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Preferred Citation: Naletova, Inna. *Orthodoxy and Gnosticism in Russia. The conflict between the Orthodox Church and American missionary groups in the post-Soviet Russia.* In: *Extraordinary Times*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 11: Vienna 2001



Orthodoxy and Gnosticism in Russia: The conflict between the Orthodox Church and American missionary groups in the post-Soviet Russia

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a reflection on the religious situation in contemporary Russia, and it is based on the writings of Eric Voegelin, Harold Bloom and Nikolay Berdyaev. In his *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Eric Voegelin interpreted some modern mass movements, including Marxism and communism, as variants of ancient gnosticism. A similar view, only in application to religion in America, was defended by Harold Bloom in his *American Religion: The Emergence of Post-Christian Nation*. Although Nikolay Berdyaev did not write on gnosticism specifically, his study of the religious roots of the Russian Communism can be seen as an analysis of the development of gnostic tendencies in the Russian society of the past century. This essay applies the insights of these scholars to the religious situation in contemporary Russia and presents the conflict between American Protestant missionaries and the Russian Orthodox Church as the clash between two different religious temperaments, two different belief systems, which had a long history of turbulent co-existence in Russia: the Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian (sectarian) form of gnosticism.

1. The conflict: a brief outline

More than ten years have past since the beginning of Russia's post-communist religious revival. In 1989, for first time after seventy years of oppression, the Orthodox Church was able to re-appear in Russia's public life. Today, it numbers about 80 million of believers, more than a half of the Russian population.¹ In 1990, the adoption of new religious legislation provided the legal protections of equality and freedom to all religious organizations. The door to foreign religious mission was broadly opened and, between 1989 and 1997, Russia accepted an unprecedented wave of missionaries such that their arrival was perceived as a "crusade" or "invasion."² During these years, the number of missionary groups entering the country rose from 311 in 1989 to approximately 5,000 in 1997.³ The missionaries were allowed to rent and to buy property, to publish and to disseminate religious literature. They had practically unlimited access to public media and educational institutions and could preach and proselytize anywhere and anyhow they wanted.⁴ The 1990 Russian religious law was more friendly toward foreign missions and newly formed religious groups than the similar laws of any European country.⁵ However, many in Russia viewed the presence of foreign missionaries as an illegitimate intrusion into their religious identity, a violation of their freedom of consciousness and

¹ For a recent update of the statistical data, see the site of the Moscow Patriarchy, <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/today>, and the site of the Russian Embassy in Washington, USA, "Religion in Russia" at <http://www.russianembassy.org>. For sociological analysis of these statistics, see Alexander Morosov, "Scol'ko v Rossii Pravoslavnich?" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 20, 1997.

² See, for example, Mark Elliott and Anita Deyneka, "Protestant Missionaries in the Former Soviet Union" and Mitropolit Kirill of Kaliningrad, "Gospel and Culture" in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, ed., John Witte and Michael Bourdeaux (1999), 197-221 and 73-75, respectively.

³ Elliott and Deyneka, "Protestant Missionaries," 199-201.

⁴ Lawrence A. Uzzell, the director of the Keston Institute, pointed out to many examples of missionaries' inappropriate cultural behavior when they used this freedom for the purpose of proselytism. In the early 1990s, for example, American missionaries sought (and often received) access to public schools to preach to schoolchildren during regular school hours. See Lawrence Uzzell, "Guidelines for American Missionaries in Russia" in Witte and Bourdeaux, *op. cit.*, 328.

⁵ See John Witte's "Introduction" in Witte and Bourdeaux, 1-27, and an analysis of Russian religious legislation in Jeremy Gunn, "Caesar's Sword," *Emory International Law Review* 12: 43-198.

an enterprise deeply unethical and even threatening to Russia's independent national development.⁶

Particularly acute tensions arose between the Russian Church and American Protestant groups. Already in 1993, the Church began to promote the idea of imposing legal restrictions on missionary activity and, in 1997 (with the initiative of the Duma), new corrections to the law were accepted. According to the 1997 law, most missionary groups fell under the category of "non-traditional" and were closed or denied registration. Significant number of missionaries left the country.⁷ After 1997, international human rights organizations evaluated the Russian religious freedom situation as continuously deteriorating.

The problems that American Protestant missionaries experienced in Russia have been commonly understood as resulting from the clash between the Russian traditional mentality and the rising democracy and pluralism. However, this tendency to see tradition and modernity as polar oppositions (and the two religious groups as representing them) increase misunderstandings on the cultural level and may lead to wrong policy solutions. Viewing this situation in the sharply dualistic terms, human rights organizations, legal institutions, governments and media groups tend to focus mainly on the political, economic and legal aspects, while paying little attention to its specifically religious meaning.⁸ Perhaps this is one reason why their efforts to improve the conditions of religious freedom in Russia have been less effective than expected: in many cases these efforts intensified religious tensions instead of mediating them.⁹ The Church, in contemporary Russia, strongly insists on

⁶ A theological difference between the Orthodox and Protestant understanding of Christian mission – the difference between proselytism and evangelism – must be mentioned here. See Witte, "Introduction," *op. cit.*, 21-24.

⁷ The dynamic of the decline of the number of Protestant communities in Russia after 1997, see Anatoly Krasikov, "From the Annals of Spiritual Freedom: Church-State Relations in Russia," in *East European Constitutional Review* 7, no.2 (1998): 75-85.

⁸ As a challenge to the general approach the works of Harold Berman should be noted. See, for example, his "Freedom of Religion in Russia" in Witte and Bourdeaux (1999), *op. cit.*, 265-84. Paul Valliere's article "Russian Orthodoxy and Human Rights," in *Religious Diversity and Human Rights*, eds., Irene Bloom, J. Paul Martin, and W. L. Proudfoot (1996), 278-92, is also rather exceptional in its sensitivity to specifically religious side of the issue. The works of Keston Institute in Oxford also should be mentioned as presenting a balanced view on the religious situation in Russia.

⁹ See the Moscow Patriarchy's views on US Department of State's evaluation of religion and human rights in Russia "Church Objects to US State Department Report" posted at Stetson News service on September 8, 2000. The negative sides of the, so called, Smith Amendment

its rights to speak as the voice of the Russian nation and resists sharing its “canonical territory” with other Christian groups. The latter, in turn, ignores the Church’s traditions and opposes its demands on having any privileged position in Russia. The Russian and American governments, on local and international levels, including local and international NGOs have become involved in the conflict. The opposition led to numerous explosive situations all over the country.¹⁰

The efforts of international human rights organizations to mediate this situation face a serious problem. Attempts to ensure Russia’s compliance with international laws and agreements do not find enough support in Russian society. That is, these laws and agreements are perceived as being imposed on Russia from “outside” and so being alien to its indigenous culture and tradition. Popular distrust of official laws—so-called Russian “legal nihilism”—has become a serious obstacle to those who have tried to use law to develop human rights in Russia. A gap between the people’s intuition of justice (which is ultimately religious and based on tradition) and the justice expressed in the official laws has created a situation in which the people’s moral feelings are not reflected in public life. Public life, therefore, was perceived as subjected to laws alien to people’s beliefs, values and principles. Suspicion and distrust of the rule of law resulted from this gap and have led to various conflicts (including the ones between the Church and missionaries) which have proved to be difficult to solve without paying close attention to the people’s traditions, customs, historical memories, and religious beliefs.¹¹

Looking at Russia’s post-Communist religious developments, observers begin to talk about Russia returning to its imperial past and Russian Orthodoxy as transforming itself into a state ideology. Almost 30 percent of the Russian population, according to one poll, think that the Russian Church should enjoy the support and

were pointed out in the 2000 Report of the US Commission for Religious Freedom posted at www.uscirf.gov.

¹⁰ The US Commission for International Religious Freedom was created to improve the conditions of religious freedom all over the world. Russia was one of the first countries taken by the Commission at the focus of its attention.

¹¹ For general discussion of this issue see Harold Berman, *Faith and Order: The Reconciliation of Law and Religion* (1993). An attempt to study religious roots of the Russian “legal nihilism,” see Shara Abraham, “The Perpetuation of Legal Nihilism,” a reported speech by Boris Topornin, the President of the Institute of State and Law, Moscow, *Human Rights Brief* 7 (Winter 2000): 17-18.

protection of the state.¹² President Putin, in particular, emphasized the negative influence of foreign religions and the importance of the Russian Church in “maintain[ing] the population’s spiritual and moral welfare and counter[ing] the aversive impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.”¹³ These and many other facts and events were able to create the strong impression that Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Communism are phenomena of a common nature and that Orthodox faith, because of the very nature of its beliefs, has been an obstacle to democratic developments in Russia.¹⁴

Without taking into consideration people’s religious beliefs, the references to political or social implications deriving from these beliefs risk becoming too reductive and, therefore, misleading for those who use them for policy making. In the following analysis, my focus will be on the religious issues of the conflict. I will try to show that, in spite of the fact that both sides of the conflict claim to be Christian, they have different spiritual and belief systems. The tensions between them, as I argue, are older than they seem to be: they have deeper historical roots than the recent tensions between Russia’s newly built democracy and its Communist past. The conflict between Russian Orthodox and American missionaries is a conflict of “two religions within one,” a split, an ongoing “Reformation,” an extension of a battle between Orthodoxy and the gnostic tendencies developing in the Russian society and in the Russian Church, at least, since the time of the Great Schism and Revolution.

¹² See a report of the Russian Independent Institute for Social and National Problems “Religiousness of Russian Youth” posted at Stetson News Service, December 14, 1998. See also Putin’s concept of Russia’s national security in *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obosrennie*, January 14, 2000.

¹³ “Experts Predict Putin Presidency Will Support Orthodoxy,” *Newsroom*, April 3, 2000, posted in Stetson’s News Service.

¹⁴ The view that Orthodoxy holds its own spiritual and territorial war against the West is a thought-provoking issue that is discussed in media and in scholarly literature more and more often. “Is there an eastern-Orthodox block in world politics?” This question appeared in *The Economist* in a book review of Victoria Clark, *Why Angels Fall* (2000). The author of the book, apparently, became convinced that the answer to this question was yes. See “When Cultures Don’t Collide,” *The Economist*, October 14, 2000.

2. Nikolay Berdyaev on religious roots of Russian Communism

In his study of origin of the Russian Communism, Nikolay Berdyaev presented a now classic thesis that the Russian religious mentality and communist ideology have much in common. This commonality, according to Berdyaev, takes its roots not in the Russian Orthodox faith but in Russian sectarian and schismatic psychology. Berdyaev admits, however, that it is difficult to draw a clear line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy because the two have often co-existed in the Church. Yet, in times of social and economic upheavals, in times of large-scale social changes, the contrast between them becomes more clear and a split inevitable. Although Berdyaev's analysis was focused on Russia of the beginning of the twentieth century (the time of transition between Tsarist rule and the Soviet regime), it provides a valuable illustration to Russia's contemporary problems.

The revolutionary mass movement of the beginning of the last century found its inspiration not only in Western socialist ideas and the misery of Russia's economic situation, but also in Russian messianic spirituality, in people's readiness for an apocalyptic solution to social problems, and in their hope for a radical transformation of the whole society and creation of a "kingdom on earth." The belief in the existence of a perfect realm of freedom and happiness—the city of Kitezh—played an important role in Berdyaev's analysis. This originally pagan belief was preserved in numerous Russian sects and cults and, as Berdyaev showed, it existed together with the belief in Russia's specific mission in the world: the vision of Moscow as the Third Rome. At the turn of the century, these pagan and Christian beliefs merged with Marxist and socialist views and formed, as Berdyaev put it, a "new religion" which replaced the official Church. Finding no support for itself within the official faith, the religious energy of people turned outside and became schismatic:

From this arose the legend of the city of Kitezh hidden behind the lake. The people were seeking the City of Kitezh. A keen apocalyptic consciousness came into being... Schism became a characteristic phenomenon of Russian life... Russian revolutionary intelligentsia of the nineteenth century was to become sectarian...¹⁵

The origin of Russian Communism, to follow Berdyaev, is to be found not in the Orthodox faith itself but in the Church's institutional weakness, namely, in its inability to free itself from sectarian and pagan beliefs and to present people with a

¹⁵ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (1964), 12.

spiritual alternative to the desperate present as well as to the coming totalitarian future.¹⁶ The alternative was found in sectarian (essentially gnostic) movements. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, these movements reached their revolutionary phase, the Church was unable to withstand the battle with it. Being true to its nature, however, it condemned the rising Soviet power and, as the result, it ceased to exist as an independent institution for almost seventy years.¹⁷

The idea of finding a city of Kitezh and rebuilding a new and perfect society on the ruins of the old one continues to attract those in Russia who are deeply disappointed in the present and are hoping for a better future: those who want to solve, perhaps too quickly, the existing social problems. The gnostic flight from the oppressive and confusing world toward a “just society,” toward a new and better social order, which is totally different and even alien to the present one, seems more acceptable and more believable than the spiritual requirements of the Church. The Church’s affirmation of the world (including its present conditions) as grounded in the transcendent order of things (and, therefore, not absolutely lacking divine grace) may be more difficult for those who are deeply disappointed in their life to accept. The idea of gnostic revolution or gnostic flight from the world may be more acceptable—more comforting. The insecurity that one finds in traditional beliefs, together with the easy-to-discover institutional weakness of the Church, lead away from Orthodoxy and tradition toward a search for firmer foundations for human existence: away from the Church toward occult practices, utopian ideas, and more “modern” religious practices—away from the uncertainty of beliefs toward the safety of knowledge.

Today, the Russian Church finds itself in a position similar to that of the end of the nineteenth century. A hundred years ago, the Church was opposed to revolutionary intellectuals; today it is opposed to the activists of religious freedom.

¹⁶ For example, in Dostoevsky’s “Brothers Kharamazovs,” the youngest of three brothers, pious Aleousha, was supposed to leave the Church after the death of his spiritual teacher Zossima and become a revolutionary leader.

¹⁷ Another scholar of Russian sectarianism, Pavel Miliukov, analyzed the change in religious outlook of the Russian society brought by the rise of sectarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was a change, he argued, from mass rituals of worship, essential to Orthodoxy, toward a more individual form of faith, which was more characteristic of sectarian beliefs. This transition from sacramental piety to a more individual one can be seen as precursor of the transition from the Tsarist rule to Bolshevism. See Pavel Miluikov, *Ocherki po istorrii Russkoi kulturi*, quoted in Oleg Kharkordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia* (1999), 56.

Equally righteous, aggressively enthusiastic, practically oriented and self-assured, these present day activists know with great certainty how the society should be organized and how different religious groups should deal with each other. They have the knowledge which the traditional faith does not have. Ease in dealing with national traditions and history should be added to the list of qualities that today's missionaries and religious rights activists share with their revolutionary predecessors. Today, like a hundred years ago, tradition and history have become a battlefield between Orthodoxy and schism, between the faith and its gnostic interpretations.

The origin of the Russian Communism, to summarize Berdyaev's position, lies in the religious energy of the Russian people which turned in the direction of schism and broke from the Church's spiritual and sacramental guidance. The dogmatism of the Russian people, their search after social justice and hope to build the kingdom of God upon earth, their messianism and faith in Russia's own path of development have been intensified by the difficult economic situation and shaped by Marxist social theory, thus making the Communist ideals believable.¹⁸ In the formation of a new order, as Berdyaev stressed, the Russian sectarian and schismatic psychology played an immense role. The revolution brought to power a particular type of people: those whose thought and temperament were indeed religious, yet essentially non-Orthodox.

3. Eric Voegelin on gnostic mass movements

If Nikolay Berdyaev viewed Russian Marxism and communism as forms of sectarian deviation from Orthodoxy, Eric Voegelin studied these movements in the European context and presented them, together with psychoanalysis, progressivism, national socialism and fascism, as the modern expressions of ancient gnosticism. These two approaches are complementary.¹⁹ The sectarian features of Russian communism in Berdyaev's analysis correspond to the gnostic features of modern mass movements presented in Voegelin's work. Taken together, they help us to reconstruct a historical continuity of the gnostic movements in Russia from their sectarian past to their culmination in the early twentieth century. They also put the

¹⁸ Berdyaev, 140-141.

¹⁹ In the introduction to his "Science, Politics and Gnosticism" (1968), Voegelin briefly refers to Lenin's activism as the revolutionary phase of gnostic movements in Europe.

present religious conflict within a broader historical and religious perspective thus allowing us to better understand its religious meaning and evaluate its possible social and political consequences.

The central feature of a gnostic belief system, according to Voegelin, lies in people's dissatisfaction with the situation in the world and their hope to pass to a better world through the destruction of the present one (Russian apocalypticism). There is also an assumption of a pure origin of man, of man's original perfection (the image of the city of Kitezh). Gnostics, Voegelin writes, "are not inclined to discover that human beings and they themselves in particular are inadequate... the fault should be found in the wickedness of the world."²⁰

The gnostic assumption that the world is impure, evil, and dark is connected to the belief in the power of one's own activity to change radically one's conditions in the world and, through one's own effort, free himself from the world's imperfections. Mystic ecstasies, magic practices, different forms of asceticism may serve as the passes to another world, as the forms of flight from the present oppressive conditions. Gnostics, according to Voegelin, put particular emphasis on individual work for one's own salvation, on the belief that radical changes in the world's order are possible within the realm of human action:²¹

²⁰ Voegelin, 87.

This attitude also finds its reflection in Russian sectarianism. Among various Russian sectarian groups, Chlysti, Scoptsi and Molokane should be noted as the strongest and the most popular. Each in its own way, they believe in man's pure or divine origin. The Chlysti, for example, are known for their ecstatic celebration of the presence of Christ in each member of their group. The Molokane, tracing their beliefs back to the ancient time, opposed the Orthodox belief in the nature of Christ as fully divine and fully human: the humanity in God presupposes His imperfection and suffering which seem, in gnostic beliefs, totally unacceptable. The case of Old Believers is more complicated. It shows that the Orthodox beliefs and ritualism may be very close to the gnostic ones. In the 15th century, there was a big split in the Russian Church which happened because some groups in the Church could not admit the falsity of their rituals and did not accept the authority of Church to correct them. They assumed that the official Church became "contaminated" with the "worldly" influences and, therefore, lost the purity of its original faith. For these people, the preservation of the rituals was more important than the faith itself: the rituals, for them, were both the way toward the divine and the presence of the divine. In scholarly circles, the Old Believers's schism has been often viewed as the beginning of the Reformation in the Russian Church.

²¹ In the case of Russia, this combination of the gnostic enthusiasm to change the world with awareness of one's non-belongingness to the world—the belief in the world's ultimate non-existence—may explain the cruelty with which the Russian revolutionaries introduced and promoted their vision of Russia's great transformations. For Marxists and Communists, Rus-

*All gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action. This is a matter of altering the structure of the world, which is perceived as inadequate, that a new, satisfying world arises.*²²

Knowledge is the instrument for gnostic salvation. The essence of the gnostic attitude to the world, Voegelin explains, lies in “the construction of a formula for self and world salvation, as well as in gnostic readiness to come forward as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of the mankind”—a clear formulation of the state of perfection, a model, a paradigm of the right order.²³

Striving for perfection—the “active mysticism,” as Voegelin called it—is another important part of gnostic beliefs. This feature could be found in the progressivist periodisation of the world and in the Marxist idea of perfect classless society. It is also present in the idea of communism as a community of individuals able to live together without mediation by the state. This idea is not alien to Christian faith. A monastery, according to Voegelin, is a community of spiritually independent men who live together without the sacramental support of the church. The idea of individual perfection is recognizable not only in communism, but also in the idea of democracy. Both democracy and communism, for Voegelin, thrive on the symbolism of a community of autonomous men.²⁴

Two important points should be emphasized here: first, that gnosticism is closely related to Christian beliefs and is difficult to be separated from them; second, that gnostic beliefs and spirituality may be implemented not only in communist ideals,

sian traditional religious beliefs and practices were nothing but the remnants of the old order which, sooner or later, should disappear because they will not be able to survive in the future communist society. It can also explain the ease with which today’s religious rights activists deal with people’s local traditions and customs: too easily submerging them under the umbrella of international norms. People’s local sentiments and practices, their beliefs and customs – valuable and meaningful in their “small” worlds and not always corresponding to the international standards – seem to be too local to the degree of non-existence. They disturb the “purity” of the general vision, the vision of the total and perfect freedom – and may irritate with their persistency.

²² Voegelin, 100.

²³ Ibid.,. 88.

²⁴ Ibid., 99.

but also in democratic ones. These two points were developed in greater detail in Harold Bloom's study of religion in America.

4. Gnosticism and the American national faith: Harold Bloom's thesis

The core of the American Religion, states Harold Bloom, is Gnostic, Enthusiastic, Orphic and millenarian. It marks itself as Christian but it really is not. Mormons, Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and various other expression of American faith, including the whole diversity of American Protestant groups, call themselves Christian but, in their beliefs and spirituality, are closer to ancient Gnostics than to the early Christians. Even Roman Catholics, Muslims and Jews in America, according to Bloom, are surprisingly gnostic:

*We are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is subject and object of one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark of breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation.*²⁵

The crucial elements that mark the American religious experience are solitude, a sense of loneliness in the world; individuality, belief in personal relation to God; and the pragmatism of feelings. The American religious temperament, according to Bloom, emphasizes acts and experiences more than thoughts, desires and memories.²⁶ The focus on an individual's personal rather than collective experience of God and the discovery of loving God, the belief that God loves him or her in a personal and intimate way, constitutes the core of the American religious temperament and goes back to revivalism and the frontier life of the early nineteenth century.²⁷

The experimental and highly individual nature of American religion is closely connected to the belief in individual divinity, in the perception of Self as standing outside of creation and being part of God. The Real Me, as Bloom observes, is defined as something deeper than the soul, as something totally separate and solitary. Human freedom is interpreted as the freedom to be alone with God who Himself is viewed as also separate and solitary. The American understanding of freedom, Bloom notes, is different from the notion of Christian liberty originally defended by the Puritans: it is not the freedom of a religious community to be recognized as

²⁵ Bloom, Harold, *The American Religion: the Emergence of Post-Christian Nation*, (1991), 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷ 88 percent of Americans believe that God loves them. See Bloom, page 37.

a legitimate part of a larger society but the freedom of an individual to be separated from society and totally autonomous in one's relationships with God. "No American feels free if she is not alone," writes Bloom, "no American ultimately concedes that she is part of nature."²⁸

American Religion, as Bloom concludes, is irretrievably gnostic with a particular focus on knowledge as the source of information, and information as the means of salvation. Knowledge, in the American faith, is a way to freedom: freedom from nature, time, history, community, and other selves. The highest desire of the American religious mind is to reconstruct not the primitive Church but the primordial Abyss: the Abyss of information. "Our national faith 'knows,'" says Bloom, "though it wants always to know yet more."²⁹

In his generally favorable view of the American religious experience, in his fascination with its gnostic character, Bloom does not leave unnoticed its possible political and social consequences: the danger of losing Self in selfishness, self-intoxication and anti-intellectualism, and adapting religious beliefs to the individual needs to such an extent that they lose their spirituality, turning into an ideology. American Religion is the religion of self, he writes, and, as such, it is not likely to be a religion of peace, particularly because the American self has a tendency to define itself through its war with otherness. If knowing ultimately tells us that we are beyond creation, if salvation will not be taken away from us no matter what we do, then how can we be ultimately responsible for our actions? It will be the world, impure, imperfect and dark, that we will blame for placing obstacles in our way. The gnostic, he concludes, risks being preoccupied with the imperfections of the world and forgetting about one's own imperfections:

We fight, he continues, to make the world safe for Gnosticism, for knowledge: for American sense of religion... I shake my head in unhappy wonderment at the politically correct young intellectuals, who hope to subvert what they cannot begin to understand.³⁰ ... We export our culture abroad, low and high, and increasingly we export the American Religion as well. If Woodrow Wilson proves to be correct and we were intended to be a

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

*spirit among the nations of the world, then the twenty-first century will mark a full-scale return to the wars of religion.*³¹

5. The Wars of Religion: the case of Russia

How does the American Religion presents itself in foreign lands? Does it have the same gnostic features as it has at home? What makes the export of this religion successful? What are the consequences of such an export? With these questions I am entering a largely unexplored territory. Attempts to study the meaning and role of American Protestant missions abroad, and in Russia in particular, have been focused too much on political, legal, or economic aspects, and, as I have noted above, the religious dimension has been ignored. In the following pages, I will present a few remarks on a possible larger study of American mission in Russia: a sort of phenomenology of the American Religion Abroad, in an attempt to define the American Religion by its opponent—by the Russian society and its Church.

“Invisible” institution: There is an established institution on the Russian side of the conflict, namely, the Russian Orthodox Church which claims to be the carrier and preserver of the Russian national and religious identity and tradition. On the American side, however, there is no such institution. The missionary groups have little contact with one another; they have no overarching structure controlling their activity “from above.” The missionary groups are independent and have no common purpose or program. It is difficult to find two groups that fully share in rituals and beliefs and would have a strong sense of common tradition. In striking opposition to the Russian Church, none of the missionary groups claims to represent the American national faith or American national tradition.

However, from the Russian perspective, the multi-phased and vague American national character and religion appear as coherent and unified entities. The missionaries do promote in Russia a specific religion of their land, an American variant of Christianity. American religion is seen by many Russians as a part of the American state apparatus closely linked to American economic power. As many observers noticed, American missionary groups are often perceived as only slightly different from McDonald’s corporations, insofar as they have the same purpose: Russia’s colonization. One professor from a provincial Russian University once compared the missionaries’ arrival in Russia with the landed troops of a foreign army: “Just

³¹ Ibid., 265.

wait,” he said, “and you will see the hard artillery behind and the tanks will come right after.” It is also broadly believed in Russia that American Mormons are not a religious group but agents of US interests, that Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses with the help of hypnosis take the Russian youth away from their families and traditional roots and undermine Russia’s spiritual and moral health.³² However mistaken these views might be, they reflect the perception of American mission as a united enterprise in which, affirming Bloom’s fears, the faith is reduced to nothing but an ideological machinery promoting American political and economic power.

Religion without creed, tradition and theology: “Missionaries should be honest about identifying themselves,” wrote Lawrence Uzzell in “Advise to the American Missionaries.”³³ Being the Head of the Keston Institute in Oxford, Uzzell and his group studied and monitored the state of religion in Russia for several decades and, observing the present condition, pointed out the negative side of missionary activity. One problem lay with missionaries’ dishonesty in identifying their faith. “A Baptist or Methodist,” he wrote, “should call himself or herself just that, not generic ‘Christian’.” This advice and the phenomenon it reflected are remarkable. They show that the divisions between American groups lost their meaning not only for Russians (who do not know much about them) but also for Americans in Russia. For practical purposes, missionaries promote a somewhat vaguely defined Christianity rather than a particular denomination. The question is: what kind of Christianity? The missionaries themselves perhaps would not be able to define it: American Gnostics, as Bloom has remarked, are striving for knowledge but do not know much about themselves. They have faith but have no creed, no tradition and no theology. Lacking spiritual discipline, they turned to gnosis. It is also remarkable that, in one interview, a Russian provincial activist said that Protestantism originated in America.³⁴ Not only ignorance on the part of the activist is present here but a feeling shared by many in Russia—the feeling that the European Protestantism is different from its American variations, that Americans bring to Russia a particular type of Protestantism, its American form—the Religion of America.

³² See the reports of Keston and Stetson News Services, and 2000 report of the US Commission for International Religious Freedom posted on their web page: www.uscirf.gov. See also the observations of Viktor Kalinin in his article “Dostoinstvo pri nedostatkax,” *NG-Religii*, April 15, 1998.

³³ Lawrence Uzzell, “Advise to the American Missionaries,” in Witte and Bordeaux, *op. cit.*, 238.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

A Russian friend of mine, whom I have not seen for several years asked me once what am I studying in America. I answered that I study religion. “I see,” he said, “so, you believe in the American God?” This remark struck me with its obvious incorrectness; yet, at the same time, with a sense of truth present in it: it expressed the sentiments that many Russians would share. For my friend, there existed a connection between living in America and believing in some sort of American deity. He presupposed that whatever beliefs I could nominally have, the God I worship would be American—different from the one believed in Russia. Indeed, removed from the American context, the joke would lose its meaning. What makes the God different was His Americanness.

Progressivism: American missionaries are known for their assumption of their superiority not only in economic or political matters but also in their faith. Because the American political and economic systems are more successful than in Russia, it is assumed that its religious customs are also superior. From this perspective, Orthodoxy is seen as “medieval,” having no relevance to the modern world and, therefore, creating nothing but obstacles to Russia’s democratic developments.

Religion of choice: In one conversation with an activist of religious freedom, who was also a practicing American Methodist, I asked how it is possible for him to defend other religions and, at the same time, be convinced in the truth of one. “I do not see any contradiction,” he answered. “Defending religious freedom, I defend choice. People should be free to choose their beliefs. They should have as many options as possible. This does not contradict my Christian faith.” I was not satisfied with this answer. Why, I was thinking, is it rare to meet an Orthodox believer among human rights advocates in Russia? Because Orthodoxy does not appreciate the freedom of choice? Because, in its very foundations, Orthodoxy differs from the beliefs of the Christians in America? What is the difference then?

The primacy of choice over tradition is the essence of the American world view. Indeed, the terms “shopping culture” and “religious market” became a commonly acceptable descriptions of American society and religion. They presuppose that, without sufficient information, without a sufficient “religious market,” one’s beliefs are somehow incomplete, not wholly true. In a situation of a perfect religious freedom, all religious groups would fully exchange beliefs with others and would prize the freedom of their members to make free choices. In this situation people would glorify the freedom to choose perhaps more than God Himself—they would worship freedom to make free choices and be independent from larger society, as well

as from history, tradition and other man—the freedom of a gnostic man who knows (rather than believes) but wants to more and more.³⁵

The worship of choice presupposes a de-evaluation of tradition. Freedom to choose means freedom to create one's own tradition, one's own pass to salvation and one's own personal and intimate relations with God. The Russian Church sharply opposes this view. For the Orthodox, tradition is not a choice, it is not even the best choice. Tradition lies beyond choices. Tradition puts all possible social situations (including the ideal of total religious freedom) in a larger frame of reference making it relative to their time and, therefore, doubtful in claiming to present the world with the absolute happiness. Tradition is the way to make any views on reality held less firmly and any absolutist claims for truth less certain. Tradition is able, in Peter Berger's phrase, "to relativize the relativizers" without, at the same time, slipping into the meaninglessness (truthlessness) characteristic of modern pluralism. To use Eric Voegelin's words, religious tradition saves modern man from "the temptation to fall from uncertain truth to certain untruth."³⁶

6. Conclusion

This essay attempted to analyze the most problematic part of the religious situation in Russia, namely, the conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church and American Protestant missionaries. It was not an apology written on behalf of the Russian Church but an attempt to uncover the largely unnoticed spiritual and historical meaning of the Church's opposition to foreign missionaries in present Russia. It was an attempt to draw attention to the spiritual dimension of this opposition and present it as the conflict between Russia's traditional faith and gnostic deviations from it.

This paper also claims to reconstruct a historical continuity of gnostic movements in Russia from their sectarian variations through their victory at the time of the Russian revolution to the contemporary gnostic influences in the Russian society manifested in the form of Church's opposition to missionary activity. The writings of Nikolay Berdyaev, Eric Voegelin, and Harold Bloom are used as a theoretical ground for such reconstruction. Eric Voegelin presents the gnostic core of the Marxism and communism as one of the most powerful intellectual and mass

³⁵ See the reference to Harold Bloom, in the footnote 28.

³⁶ Voegelin, 110.

movements in Europe of the last century. Berdyaev's classical thesis on the religious roots of the Russian Communist helps us to put Voegelin's insight in a specifically Russian context and illuminate the gnostic elements in various sectarian and schismatic deviations from the Church. The reasons for the predominance of sectarian spirituality in Russia of the turn of the last century lies, for Berdyaev, in the institutional weakness of the Church, in its failure to affirm its spiritual boundaries and present a strong spiritual alternative to the sectarian and schismatic movements. At the turn of the last century, as we know now, the battle between the two resulted in the victory of gnosticism and the death of the Church as an independent institution.

Harold Bloom's insight into the gnostic core of the American Religions experience is helpful for understanding the problems that the American missionaries experience in Russia today. The spirituality and world view that the missionaries bring to Russia are not as modern and new as it is often presented. The gnostic features of American Religion resonate in the Russian context as something familiar, something already present in Russian culture and history. The conflict between missionaries and the Church is not only a conflict between modernity and tradition but an extension of a long battle between Orthodoxy and the gnostic tendencies developing in the Russian society since the time of the Great Schism and Revolution.

What are the consciences of modern gnosticism? The present intense conflict leaves us with the hope that the totalitarian solution that resulted from the victory of gnosticism at the turn of the last century will not be repeated again. Perhaps, today, gnostic influences could be helpful for revitalizing Russia's social life, bringing more activism and diversity into it, developing people's trust for the rule of law, and creating a healthy atmosphere in society as well as in the Church. They can help the Church to define its spiritual boundaries and be strong and outspoken in responding to any risk of crystallizing faith in the form of knowledge. Keeping its tradition alive, the Church has the power to relativize any absolutist political claims and save Russia from another gnostic prophecy. Perhaps, one should conclude modestly that the present religious conflict in Russia is a battle in which there are no—and should not be any—winners or losers.