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Experiences of Inculturation of Methodism in Russia

Rüdiger Minor

1. Russian Culture and Methodism

As we are looking at the example of inculturation of Methodism in Russia, it will be helpful to remember some characteristics of Russian culture. First of all, we should note that it is a culture, deeply influenced by Christianity. I would even maintain that this influence is stronger than in contemporary Western European culture. Let me mention three components of this Russian Christian culture in Russia and Methodist attitudes toward them: the (official) Orthodox Church, Russian Protestantism, and the “religious mood,” popular climate of intellectual-spiritual customs and values, usually labeled as *dukhovnost* (spirituality), which could be characterized as integrating a diffuse “Christian” self-understanding with strong national as well as superstitious elements and a traditional value system.

a. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)

Since the meeting of two cultures is a process of reciprocity and mutual giving and taking, we should not look only on elements of our tradition that we would like to “give,” but recognize the importance of the host culture as the roots for an “inoculation” of Methodism.

- The influence of the Eastern Fathers on the formation of Wesleyan spirituality (though not appreciated by all Wesley scholars) is creating an important kinship with Russian culture. The importance is not on theology in the first place, though there is an interesting “fraternization” of conservative Evangelicals (among them Methodists) centering on traditional positions in dogmatics and ethics.
- While this is probably best understood as a part of Ecumenical church politics, there is indeed a strong influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on social-ethical positions in the traditional (Baptist, Pentecostal) Protestant communities in Russia. When in 2000 the ROC published its “Basic Social Concept,” so as to claim the field of social relations and activities in Russia as their own, the traditional Protestant denominations followed in 2003 with their “Social Position,” which in large measure simply copied the Orthodox text. The Russia United Methodist Church did not participate in this process. We have our Social Principles that are quite different from those two documents, however the church struggles with this cultural difference and feels the influence of the majority position on its rank and file members and even pastors (for example, the status and role of women, the acceptance of certain minorities).
- Getting closer to the subject of this gathering The Charles Wesley Society, Orthodox worship, seen by the majority of the population as the only normative form of worship, is strongly influential. The relationship is

ambivalent. The specter stretches from strong rejection of Orthodox worship forms by the majority of traditional Protestants to the careful approach of United Methodists in using elements of Orthodox worship and to the creation of “Evangelical-Orthodox” forms, most of them quite artificial (and for my taste more “artisan” than art of worship). There is, however, one important common element. As you know, the word *Pravoslaviye* (Orthodoxy) does not mean right thinking or teaching, but the right praise of God. And those Christians, who are not Orthodox, are called *Inoslaviye* (Heterodox), literally translated, they are not praising God in the “right” (*pravyy*) way, but in a “different” (*iny*) way. But they are praising God, anyway. Even Russian Baptists, despite three or four sermons which are either Sunday school lessons of biblical narrative or dry dogmatic essays, in their worship they sing: church, and youth choir, and men’s choir, and women’s choir. I need to come back to this when I am speaking about the religious mood of the people.

b. Russian Evangelical Protestantism

Despite the overwhelming influx of American missionaries over the last fifteen years, it needs to be emphasized that traditional Russian Protestantism has its roots in the German, British and Scandinavian Evangelical movement (*Erweckungsbewegung*) of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

- A part of its legacy are the hymns, most of them well known to Methodists of my generation and older in Europe and America. Some of Charles Wesley’s hymns belong to this common spiritual treasure of Russian Protestants; I found them even in the hymn book of the Lutheran Church of “Ingermanland,” a very conservative almost Catholic group of Finnish origin, living mostly around St. Petersburg. (They would probably have problems even to spell “Methodism” correctly.) To take their hymn book as an example, it contains “Jesus, lover of my soul,” “Love divine, all loves excelling” (naming a certain “N. Ludwig, 1725” as the author), “Hark! the herald angels sing.”

Among other groups are also well known (and there are probably more): “O for a thousand tongues to sing” and “And can it be that I should gain.”

Therefore, we can rightly say that Charles Wesley was present in Russia independently from the missionary endeavors of Methodism in the late nineteenth and again late twentieth centuries.

- I don’t have the time to tell the story of the cultural clashes and adaptation in modern United Methodism, since there was not only the Russian “host” culture but also the cultural “carrier systems” of American, Korean, and European Methodism within the young movement. There has been a temptation to follow a traditional Protestant model in relationship to Orthodoxy and especially Orthodox worship, a purism that condemns

everything that is not “biblical” in the sense of “Evangelical main line” (which is “main line Protestantism” in Russia). This meant objection to the liturgy, condemnation of icons as idols, etc. In contrast, Methodism has not positioned itself as contra-Orthodox but from the very beginning developed an attitude of appreciation of genuine Orthodox spirituality and worship, looking for their biblical roots and positive role for devotion. (More on Methodist worship later)

c. Russian “religious mood”

As mentioned earlier, Russian culture has been strongly influenced by Christianity, and the “Russian soul” has been penetrated by Orthodoxy, which can be traced even in contradictory form of the Soviet atheist period.

- It was at the 1999 consultation between Orthodox and Methodist theologians at St. Vladimir’s Seminary near New York City, where three persons from the Russia United Methodist Church were present. At the third day, my United Methodist colleagues turned to me and said: “We are more Orthodox than all these Western priests and monks together.” To be Russian is to be Orthodox. Our souls resonate.
- In a paper delivered at the 2003 Annual Conferences in the Euro-Asia Episcopal Area, Elena Stepanova spoke on “John Wesley and the Revival of Methodism in Russia.” In a splendid way, she was showing the parallels between Wesley’s mission and thought with the great themes of Russian literature and philosophy, which are also the burning questions of being human in Russia today. She identified the need to understand the “problem of what it means to be a person,” not in an individualistic but an existential sense. She states that “John Wesley was convinced, that God gives freedom to every person, and that freedom is a supernatural divine gift to restore the fallen creature to responsibility and accountability. The gift of freedom gives to the conscience the ability of perception and to the will the power to choose the good and resist evil.” Another problem is the quest for a living faith that is able to sustain the personal life, as well as support society. According to Wesley, this is “a process, which goes on during the whole life and develops in a person spiritual maturity,” striving for perfection not as a personal goal, but for the resurrection of the image of God in humankind. This is the renewal of the church in a “Catholic Spirit” that overcomes the divisions and works for a renewed world. Stepanova was summing this up in a quotation by V. Solovjev: “Genuine Christianity . . . ought to be universal; it ought to be extended to all humankind and to all human deeds All deeds and relationships common to all humankind have to be ruled by the same ethics . . . , namely, by the ethic of love, free concord, and brotherly unity.”

- Russian language has not only maintained a lot of its religious and biblical references, more than other European languages (much more than English and even more than German). It has also translated “church language” (mostly from the Greek) into genuine Russian or created new Russian words, which are used in everyday Russian, too. To give one example: the word *Voploscheniye*—Incarnation (literal translation) is used to express the high quality and very essence of a thing (while “the devil incarnate” or *eingefleischt* have a rather negative meaning in English or German). While biblical literacy is low in Russia, biblical imagery is used frequently. Biblical allusions, as we find them in Charles Wesley’s hymns, are something very natural, are natural in the Russian language, too.
- As was already mentioned, praise is very close to the Russian soul and, therefore, an important element of worship. Methodist worship in Russia is characterized by a longing for the “beauty of the Lord.” As mentioned earlier, Russian Methodism has been begotten by various blends of Methodist culture and worship style. And there had been attempts to make it more American or more Korean or more European, even by Russians themselves as true disciples of their spiritual parents. What has emerged, however, over a period of several years of experimenting and sharing is a liturgy that people are recognizing as their own. There was not much need to transform the worship order of Word and Table, because our United Methodist Book of Worship has been restoring the “common template” of the universal church’s worship to a high degree. I remember the pleasant surprise of a Russian Orthodox priest as I showed him the order of the Methodist communion service in Russian. He did not fathom that Protestants would have such a rich and “correct” worship, thinking of it just as alternating preaching and singing. More significant is the adaptation of Russian customs in worship. People can “light a candle” with a prayer, our worship places are not void of pictures (one of our pastors wrote his master’s thesis on proclamation of the gospel through icons). The order for marriage ceremonies and funerals have elements from Russian rituals, replacing “Western” customs. There had been some discussion whether we were mixing traditions; however, the Book of Liturgy was accepted gladly. People feel at home in those culturally matching worship services.

2. Charles Wesley’s hymns in the RUMC Hymnbook, *Mir Vam* (Peace be with you)

The hymnbook of the Russia United Methodist Church was published in 2002. It is mainly the work of a very gifted woman, Ludmila Garbuzova, a pastor of the RUMC and a professional musician and choir director. Even before she became a Christian believer, she was profoundly knowledgeable and deeply committed to Russian (and other) sacred music. Under the gentle, patient, and persistent coaching of S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Carlton R. Young she has given to the

Russian Christians (not only Methodists) a real treasure of spiritual and musical value. This is what she has written about the book:

What makes this book different from others? Its particular virtue lies in the fact that many kinds of Christian songs are presented in such a small volume. Within this diversity one finds:

- Hymns of different Christian denominations (Russian Orthodox canticles, Old Believers' songs, songs of the Taizé community, early Russian Protestant hymns, as well as Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist hymns, created by the Wesley brothers and others);
- Hymns of different epochs, from age-old psalms to contemporary spiritual songs;
- Hymns of different cultures and nations—global songs—that are well known in churches of many countries around the world and were translated for the first time into Russian by parishioners of the Russia United Methodist Church, and by parishioners of other denominations;
- Hymns that were created in local congregations of the Russia United Methodist Church today.

Out of a total of 297 hymns, 13 are by Charles Wesley and one by John. The final section of the book is devoted to “Hymns by the Wesley Brothers on Biblical Texts.” Seven of the hymns are translated by Daniil Yasko, a Ukrainian Baptist, who has also translated other hymns from English into Russian. Three translations by unknown authors belong to the common heritage of Protestant hymns; three have been translated by Russian United Methodists, one by a Russian Orthodox layman, living in the US. Of special interest is “Jesus, lover of my soul,” which is presented in two different forms (more about it later).

The tunes to the hymns are the usual American ones. However, it should be noted, that Ludmila Garbuzova wrote a new tune for “And can it be” to replace the “anticlimactic” traditional one (which is also included in the book). As could be expected, the translations are of different quality. I am refraining from making public statements about the quality of Russian poetry as literature. Trying to comment on other qualities, I would state, that most of them transmit the message of Charles' hymns fairly well. The language is full of biblical allusions, sometimes different from Wesley's and even more than in his text. As the main message comes through quite well, some of the subtleties of Wesley's theology are lost. As an example, I cite the second stanza of “Love Divine, all loves excelling” with a literal re-translation of the Russian text:

<p>Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit Into every troubled breast! Let us all in thee inherit; let us find that second rest. Take away our bent to sinning; Alpha and Omega be; end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.</p>	<p>Spirit of love, pour out richly (Rom. 5:5) into our timid hearts, fill with your power, open the Father's love. Be our Alpha and Omega destroy every sin. Make us whiter than snow, keep in us a strong faith.</p>
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Gone is the “second rest” and the taking away our “bent to sinning”—allusions to the doctrine of perfection; however (in my mind) the main message of the “love of God, shed abroad in our hearts” is maintained.

I would like to use the two versions of “Jesus, lover of my soul” for a final observation about the Russian translations. As mentioned earlier, there is an older one, part of the common heritage of Russian Protestantism. It is in a very simple language, I dare to say, poor poetry, but full of biblical allusions, even replacing the phrase “make and keep me pure within” with “create in me a clean heart.” However, the message of personal protection and the proclamation of justification is clearly pronounced. The second version is by a Russian Orthodox clergyman, Father Ioann Ekonomtsev. According to my Russian experts, it is much better poetry, but it has become just a personal outpouring of a troubled soul. Both versions carry some of the content of Wesley’s great hymn, which is, as his other works, great Christian poetry, because it unites a deep personal passion with profound and sound Christian teaching (as it was said that the whole content of John’s writing could be extracted from Charles’s hymns). While Father Ioann keeps this “existential” moment, the traditional translation tells about the message. As a pastor, I prefer the latter.

When I came to Russia thirteen years ago, there were basically two hymns that were known in our fledgling Methodist church: “What a friend we have in Jesus” and “How great Thou art.” They were sung every Sunday, sometimes both. United Methodists now “sing their faith” as a source of power and strength for their daily lives and as a message and invitation to their neighbors. Thank you, Charles Wesley (and a few others)—and glory to God!

Appendix: List of hymns of the Wesleys in the Russian hymnal

- # 13 O, for a thousand tongues to sing (*UMH* #1)
- # 90 Hark! the Herald Angels sing (*UMH* # 388)
- # 104 Christ, the Lord, is risen today (*UMH* #439)
- # 133, 134 And can it be (*UMH* 527)
- # 156, 297 Jesus, lover of my soul (*UMH* #125)
- # 157 Thou hidden source of calm repose (*UMH* # 89)
- # 174 Love divine, all love excelling (*UMH* # 283)
- # 240 Truly baptized (*Global Praise I* # 63)
- # 247 Let Him, to whom we now belong
(1780 *Collection of Hymns* # 416)
- # 291, 292 Rejoice, the Lord is king (*UMH* # 483)
- # 293 Jesus, thy blood and righteousness (*UMH* # 127)
- # 294 A charge to keep I have (*UMH* # 150)
- # 295 Lo, he comes with clouds descending (*UMH* # 364)
- # 296 Give us this day