Soul Wars
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Abstract

This Article offers a brief review of the sharp new religious conflicts that have emerged at the end of the second millennium, particularly between Western and Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslim and Christian groups over issues of proselytism and conversion.

Keywords: soul wars; proselytism; conversion; missionaries; Russia; Africa; Evangelicals; Russian Orthodox; Muslims; Africa

A new war for souls has broken out in many parts of the world at the close of the second millennium. In some communities, such as the former Yugoslavia, local religious and ethnic rivals, previously kept at bay by a common oppressor, have converted their new liberties into licenses to renew ancient hostilities, with catastrophic results. In other communities, such as Sudan and Rwanda, ethnic nationalism and religious extremism have conspired to bring violent dislocation and death to hundreds of rival religious believers each year, and to persecution, false imprisonment, forced starvation, and savage abuses of thousands of others. In still other communities, most notably in America and Western Europe, political secularism and nationalism have combined to threaten a sort of civil denial and death to a number of believers, particularly "sects" and "cults" of high religious temperature or low cultural conformity.

The most heated new battles in this war for souls are between local and foreign Christian and Muslim groups in parts of Eastern Europe and Africa. With the political transformation of these regions in the past two decades, foreign religious gained new rights to enter these regions. In the 1980s and 1990s, they came in increasing numbers to preach their gospels, to offer their services, to convert new souls. Initially, local religious groups welcomed these foreigners. Today, they have come to resent these foreign religions, particularly those from North America and Western Europe who assume a democratic human rights ethic. Local religious groups resent the participation in the marketplace of religious ideas that democracy assumes. They resent the toxic waves of materialism and individualism that democracy inflicts. They resent the massive expansion of religious pluralism that democracy encourages. They
resent the extravagant forms of religious speech, press, and assembly that democracy protects.

An increasingly acute war has thus broken out over the cultural and moral souls of these newly transformed societies and over adherents and adherence to competing forms of faith and ethnic identity. In part, this is a theological war -- as rival religious communities have begun actively to defame and demonize each other and to gather themselves into ever more dogmatic and fundamentalist stands. The ecumenical spirit of the previous decades is giving way to sharp new forms of religious balkanization. In part, this is a legal war -- as religious groups have begun to persuade local political leaders to adopt regulations restricting the constitutional rights of their religious rivals. Beneath a shiny constitutional veneer of religious rights and freedom for all, many East European and African countries have recently developed a legal culture of overt religious favoritism of some and oppression of others.

Two dimensions of this new war for souls will occupy us briefly here: (1) the struggle between Western and Eastern Christian understandings of mission, particularly those of Western Evangelicals and Orthodox believers in Russia; and (2) the struggle between Christian and Muslim understandings of the rights and rites of conversion. I shall first analyze briefly the theological and legal issues at stake in these two struggles, and then chart a few pathways for blunting some of the sharpest conflicts over them.

**Orthodox-Evangelical Conflicts**

At the heart of the political struggle between Western and Eastern Christians in Russia and other portions of Eastern Europe today are sharply competing theologies of mission. Some of these missiological differences reflect more general differences in theological emphasis. Eastern Orthodox tend to emphasize the altar over the pulpit, the liturgy over the homily, the mystery of faith over its rational disputation, the priestly office of the clergy over the devotional tasks of the laity. Western Christians generally reverse these priorities -- and sometimes accuse the Orthodox of idolatry, introversion, and invasion of the believer's personal relationship with God.

These differences in theological emphasis are exacerbated by conflicting theologies of the nature and purpose of mission. Western Evangelicals, in particular, assume that, in order to be saved, every person must make a personal, conscious commitment to Christ -- to be born again, to convert. Any person who has not been born again, or who once reborn now leads a nominal Christian life, is a legitimate object of evangelism -- regardless of whether and where the person has been baptized. The principal means of reaching that person is through proclamation of the Gospel, rational demonstration of its truth, and personal exemplification of its efficacy.
Any region of the world that has not been open to the Gospel is a legitimate "mission field" -- regardless of whether the region might have another Christian church in place. Under this definition of mission, Russia and its people are prime targets for Evangelical witness.

The Russian Orthodox Church, too, believes that each person must come into a personal relationship with Christ in order to be saved. But such a relationship comes more through birth than rebirth, and more through regular sacramental living than a one-time conversion. A person who is born into the Church has by definition started "theosis" -- the process of becoming acceptable to God and ultimately coming into eternal communion with Him. Through infant baptism, and later through the mass, the Eucharist, the icons, and other services of the Church, a person slowly comes into fuller realization of this divine communion. Proclamation of the Gospel is certainly an important means of aiding the process of theosis -- and is especially effective in reaching those not born or baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church. But, for the Russian Orthodox, mission work is designed not to transmit rational truths, but to incorporate persons into communion with Christ and fellow believers.

This theology leads the Russian Orthodox Church to a quite different understanding of the proper venue and object of evangelism. The territory of Russia is hardly an open "mission field" which Evangelicals are free to harvest. To the contrary, much of the territory and population of Russia is under the spiritual protectorate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Any person who has been baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church is no longer a legitimate object of evangelism -- regardless of whether that person leads only a nominal Christian life. Indeed, according to some Orthodox, any person who is born in the territory of Russia can at first be evangelized only by the Russian Orthodox Church. Only if that person actively spurns the Orthodox Church is he or she a legitimate target of the evangelism of others.

This is the theological source of the Patriarch's repeated complaints about Western proselytism in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet bloc. The Patriarch is not only complaining about improper methods of evangelism -- the bribery, blackmail, coercion, and material inducements used by some groups; the garish carnivals, billboards, and media blitzes used by others. The Patriarch is also complaining about the improper presence of missionaries -- those who have come not to aid the Orthodox Church in its mission, but to compete with the Orthodox Church for its own souls on its own territory. The Patriarch takes seriously the statement of St. Paul, who wrote: "It is my ambition to bring the Gospel to places where the very name of Christ has not been heard, for I do not want to build on another man's foundation" (Romans 15:20)

International and constitutional human rights norms alone will ultimately do little to resolve this fundamental theological difference between Russian Orthodox and Western Evangelicals and other Christians. "In seeking to limit the incursion of missionary activity we often are accused of violating the right to freedom of conscience and the restriction of individual rights," explained Patriarch Aleksii II. "But freedom
does not mean general license. The truth of Christ which sets us free (John 8:32) also places upon us a great responsibility, to respect and preserve the freedom of others. However, the aggressive imposition by foreign missionaries of views and principles which come from a religious and cultural environment which is strange to us, is in fact a violation of both [our] religious and civil rights" [Pravoslavnaya Moskva (March, 1997), No. 7 (103)]. The Russian Orthodox Church must be as free in the exercise of its missiology as Western Evangelicals wish to be. Both groups' rights, when fully exercised, will inevitably clash.

A theological resolution of this war for souls is thus as important as a human rights resolution. Interreligious dialogue, education, and cooperation sound like tried and tired remedies, but these are essential first steps. Self-imposed guidelines of prudential mission are essential steps as well. Foreign missionaries must know and appreciate Russian history, culture, and language; avoid Westernization of the Gospel and First Amendmentization of politics; deal honestly and respectfully with theological and liturgical differences; respect and advocate the religious rights of all peoples; be Good Samaritans as well as good preachers; proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. Such steps will slowly bring current antagonists beyond caricatures into a greater mutual understanding, and a greater Christian unity in diversity.

Western Christians, in particular, have much to learn from Orthodox worship -- the passion of the liturgy, the pathos of the icons, the power of the silent inner spirit, the paths of pilgrimage of the soul toward God and His angels. Western Christian Churches also have much to learn from Orthodox church life -- the distinctive balancing between hierarchy and congregationalism through autocephaly; between uniform worship and liturgical freedom through use of the vernacular rites; between community and individuality through a trinitarian communalism, centered on the parish, the home, the babushka.

Orthodox Christians, in turn, have much to learn from their Western co-religionists -- the emphasis on personal moral responsibility, stewardship, and vocation; the importance of daily devotion, regular penance, and individual spiritual growth; the cultivation of homiletics, Christian apologetics, and theological disputation; the insistence on the continued nurture and inherent plasticity of the Christian tradition.

The ultimate theological guide to resolve the deeper conflict over mission and conversion, however, must be a more careful balancing of the Great Commission and the Golden Rule. Christ called his followers to mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). But Christ also called his followers to restraint and respect: "Do unto others, as you would have done unto you" (Matthew 7:12). If both sides in the current war for souls would strive to hold these principles in better balance, their dogmatism might be tempered and their conflicts assuaged.
Christian-Muslim Conflicts

At the heart of a number of the conflicts between Christian and Muslim groups, not only in Eastern Europe but especially in Africa, is a fundamental controversy over the right to change one's religion, to convert. Most Western Christians believe in relatively easy conversion into and out of the faith. Most Muslims believe in easy conversion into the faith, but allow for no conversion out of it. Whose rites get rights?

International human rights instruments initially masked over these conflicts, despite the objections of some Muslim delegations. Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration included an unequivocal guarantee: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes the right to change his religion or belief...." Article 18 of the 1966 Covenant, whose preparation was more highly contested, became more tentative: "This right shall include to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice...." The 1981 Declaration repeated this same tentative language, but the dispute over the right to conversion contributed greatly to the long delay in the production of this instrument. Today, the issue has become more divisive than ever.

"A page of history is worth a volume of logic," the great American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said. And, on an intractable legal issue such as this, recollection might more illuminating than ratiocination.

It is discomfiting, but enlightening, for Western Christians to remember that the right to enter and exit the religion of one's choice was born in the West only after centuries of cruel experience. To be sure, a number of the early Church Fathers considered the right to change religion as essential to the notion of liberty of conscience, and such sentiments have been repeated and glossed continuously until today. But in practice the Christian church largely ignored these sentiments for centuries. As the medieval church refined its rights structures in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it also routinized its religious discrimination, reserving its harshest sanctions for heretics. The communicant faithful enjoyed full rights. Jews and Muslims enjoyed fewer rights, but full rights if they converted to Christianity. Heretics - those who voluntarily chose to leave the faith -- enjoyed still fewer rights, and had little opportunity to recover them even after full and voluntary confession. Indeed, in the heyday of the inquisition, heretics faced not only severe restrictions on their persons, properties, and professions, but sometimes unspeakably cruel forms of torture and punishment. Similarly, as the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican Churches routinized their establishments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they inflicted all manner of repressive civil and ecclesiastical censures on those who chose to deviate from established doctrine -- savage torture and execution in a number of instances.
It was, in part, the recovery and elaboration of earlier patristic concepts of liberty of conscience as well as the slow expansion of new Protestant theologies of religious voluntarism that helped to end this practice. But, it was also the new possibilities created by the frontier and by the colony that helped to forge the Western understanding of the right to change religion. Rather than stay at home and fight for one's faith, it became easier for the dissenter to move away quietly to the frontier, or later to the colony, to be alone with his conscience and his co-religionists. Rather than tie the heretic to the rack or the stake, it became easier for the establishment to banish him quickly from the community with a strict order not to return.

Such pragmatic tempering of the treatment of heretics and dissenters eventually found theological and legal rationales. By the later sixteenth century, it became common in the West to read of the right, and the duty, of the religious dissenter to emigrate physically from the community whose faith he or she no longer shared. In the course of the next century, this right of physical emigration from a religious community was slowly transformed into a general right of voluntary exit from a religious faith, without encumbrance. Particularly American writers, many of whom had voluntarily left their Europeans faiths and territories to gain their freedom, embraced the right to leave -- to change their faith, to abandon their blood, soil and confession, to reestablish their lives, beliefs, and identities afresh -- as a veritable sine qua non of religious freedom. This understanding of the right to choose and change religion -- patristic, pragmatic, and Protestant in inspiration -- has now become an almost universal feature of Western understandings of religious rights.

To tell this peculiar Western tale is not to resolve current legal conflicts over conversion that divide Muslims and Christians. But it is to suggest that even hard and hardened religious traditions can and do change over time, in part out of pragmatism, in part out of fresh appeals to ancient principles long forgotten. Even certain Shi'ite and Sunni communities today, that have been the sternest in their opposition to a right to conversion from the faith, do have resources in the Qur'an, in the early development of Shari'a, and in the more benign policies of other contemporary Muslim communities, to rethink their theological positions.

Moreover, the Western story suggests that there are half-way measures, at least in banishment and emigration, that help to blunt the worst tensions between a religious group's right to maintain its standards of entrance and exit and an individual's liberty of conscience to come and go. Not every heretic needs to be either executed or indulged. It is one thing for a religious tradition to insist on executing its charges of heresy, when a mature adult, fully aware of the consequences of his or her choice, voluntarily enters a faith, and then later seeks to leave. In that case group rights must trump individual rights -- with the limitation that the religious group has no right to violate, or to solicit violation of, the life and limb of the wayward member. It is quite another thing for a religious tradition to press the same charges of heresy against someone who was born into, married into, or coerced into the faith and now, upon opportunity for mature reflection, voluntarily chooses to leave. In that case, individual
rights trump group rights -- with the limitation that the individual has no right to remain within the former religious community to foment reform or non-conformity therein.

Where a religious group exercises its trump by banishment or shunning and the apostate voluntarily chooses to return, he does so at his peril. He should find little protection in state law when subject to harsh religious sanctions -- again, unless the religious group threatens or violates his life or limb. Where a religious individual exercises her trump by emigration, and the group chooses to pursue her, it does so at its peril. It should find little protection from state law when charged with tortious or criminal violations of the wayward former member.

There are numerous analogous tensions -- generally with lower stakes -- between the religious rights claims of a group and its individual members. These will become more acute as religion and human rights become more entangled in next decades. Particularly volatile will be tensions over discrimination against women and children within religious groups; enforcement of traditional religious laws of marriage, family, and sexuality in defiance of state domestic laws; maintenance of religious property, contract, and inheritance norms that defy state private laws. On such issues, the current categorical formulations of both religious group rights and religious individual rights simply restate the problems, rather than resolve them. It will take new arguments from history and experience and new appeals to internal religious principles and practices, along the lines just illustrated, to blunt, if not resolve, these tensions.