion. . . . The head of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, participates in high-level official events and appears to have direct access to and influence with officials of the executive branch” (Bureau of Democracy 2000).

The most controversial of the 1997 articles focuses on restricting organizations that did not exist during Communist or pre-Communist times. As Robinson summarizes above, recently established and non-Russian religious organizations were severely curtailed. The 1997 law as a whole is complex and provoked fear among some that many groups will be required to disband. Ironically, the law’s restrictions also seemed to target the Methodist Church (Gordon 1997), despite support that helped strengthen Russia and Russian Orthodoxy for over a century. Lehmann (1998, 487–88) suggests that the MC may have inadvertently assisted the undoing of more recent ecumenical relations: “The 1990s produced what for

the Russian Orthodox Church must have been a frightening repeat of the situation in the 1920s, when Baptists and Evangelicals were able to win new converts by emphasizing ‘. . . the social side of their faith, which on the surface at all events, was in harmony with the social objects of the revolution.’”

Into a New Millennium: Pottage or Birthright?

In September of 2002, the Methodist Church celebrated the tenth anniversary of its Russian resurgence. Beginning with just a handful of short-term unofficial representatives in 1990, by 1994 the MC had registered twenty-two Russian “Bible Groups” and congregations, and at its ten-year mark had grown to 109 congregations, one regional Bible

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College, a Russia-wide distance-based pastor’s training program, and a residential seminary. With approximately 5,000 adherents, the Methodist Church in Russia was stronger in 2002 than it had ever been in its more than a century existence (RUMC 2002).

Yet this growth must be kept in perspective, since the

MC was not truly competing with the OC or even keeping up with the many other Russian Protestant confessions (such as the Lutherans and the Baptist Union) that survived the purges.¹⁰ A new element further weakened its profile in the face of the OC. By the turn of the millennium the Methodist Church in Russia was almost wholly indigenous. Although a very few episcopal, seminary, and consultant positions were still being held by foreigners, only three out of the 109 locations were not served by local Russian leaders or pastors. This development of an indigenous Russian Methodist Church was intentional, and did help remove the accusations of foreign proselytizing. However, it was the formidable international strength and global presence of Methodism that met with and inadvertently challenged the Russian Orthodox Church both in the 1920s and the 1990s. As this international presence slowly gave way to a much smaller and developing indigenous ethos, Methodism no longer seemed to be much of a threat¹¹ and the MC (along with other indigenous non-OC churches) became increasingly vulnerable to governmental harassment and the target of human rights violations (Uzzell 2003).¹²

Although the reentry of Methodism into Russia in the early 1990s formally incorporated an ecumenical component, today few Russian Methodists give much hope for good relationships with the OC. A former Russian leader of the regional Methodist Bible College privately expressed her belief that not even the societies founded on the work of the late Father Alexander Menn—known for their theological openness and ecumenical influence on many Orthodox leaders—have been helpful to local Protestant churches, such as the Methodists.

In truth, the most helpful Orthodox-Methodist ecumenical effort of recent years has not involved any formal organizations or councils. Rather, it has focused on a series of academic gatherings from 1999 to 2002 (Bloom 1999; Young 2003). The fact that all were held outside of Russia and that the meetings resulted in a theological publication indicates how far removed is this current ecumenical effort from that of local concern.¹³ In Russia, the tension between Methodism and Orthodoxy seldom reflects explicit theological issues. The most important dynamics lie within the strain of democratizing impulses and the relative health and strength of the Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

Rather than being engaged within a sphere of Christian doctrine, it appears as if Orthodox-Methodist ecumenism has been locked in a competing polity. During the twentieth century an increased Methodist presence in Russia coincided with moments of heightened democratic populism, as reflected in the 1905 Edict of Tolerance and early Bolshevik reform. Further, the health of the Methodist Church in Russia has been proportionate to the institutional weakness of the Orthodox Church. Ecumenism was stronger during times of Orthodox weakness, and was expressed primarily through joint humanitarian efforts. However, in times of greater Orthodox institutional strength, ecumenical relations were strained and even severed.

A more democratic milieu beginning in the 1990s allowed the Methodist Church the unique opportunity to reestablish itself as a Russian denomination. The Orthodox Church is also reestablishing its strength, however, and will likely continue to challenge both the presence of Methodism and more formal ecumenical dialogues. If the Methodist Church wishes to continue as an active Russian religious organization with an ecumenical commitment it will need to engage in several courses of action. The first action requires the Russian Methodist Church, while continuing to indigenize, to remain in close partnership with global denominational efforts. These include supporting current U.S. and other governmental policies that strengthen international religious freedom. U.S. embassy officials must stay formally engaged in religious freedom talks in Russia at both the federal and individual case levels (Bureau of Democracy 2000). The U.S. mission also involves NGOs in its work to further religious tolerance and international humanitarian efforts, which has at times included the Methodist Church (Kimbrough, 1995). The Russian and international Methodist communities must partner in supporting such efforts.

A second course of action lies in strengthening the Russian judicial system. Krylova (2000) and Homer and Uzzell (1997) stress the importance of the courts' responses to Russia's religious laws.¹⁴ The courts have historically been marked by religious regionalism and seemingly arbitrary decisions, and thus may provide the greatest barrier to fair religious laws and their application. The reform and strengthening of Russia's legal institutions would be in the best interests, not only of non-Orthodox confessions, but also of the country's overall religious culture. The establishment of Russia as a "multinational, multiconfessional state," says Krasikov (1996), is the only acceptable goal for a progressive Russia.

A third course of action builds on an underdeveloped tradition of ecumenism and interconfessional dialogue within Orthodoxy. Known as *sobornost*, Berman (1998) contends that this tradition may yet be the best long-term course of action. He believes that

the ultimate resolution of the intense inter-church, inter-denominational conflicts that will continue to exist in Russia, both among citizens of Russia and between Russians and foreigners, must be undertaken not at the level of legislation but at the level of dialogue and negotiation among all the conflicting groups. There is a strong but almost untranslatable word for this in the tradition of Russian Orthodoxy: *sobornost*—conciliarity, collectivity, or perhaps, to coin a new word, “communification,” a bringing of diverse groups together into community through the power of speech, and indeed, the power of prayer.

Unofficial and academic ecumenical gatherings are helpful, but cannot substitute for larger and more representative efforts. It is significant that following the passage of the pro-Orthodox 1997 religious laws the Orthodox Church still maintained a formal presence at some key dialogues. These must be more formally recognized and appreciated by the Protestant communities. Courses of action that focus on international religious freedom, the Russian judicial system, and the Orthodox tradition of *sobornost* should greatly strengthen ecumenism between the Orthodox and Methodist confessions.

NOTES

1. The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1948 and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. WCC membership consists of “400 million Christians represented through more than 340 churches, denominations and fellowships in 120 countries and territories throughout the world” (World Council of Churches 2001). On the ecumenical continuum, the WCC represents a “confederated” initiative, that is, interconfessional dialogue leading towards cooperation, while maintaining the sovereignty of the participating groups (Cairns 1981).

2. “Visibility” is at the heart of the recent Orthodox dissent to the Charta ecumenica, Europe’s most ambitious ecumenical effort. The Charta reflects the work of more than 120 mainline churches in Europe, including the Russian Orthodox Church. The Moscow Patriarchate informed the committee that its ecumenical goal to reach “visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith” was unacceptable, because such ecumenical visibility would include non-Orthodox churches (Brown 2001).

3. The Bolsheviks may have had the largest role in forcing the schism. According to Coffman, “The state didn’t invent the conflict; since the 1890s some church leaders had been calling for reforms such as separation of church and state, decentralization of authority, worship in the living Russian language, and an end to monastic control of higher church offices. But it was Leon Trotsky’s idea, later adopted by Vladimir Lenin, to use the conflict to destroy the church from within” (2000, 1).

4. Malone (1995) says that the three main factions breaking away from the OC typically used secret meetings and the purging of priests as methods to gain control. When a second “All Russia Sobor” was held in 1923, it was largely because of the endorsement of Patriarch Tikhon, which was likely forged.

5. Several other non-Orthodox confessions also took advantage of the Edict, including the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church shares a similar ecclesiology with the OC, and was represented in greater numbers in Russia than the Methodists. These similar attributes caused conflict with the OC both in the 1920s and 1930s as well as following perestroika, since the Catholics appeared a more likely competitor than the Protestants.

6. It is important to note here that Brovkin (1998) has found archival documents that suggest that the Renovationists were not completely free agents, but in fact had contacts with the GPU. This hints at the possibility of ulterior motives for their contacts with Americans. This point deserves further research scrutiny that might define more clearly the extent and nature of these relationships.

7. This identity may be a false one, paving the way for those churches (like the MC) that historically have done a better job at social service. Lehmann (1998, 487) states that “the Russian Orthodox Church has always been very poor in serving social functions beyond providing baptism, weddings, and funerals,” and during the height of the Soviet era, church life represented little more than attending services and observing church ritual (Scorer 2001).

8. Of course all of these sources of tension, especially that of the Orthodox Church promoting strict measures against the activities of foreign missionaries, must also partially be understood in the historical backdrop of the possible connections between the GPU, the Renovationists, and the Methodist Church in the 1920s pointed out in footnote 6 above.

9. Interestingly, it was the Orthodox Church in America that offered some of the greatest public caution to a possible misapplication of the 1997 law. “As American Orthodox Christians, we are concerned that the legislation clearly gives opportunities for over-reaction by Russian society and the Russian state and carries within it the possibility of new suppression of religious liberty in various parts of Russia” (Orthodox Church 1997, 7).

10. The non-Orthodox Christians represent a very small percentage of Christians in Russia. “In 1996, 83 percent . . . followed Russian Orthodoxy, 13 percent...[listed] no specific affiliation, and less than 1 percent identified themselves as Catholics or Protestants” (Lehmann 1998, 467). Measuring the actual numbers of any faith in Russia, however, is a difficult task (Elliott 2001).

11. In 1999 a survey was conducted of Russian attitudes toward specific Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths (Kääriäinen and Furman 2002). Respondents were asked to rate each religion as “very good,” “good,” “bad,” or “very bad.” Orthodoxy received the most positive ratings (94 percent of respondents identified Orthodoxy as either “good” or “very good.”) Those receiving the most negative ratings were understood to be either “new” or “active” religions. Methodism was below the average and median in all ratings. Perhaps most telling, Methodism received the greatest number of “no opinions” of any denomination or faith included in the survey.

12. Anecdotal reports from Methodist pastors and lay leaders describing low-level forms of harassment throughout Russia and the CIS are common.

13. The work in question (Kimbrough 2002), however, is a very important addition to Orthodox-Methodist theological understanding.

14. Ratushny (1999) notes the historic lack of an independent judiciary. In comparison to democratic judicial goals of independence and impartiality, the Soviet system was wholly dependent on the party, lacked impartiality, and was not respected. This was due primarily to a mix, rather than separation, of governmental powers: the Party and the courts were essentially the same. The judicial system arrived in the 1990s, grossly underdeveloped and lacking any strong theoretical foundation.

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