**Orthodoxy and Protestantism: Will They Continue Their Sibling Rivalry or Make Common Cause in Combatting Secularization?**

**Mark R. Elliott**

In October 2016 while in Russia, I was invited to speak at Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary by a longtime friend, Father Georgi Edelstein, a parish priest and professor at the seminary. Because of schedule conflicts, I was unable to accept this unexpected invitation. However, I did suggest that I might be able to speak at the seminary on a future trip to Russia.

Several developments made it possible for a group of Asbury Theological Seminary and Asbury University faculty and graduates to do just that in May 2017.

1. Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary Rector Georgi Andrianov invited up to ten Asbury faculty to participate in an international biblical studies conference in commemoration of the 270th anniversary of the seminary’s founding;
2. I was able to secure a grant which, along with more modest contributions from Asbury Theological Seminary and the Wilmore Free Methodist Church, made the trip possible; and
3. Finally, George Steiner, president of Orphan’s Tree, a ministry to at risk youth who have aged out of Russian orphanages, agreed to have his staff handle arrangements and logistics within Russia.

With all that is currently negative in Russia’s relations with the West and in light of the frequently strained relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and both Western and indigenous Evangelicals, the invitation for such a sizeable contingent of Evangelical faculty to speak in a Russian Orthodox conference struck me as highly unusual, if not unprecedented. Of the 18 conference speakers, half were Evangelicals (eight from Asbury, plus George Steiner).

Several circumstances appear to have played a role in prompting Rector Andrianov’s invitation.

1. I have enjoyed several decades of friendship and collaboration with Fr. Georgi Edelstein of the Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary faculty: He accepted my invitation to speak at a conference I organized at Wheaton College while I was on the faculty there; Father Georgi provided me with sage advice on numerous occasions as Riverchase United Methodist Church (Birmingham, AL) sponsored nearby Sudislavl Orphanage; I led two short-term mission teams from Clemson United Methodist Church and Southern Wesleyan University to work with orphans and to assist in the restoration of two of Fr. Georgi’s three Orthodox churches; and I have published articles by and about Fr. Georgi in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, which I serve as editor. Through these many years of working together I was able to establish a strong relationship of trust with Fr. Georgi.
2. Metropolitan Ferapont, appointed to the Kostroma Diocese five years ago, is more favorably disposed towards Evangelicals than his predecessor. As the Metropolitan explained, the study of the Bible provides common ground for all confessions, and he wanted conference participants to learn from each other.
3. Finally, I have served as editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* for 25 years. It may be that the many articles published in the *EWC&M Report* aimed at objective coverage of Orthodox Church life and improved relations between Orthodox and Evangelicals helped prepare the way for the invitation Asbury faculty received. (See Appendix I.)

In any case, I consider the opportunity afforded Asbury faculty and graduates to speak at Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary to be one of the most unusual and significant invitations that has come my way in my 43 years of travel and ministry in Russia.

The International Biblical Studies Conference in Commemoration of the 270th Anniversary of Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary, May 30-31, 2017, included 18 speakers including seven from Russia, one each from Kazakhstan and Lebanon, and nine from the United States. The eight Asbury speakers provided the majority of the international contribution in their nine presentations, including addresses dealing with Old and New Testament studies; the Ascension; comparisons of Wesleyan and Orthodox understandings of sanctification/theosis/obozhenie; and biblical bases for social ministries including Christian hospitality, counseling for alcoholics, and local parish charity. (See Appendix II.)

The hospitality extended by Metropolitan Ferapont, Rector Andrianov, and Orthodox conference participants to Asbury participants and Orphan’s Tree President Steiner could not have been more cordial. Not only the accommodations and meals, but the genuine interest that Asbury presentations generated, made it clear that Asbury’s contributions to the conference were genuinely welcomed and were considered substantive. This could not have been clearer, for example, following Dr. Anthony Headley’s address on counseling with alcoholics and their families and Professsor Sarah Bellew’s address on local parish charity. Their enumeration of best practices in working with alcoholics and in developing congregational compassionate ministry elicited questions from the audience that were anything but *pro forma.*

Father Georgi Edelstein, not to be confused with Rector Georgi Andrianov, was the catalyst for the invitation for Asbury faculty to participate in the Kostroma Orthodox Theological Seminary Conference. He is a respected figure within the pro-democracy element of Russian intelligentsia who is known and revered far beyond his rural parishes. In the Soviet era, in order to be ordained an Orthodox priest, Father Georgi managed to overcome the disabilities (as far as the KGB was concerned) of being ethnically Jewish and having an earned doctorate. In the early 1990s, he survived the disapproval of Orthodox hierarchs following his publication in Moscow newspapers of articles charging collusion between the Moscow Patriarchate and the KGB. In addition, he is the author of a courageously candid memoir, *Zapiski sel’skogo svyashchennika* [*Notes of a Village Priest*].[[1]](#endnote-1)

Father Georgi Edelstein’s international standing (enhanced by his son’s position as speaker of the Israeli Knesset) may have strengthened the hand of Metropolitan Ferapont and Rector Georgi Andrianov such that they believed it defensible to accept such expansive Evangelical participation in the Kostroma Orthodox conference. Whether or not this is the explanation for the Asbury invitation, in whole or in part, the hope is that it will serve as a foundation for future collaboration. To that end Rector Andrianov has invited Dr. Headley to return to give additional lectures on counseling alcoholics.

One of the goals of the trip was to make a contribution toward improved relations between Evangelicals and Orthodox. Following the Kostroma conference, which directly supported this outcome, Asbury faculty had the privilege of spending a good part of one day with Father Georgi Edelstein, visiting his Church of the Resurrection in the village of Karabanovo and visiting a nearby elder home and orphanage that he supports. In addition, on May 28, five Asbury faculty worshiped at Moscow’s Church of Sts. Kosmos and Damian. On that occasion they were ably assisted in understanding the Orthodox Divine Liturgy through the assistance of Asbury Seminary graduate Sergei Koryakin and his wife, Nina, who are members of this parish. Also, Father Makarios in Ivanovo gave several Asbury faculty a tour of Ivanovo’s Assumption Cathedral and discussed theology with them over tea for several hours. Later that same afternoon of May 29, Father Makarios participated along with Asbury faculty in a panel discussion for Orphan’s Tree staff on best practices in working with young orphan grads. Finally, in Moscow Asbury faculty visited the Orthodox Convent of Martha and Mary, receiving an introduction to its history, its closure in the Soviet era, and its more recent reopening, which has permitted the renewal of its tradition of charitable ministries.

Being an historian, it should come as no surprise that I would desire to place Evangelical collaboration with Orthodox in Kostroma in its historical context. What follows is primarily a call for further research on the myriad aspects of the Orthodox-Protestant interface from the 16th century to the present.

1. In fending off Catholic threats, Ecumenical Patriarch Cyril Lukaris (1572-1638), authored a Confession of Faith that was Calvinist in essence and widely condemned in a series of Orthodox councils, culminating in its definitive repudiation at the Council of Jerusalem in 1672.[[2]](#endnote-2)
2. Of all the descendants of the Protestant Reformation, Anglicans have been the most well-disposed toward Orthodoxy. The common ground of the two traditions has included resistance to papal claims to head the universal church and a shared devotion to the theological grounding provided by early Church Fathers.[[3]](#endnote-3)
3. Moving to modern times, it would be helpful to have a comprehensive study of Orthodox dialogues with various Protestant churches: with Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and others.[[4]](#endnote-4)
4. Beginning in the 1990s various additional Orthodox-Protestant theological discussions may be noted, mostly in less formal settings, including those organized by Keston College’s Jane Ellis held at Moscow’s Library of Foreign Literature, Bradley Nassif’s six U.S. conferences of his Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism (1990-99),[[5]](#endnote-5) Sergei Koryakin’s gatherings of Orthodox and Evangelical theologians in

Moscow,[[6]](#endnote-6) and our own Lausanne Orthodox Initiative meetings.[[7]](#endnote-7)

1. In the post-World War II era, even though the predominately Protestant World Council of Churches (WCC) is theologically more distant from Orthodoxy than Evangelicalism, the WCC has provided substantial funding for various Orthodox publications and Orthodox participation in ecumenical gatherings.[[8]](#endnote-8)
2. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accompanying economic turmoil, mainline Protestant denominations, including the U.S. Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), donated millions of dollars of relief aid through the Russian Orthodox Church.[[9]](#endnote-9)
3. Mention should also be made of Orthodox-Protestant collaborative academic projects including Keston Institute’s *Encyclopedia of Religion* and related books and articles;[[10]](#endnote-10) Thomas Oden’s 29-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*;[[11]](#endnote-11) and BEAM Foundation support for Moscow Patriarchate biblical studies conferences and publications. The *Pravoslavnaya entsiklopediya [* *Orthodox Encyclopedia]* project, at present roughly half way through the alphabet, does not involve Protestant participation, but the extensive coverage of Protestant history and theology is noteworthy.[[12]](#endnote-12)
4. Findings from 51 respondents to a 2002-03 survey included five East European, Russian, and Ukrainian Protestant seminary faculties utilizing some Orthodox professors and two Russian Orthodox seminaries employing some Protestant faculty.[[13]](#endnote-13) Whether the level of Orthodox-Protestant seminary cooperation has increased or decreased in the subsequent 15 years would be worth exploring.
5. Arguably, the most significant ongoing Orthodox-Protestant collaboration occurs in East European Bible societies. The Russian Bible Society, for example, includes Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, charismatic, and Adventist staff and board members.[[14]](#endnote-14)
6. Historically, the most substantive Orthodox-Protestant collaboration may have been nuanced and generousYMCA support for Russian Orthodox émigré theological publishing, a subject ably documented by Matthew L. Miller in *The American YMCA and Russian Culture.[[15]](#endnote-15)*
7. Orthodox have been wary of Western mission activity in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but there have been cases of consequential cooperation, including Gospel Light’s support for the development of Russian Orthodox Sunday school curricula, Prison Fellowship’s cordial working relationship with Orthodox in Russia and Ukraine, and World Vision’s adaptation of the British Alpha Course for catechism in the Romanian Orthodox Church.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Campus Crusade’s “Volga Mission” attempted to enlist Russian Orthodox cooperation for viewings of its Jesus film. However, showings instead appear to have galvanized Orthodox opposition to Evangelical missions in the former Soviet Union, along with the even more ambitious and controversial CoMission, a collaborative outreach of dozens of Western Evangelical ministries.[[17]](#endnote-17)

1. In Ukraine, the past few years have witnessed unprecedented levels of cooperation among two of the three Orthodox jurisdictions, Evangelicals, and Eastern-Rite Catholics, driven in large measure by 2013-14 Maidan protests and Ukrainian churches’ jointly held fears of Russian threats to their country’s territorial integrity.[[18]](#endnote-18)
2. Two intriguing and highly unusual examples of interface between Orthodox and Protestants have occurred in Romania and Georgia. Romania’s Lord’s Army, dating from the 1920s, is Orthodox, but with such Evangelical accoutrements as personal Bible study and an emphasis upon sober and circumspect conduct.[[19]](#endnote-19) More recently, in a curious reversal, Malkhaz Songulashvili has led a faction of Georgian Evangelical Christians-Baptists to adopt liturgical worship, iconography, prayers to Mary and saints, and priestly vestments.[[20]](#endnote-20)
3. The writings and example of Father Alexander Men, noted for his spirit of charity across confessional lines, have served as a bridge between some Russian Orthodox and Evangelicals. Martyred in 1990 by assailants still at large, he managed to inspire cooperation among Christians of diverse traditions. As an example, David Benson, head of theWestern Protestant mission Russia for Christ, secreted Alexander Men manuscripts out of the Soviet Union which were then published by Zhizn s Bogom [Life with God], a Belgian Catholic publishing house*.[[21]](#endnote-21)*

In 2003 I published a set of eight recommendations for Evangelical missions ministering in an Orthodox context.[[22]](#endnote-22) One of those suggestions urged Protestants to extend expressions of goodwill toward individual Orthodox priests and parishes at the local level. One example in the 1990s witnessed Father Georgi Edelstein renovate his Church of the Resurrection near Kostroma with help from Norwegian Lutherans, Canadian Baptists, and an Irish Catholic priest. Father Georgi, in turn, gave valuable advice and counsel to an American Methodist congregation sponsoring an orphanage near his parish. I will close with his advice for helping orphans, which should hold true for Christian outreach in general, whatever the confession: “The material help we give the children will be in vain if we do not also share with them Christ.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

1. **Notes:**

   *Zapiski sel’skogo svyashchennika* [*Notes of a Village Priest*]; Father Georgi Edelstein, “Thoughts on the Current Situation in the Moscow patriarchate: Hypocrisy, Servility, or Complete Indifference to the Fate of Religion?” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 10 (Fall 2002): 9, 11-12; Father Georgi Edelstein, “On Orphans, Spiritual Restoration, Repentance, and Religious Legislation,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 10 (Fall 2002), 13-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mark R. Elliott, “Methodism in an Orthodox Context: History, Theology, and (Sadly) Politics,” *The Asbury Journal*, forthcoming; George A. Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lukaris (1572-1638), Patriarch of Constantinople* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961). Portions of this section on historical context are drawn from Mark R. Elliott, “East European Missions, *Perestroika,* and Orthodox-Evangelical Tensions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33 (Winter 1996), 14-16; and Mark R. Elliott, “Orthodox-Protestant Relations in the Post-Soviet Era,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 23 (No.5, 2003); <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol23/iss5/2> . [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Elliott, “Methodism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1992); E. C. Miller, *Toward a Fuller Vision: Orthodoxy and the Anglican Experience* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow Co., 1984); S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002); S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005); S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bradley Nassif, “Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: The Status of an Emerging Dialogue,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 1 (Spring 2000), 21-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sergey Koryakin, “Orthodox-Evangelical Conversations in Moscow: An Orthodox Perspective,” *East-West* *Church & Ministry Report* 25 (Winter 2017), 13; Johan Maurer, “Orthodox-Evangelical Conversations in Moscow: A Protestant Perspective,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 25 (Winter 2017), 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tim Grass, “The Lausanne Orthodox Initiative,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 22 (Winter 2014), 1-2; Mark R. Elliott*, “*Observations from the Lausanne Orthodox Initiative, Duress, Albania, 2-6 September 2013,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 22 (Winter 2014), 2; http://www.LOImission.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hans Hebly, *The Russians and the World Council of Churches* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1978); William C. Fletcher, *Religion and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1945-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Michael Bourdeaux, Eugen Voss, and Hans Hebly, *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union: W.C.C. and USSR* (Keston, England: Keston College, Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism, 1976); and Elliott, “East European Missions,” 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Elliott, “Methodism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Sergei B. Filatov, ed., *Religiya i obshchestvo: Ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii [Religion and Society: Essays on the Religious Life of Contemporary Russia]* (Moscow, St. Petersburg: Letni Sad, 2002). Michael Bourdeaux and Sergei B. Filatov, *Atlas sovremennoi religioznoi zhizni Rossii* (Msocow: Letnii Sad, 2005-2009; Sergei B. Filatov, *Religiozno-obshchestvennaya ahinan’ rossiiskikh regionov* (Moscow: Letnii Sad, 2014- ). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001-2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyi tsentr, 1997― . [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Elliott, “Orthodox-Protestant Relations,” 1; Clifford Dueck to author, 6 December 2002; Nik Nedelchev to author, 10 December 2002; John Creech to author, 15 December 2002; Janice Strength to author, 9 December 2002; Karmen Friesen to author, 12 December 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [www.biblia.ru](http://www.biblia.ru); Mark Elliott and Sharyl Corrado, “The Protestant Missionary Presence in the Former Soviet Union,” *Religion, State, and Society* 25 (No. 4, 1997), 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The American YMCA and Russian Culture; The Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity, 1900-1940* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Elliott and Corrado, “Protestant Missionary,” 345; Elliott, “Orthodox-Protestant Relations,” 2-4; Max Rondoni to author, 25 October-1 November 2002; W. D. Wysong to author, 1 December 2002; Danut Manastireanu, “The Way: Adapting the Alpha Course for Orthodox Catechism,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 23 (Spring 2015), 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. R. Vito Nicastro, Jr., “Mission Volga: A Case Study in the Tensions between Evangelizing and Proselytizing,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (Summer 1994)*;* Perry L. Glanzer. *The Quest for Russia’s Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002); Zoya Bardina, “Success of Festivity with ‘Jesus’ Film,” *Good News 2002, News Agency of Evangelical Christians-Baptists,* 16 December 2001; Bruce Wilkinson *et al., The CoMission:; The Amazing Story of Eighty Ministry Groups Working Together to Take the Message of Christ’s Love to the Russian People* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004); G. E. to author, 10 December 2002; E. T. to author, 17 December 2002; K. D. to author, 15 December 2002; U.L. to author, 17 December 2002; S. T. to author, 16 December 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Mark R. Elliott, “The Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on Religious Life in Ukraine and Russia,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 22 (Summer 2014), 6-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Danut Manastireanu, “A Comparison of the Georgian Baptist Church and the Lord’s Army in Romania,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 24 (Summer 2016), 6-8*;* David P. Bohn to author, 27 November 2002*;* Tom Keppler, “A Summary of Trifa’s *What Is the Army of the Lord?*” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 2 (Summer 1994), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Malkhaz Songulashvili, “A Merging of Protestant and Orthodox Theology and Practice: Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*  24 (Summer 2016), 1-4; 24 (Fall 2016), 11-14; 25 (Winter 2017), 5-8. Numerous critiques of Songulashvili’s church appeared in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*: James J. Stamoolis, Danut Manastireanu, Paul Crego, and David Bundy in 24 (Summer 2016); Valery Alikin in 24 (Fall 2016); and Sergei Filatov, Steven Benham, and Anonymous in 25 (Winter 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Mark R. Elliott, “Reflections on the Life of Father Alexander Men,”*Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 37 (No. 1, 2017), 8-19;Janet Wehrle, “Father Aleksandr Men: In Dialogue With Society,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 7 (Summer 1999), 1-3; Yakov Krotov, “Fr. Aleksandr Men: Orthodox Priest and Christian Apologist,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 7 (Summer 1999), 16; David Benson to author, 12 August 2003; Greg Nichols to author, 9 December 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Elliott, “Orthodox-Protestant Relations,” 15-18. Other guidelines include Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Guidelines for American Missionaries in Russia,” and Anita Deyneka, “Guidelines for Foreign Missionaries in the Former Soviet Union” in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls,* ed. by John Witte, Jr., and Michael Bourdeaux (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 323-30 and 331-40; Edward E. Roslof, “Guidelines for Western Assistance to Russian Orthodox: A Mainline Protestant Perspective, *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 4 (Winter 1996), 6-7; and Connie Robbins and Rodney Hammer, “Giving Guidelines for Russian Short-Term Missions,” *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 11 (Spring 2003), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Father Georgi Edelstein to author, June 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)