

*“A Faith of Protest and Mere Denial?” - Prospects for Lutheranism for the Post-Soviet World*  
The Churches of the Reformation in their moral and political responsibility for the One World  
Conference, Hermannsburg.  
By the Rev. Bradn Buerkle

Luther's Protestantism is... [a] faith of protest and mere denial, and as soon as Catholicism disappears from the world, Protestantism will also disappear right after it because it will have nothing to protest against; it will be transformed into straight atheism and thus will it end. But that, let's say, is still only my chimera.<sup>1</sup>

That the great Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, would give a negative assessment of Lutheranism is not surprising to anyone acquainted with the views he espoused in his late years. He was a “cruel talent” to whom many have attributed attitudes of nationalistic chauvinism.<sup>2</sup> The quote with which this paper opens, from his *A Writer's Almanac*, is part of an article attacking all things German. For Dostoevsky Lutheranism was something utterly foreign.

Yet, at the same time, he was living in a country where the Protestant presence stretched back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and where more than a million Lutherans lived.<sup>3</sup> This means that Dostoevsky's acquaintance with Lutherans was not limited to second-hand knowledge or his trips abroad. In fact, the Lutheran church was a *state* church and the second largest Christian confession in the Russian Empire. Its congregational buildings and members were prominent in the capital of St. Petersburg, the city Dostoevsky called home.<sup>4</sup> Certainly Dostoevsky knew of Lutherans in Omsk, where he was imprisoned for a number of years<sup>5</sup>; there was even a Lutheran congregation in the small city of Staraya Russa in the Novgorod region, where he wrote “The Brothers Karamazov.”

By Dostoevsky's lifetime, Russian Lutherans had made very important contributions to the country and to society. Their ancestors had come to Russia to serve the country in various capacities, and while some of them found it in their interests to convert to Eastern Orthodoxy<sup>6</sup>,

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1 F.M. Dostoevsky. *A Writer's Diary. Vol. 2. 1877-1881*. Entry from January 1877. trans. Kenneth Lantz.. Northwestern University Press 1994. 814.

2 Shortly after his death, Dostoevsky was referred to as a “cruel talent” in an essay by the Russian critic Nikolai Mikhailovsky. Since then careful readers will note the contradictions and paradoxes in Dostoevsky's works, though Maxim Gorky's portrait of the mature Dostoevsky as a “reactionary” has colored many critics' view, both in Russia and in the West. See *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. ed. G. Pattison and D. Thompson. Cambridge. 2004. It is worth noting that more sympathetic viewpoint on Protestant can be found among other prominent thinkers at the time, from the philosopher Vladimir Solovev to even some of the Slavophiles. c.f., Augustin Nikitin. “Russkie, slavonofily i nemetskoe luteranstvo (Russians, Slavophiles and German Lutheranism)” *Nachalo*. 2001:5. 70-80. On the other hand even less negative views of Lutheranism can hardly be contributed to interaction with the Lutheran Church in the Russian Empire.

3 Olga Kurilo. *Lutherans in Russia. XVI-XX Centuries (Luterane v Rossii. XVI-XX vv.)*. Lutheran Heritage Fund. 2002. 82.

4 Around 9% of St. Petersburg was Lutheran at the time. Gepner Koch. “True Tolerance: Evangelical Life in Old St. Petersburg.” in *Slyshat i videt drug druga (Hear and See One Another: the Relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church of Germany)*. Leipzig. 2003. 37-45.

5 Lutherans (Swedish prisoners of war) first arrived in Omsk in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century; by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a stone church had been built for the congregation. I.V Cherkazyanova. “The Organization of the Spiritual Life of Siberian Lutherans: A chronicle of events 18<sup>th</sup> century – 1919. (‘Organizatsia dukhovny zhizny luteran Sibiri: khronika sobytii XVIII v.-1919. )’ *Izvestiya OGIK Muzeya*. Omsk, 1999:8. 207-226.

6 In particular the tsars of German heritage, including Catherine II and her husband, Peter III, the latter of which never adapted to the Orthodoxy of the land over which he briefly reigned. Catherine, for her part, converted to Orthodoxy as part of her adaptation to her new homeland. “Catherine was...an Orthodox believer in that, as a member of the Orthodox community of faith, she identified herself as Christian and accepted the teaching of the Church.... As an Orthodox believer she fulfilled the requirements of Orthodoxy...through the observances of fasting, attending the liturgy, going to confession and receiving Communion at the prescribed times, and making the correct signs of crossing oneself, bowing, reverencing icons, kissing the priest's sleeve and so on. She would not have thought it necessary to do any more than that...or to question her faith. The Enlightenment philosophers she favored did not require her not to believe – merely that belief should be consistent with reason, which she interpreted as meaning it should not be extreme or fanatical and that religion should not interfere in statecraft or politics.... Catherine also took

many preserved their faith and became pillars of Lutheran congregations – from engineers and miners in the Altay region<sup>7</sup> to farmers on the Volga and the Black Sea,<sup>8</sup> from military officers in Moscow<sup>9</sup> to merchants in the Far East<sup>10</sup>, from architects in the capital to governors in Nizhny Novgorod.<sup>11</sup> Famous Russian Protestants include: the painter Karl Brullov,<sup>12</sup> Franz Lefort - Peter the Great's ally in reforming the Russian military,<sup>13</sup> the jeweler Karl Faberge, and Prince Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly,<sup>14</sup> the first Field Marshal and Minister of War during the war with Napoleon. It would not be difficult to defend the claim that, considering their numbers, Protestants played a disproportionately large role in the life of the country, frequently acting as the instruments with which Peter and his successors “chopped open a window” to Europe.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time there was little interest in (if not outright hostility to) Protestant Christianity among Russia's intellectual leaders. Dostoevsky was no exception; one can find nary a positive reference to Protestantism among Russia's great writers, churchmen, or philosophers.<sup>16</sup> This is a paradoxical situation – the relative prominence of individual Protestant citizens as important contributors to society coupled with an almost total lack of influence of their Protestant theology on the spiritual and intellectual environment of the country. If we are to understand the issue of the moral and political responsibility of the churches of the Reformation in the countries formerly belonging to the USSR, it is important that we briefly consider how this situation arose and its effects on church life today.

In the first years after the Reformation Lutherans sought out potential allies against Roman Catholics in various part of Europe; Russia was no exception. While visiting Moscow such delegations spoke about the faith with the intention of determining whether or not a political alliance against Rome might be possible. It is clear that some of them harbored the secret hope that they could even succeed in converting the tsar.<sup>17</sup> The fact that some of these foreign ambassadors harbored hope that even Ivan IV (“the Terrible”) would abandon Orthodoxy is a fine example of just how unrealistic foreigners' views of Russia have been throughout history. Ivan IV, for his part, could treat Lutheran guests well when it was in his interests, but his honest assessment of Lutheranism was laid out in a letter he wrote in reply to a Protestant pastor's explanation of the faith: “Luther was (and his family name attests to this) a gloomy, fierce person<sup>18</sup>. As Luther was, so you are, too –

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her position as head of the Orthodox Church in Russia very seriously. The Church, managed in the right way, lent stability to the State. The guiding principle for Catherine was order, and the Orthodox Church...contributed to the rightful ordering of a peaceful, well-regulated State.... In the ordering of Catherine's personal life, however, religion seems to have played a very small part.” Virginia Rounding. *Catherine the Great: Love, Sex and Power*. Electronic edition. It is in this light (and not as a result of some inner, Protestant anti-monastic principles) that Catherine's secularization of monastic lands should be understood.

7 Cherkazyanova 1999.

8 By far the largest group after Catherine's invitation to German farmers, extended in 1763. For an in-depth study of their history, see, for example, Fred Koch. “The Volga Germans: in Russia and the Americas. 1763 to Present.” University of Pennsylvania Press. 1977.

9 Olga Litsenberger *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russian History (Evangelicheskoye-luteranskaya cherkov v rossiiskoy istorii.)* Lutheran Heritage Foundation. 2003. 60-63.

10 Starting in the late 1870s. Cherkazyanova 1999.

11 City library website of Nizhny Novgorod. <http://www.gorbibl.nnov.ru/luterane>.

12 As well as his older brother, the prominent St. Petersburg architect Alexander Brullov.

13 Litsenberger 2003. 63-4.

14 Russian Military History Society website. <http://100.histrf.ru/commanders/barklay-de-tolli-mikhail-bogdanovich/>.

15 The tsars helped bring and spread European values through the whole country by appointing Protestants (many, though not all, foreign-born) to important government posts. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, Lutherans were over-represented (related to proportion of the population) among Cabinet members, senators and governors. Litsenberger 2003. 9-11.

16 One can find, at most, positive assessments of certain aspects of Protestantism as compared to Roman Catholicism. It was only after Dostoevsky's death that Russian thinkers such as Vladimir Soloviev, Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Nikolai Berdyaev gained an appreciation for Protestantism as such.

17 Lutherans also tried to translate important theological texts into a language Russians and other Slavs could understand. Nikitin 1986. 251 – 2.

18 The root “lut” in Russian is related to the words gloomy and fierce.

children of darkness, servants of Satan, false prophets, thieves and mercenaries.” The letter ended with these words: “So we forbid you to spread your faith in our state. And we earnestly pray that God would protect us so that our people would not be surrounded by the darkness of your lack of faith.”<sup>19</sup> Ivan backed up his words with actions – he once got so enraged with a Lutheran theologian at the latter's comparison of Luther to St. Paul that the tsar even hit the pastor on the head with a whip!<sup>20</sup> Obviously, Lutherans were susceptible to the tsar's changing moods; they were, for example, allowed to build a church building in Moscow in 1574/5, yet three years later the German neighborhood of the city including the church was burned down by Ivan's order.<sup>21</sup>

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries many foreign citizens entered the country – some invited to serve the needs of the state, others as refugees. Thanks to this immigration and the relative tolerance shown to them by the Russian state, Lutheran congregations arose in almost all the major cities of the country. While few tsars were as interested in religion or as unpredictable as Ivan IV, the status of Protestants remained the same, i.e., the freedom to practice their faith was based on the good will of the country's rulers. Their fortunes, accordingly, changed depending on various political and economic factors. It was a tenuous existence, but one that compares favorably to the status of other religious minorities in Europe at the time.

Under Peter I and his successors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was an explosion of foreign influence in the country, both in terms of numbers (thanks to territorial expansion and immigration) and in terms of the prominence of their role in Russian society.<sup>22</sup> Russia gained territory through military actions where the majority of the population was Protestant, and Peter actively recruited artisans and civil servants from northern and western Europe to help in the process of modernizing the country. They were allowed full freedom to practice their faith, and Peter was the first Russian tsar to declare that religious freedom in the country would no longer be based on the will of sovereign but the law of the land.<sup>23</sup> Peter's tense relationship with the Orthodox church is well known; he saw that conservative forces tended to gather there to resist his projects of Europeanization. Peter's opponents were right to see that Protestant church-states relationships served as models for these reforms, even if they were carried out by the Orthodox theologian Feofan Prokopovich.<sup>24</sup> The result of these reforms is that the Orthodox church, which already was largely subservient to the state, was deprived of any serious mechanisms for influencing state policy.

Foreigners continued to play an over-sized role throughout the following century, though this was a mixed blessing for them and for the Lutheran church. By the reign of Catherine II (1762-96) tension around the issue of foreign influence became particularly prominent. Under her leadership the number of Protestants in the country grew exponentially thanks to the invitation extended to farmers from Germany to settle the Volga region. Their growing numbers meant that they (and Catherine!) were likely to experience resistance at attempts to support the Lutheran church because of the fear that this would be to the disadvantage of the Orthodox population.<sup>25</sup>

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19 Quoted in *Nasledie Lutera v Rossii*. 13-14. An in-depth study of Tsar Ivan IV's interactions with protestants has been published in Russian: Nikoletta Marchalis. *Luter izhe lut. Prenie o vere tsarya Ivana Groznogo s pastorm Rokitoj. (Luther is Ferocious. The debate about faith of Tsar Ivan the Terrible with Pastor Rokitoj)*. Moscow. Yazyky slavyanskoj kultury. 2009.

20 Litsenberger 2003. 36

21 Kurilo 2002. 39.

22 It became common in Russia to talk about a “second Tartar-Mongol Yoke,” though this time the enemy came not from the East, but from the West. Litsenberger 2003. 65. The policies of the tsars to look West did, certainly, affect their way of treating the church. Already Peter the Great contributed offerings to building Protestant churches and sometimes attended the church's dedication or worship services. Nikitin 1995. 260. Many of his successors would do the same.

23 Nikitin 1995. 260-261.

24 Nicholas Riasanovsky. *Russian Identities: A Historical Survey*. Oxford 2005. 81. Gary Hamburg in his *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500-1801* points out that though Prokopovich had a reputation as a “Protestant theologian” he believed that his ideas were complimentary to traditional Orthodox theology, not opposed to it; Protestant thought was considered useful insofar as it attacked Rome. Yale 2016. Electronic edition.

25 Litsenberger 2003. 70-72.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by attempts (begun already by Peter I) to organize the Protestant church in Russia. The high point of these efforts was the establishment of a constitution for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia in 1832. This, too, was a mixed blessing. On the one hand Lutherans had less reason for concern regarding their long-term status in the country. With a constitution (a privilege not afforded to the Roman Catholic Church, for example), they could feel confident that they would be protected by the state; to a large degree, it was even clear that they would be sponsored by it. This meant that the Protestant churches would now have their long-sought-after stability and the confidence to appeal to the authorities to protect their rights<sup>26</sup> Yet there was a very significant downside for the church, one that became more and more problematic over time. The constitution of the church and subsequent laws passed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sought to eliminate any possibility that Protestants might extend influence over other ethnic groups.<sup>27</sup> Moreover (and, from the state's point of view, more importantly) through its constitution the Lutheran Church was completely submitted to the state and any opportunity for independent action apart from the state became unthinkable.

Receiving a constitution under the conservative tsar Nicolas I seemed like a success. Yet as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed the “training” Lutherans had received in the previous centuries was reinforced; they knew that it was to their advantage to enclose their ministry firmly within the walls of “traditionally Lutheran” groups. Experience had taught them that as long as the church acted as a spiritual home for Germans, Finns, Latvians, Estonians, Swedes and other “traditionally Lutheran” ethnic groups, it would be tolerated; anything outside of that involved significant risk.<sup>28</sup>

The Lutheran church in the Russian Empire, then, despite its wholly official status, remained a foreign entity in Russian society. As one of the leading actors on the Russian religious scene, the Ober-procurate Constantine Pobedonostsev, could say at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “on the

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26 It must be said that the church's cries for protection were not always heeded. Already under Nicolas I there was serious pressure on those who lived in Livonia to become Orthodox. From time to time in the Baltic states it is clear that government officials tried to play off ethnic tensions to push people out of the Lutheran church and into the Orthodox church. *Nasledie Lutera v Rossii*. 211-215. Similarly Lutherans had a hard time in Volyn and elsewhere because of the Russification policies of Alexander III. The years leading up to and including World War I were also particularly challenging; changing the name of the capital city from St. Petersburg to the more Slavic “Petrograd” reflected the strong influence of these tendencies, despite of (or perhaps because of) ties between the Romanov's and their cousins among German ruling families. Anti-German feelings ran so high that Protestant church buildings were vandalized in the capital. Victor Dönninghaus. *Germans in Moscow: Symbiosis and Conflict (1494-1941) (Nemtsy v obschestvennoj zhizni Moskvy: simbioz i konflikt. (1494-1941))*. Moscow, 2004. 128-129. Theophil Meyer describes the atmosphere of the time: “The Russian government, as well as a large part of the Russian population, considered and considers it to be an undeniable fact that during the war of Russia with Germany, every Russian citizen with German ethnicity is a traitor and spy. Germans of the Baltics and now also within Russia (and especially the colonists) are considered to be enemies of the state who even before the war began established criminal ties with the German government... Regarding Lutheran pastors of Russia, only those who have evil intent could doubt their loyalty. It is impossible to imagine that a person, even if he enjoyed German traditions and lifestyle would still not, like every other citizen of the country, fulfill his duty to his country. Right after the start of the war the repression of Lutheran pastors began.” *Nasledie Lutera v Rossii*. 221-222. Those ethnic Germans who were able to prove that they had converted to Orthodoxy by 1914 were freed of repressive measures, such as confiscation and deportation. *Pravoslavnaya Entsiklopediya. Evangelicheskaya Luteranskaya Tserkov Rossii, Ukraini, Kazakhstana i Tsentralnoj Azii. (Orthodox Encyclopedia: Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia.)* Electronic edition.

27 For example, mixed marriages between Lutherans and Orthodox were allowed only on the condition that the children would be raised in the Orthodox faith. Any semblance of proselytism was punishable by beatings, prison, or Siberian exile. Pastors could be imprisoned, lose their call or even have their ordination rights taken away. Meyer notes the irony of the fact that many of these laws were integrated into the document that was supposed to provide the Lutheran church with rights, i.e., the church's constitution. *Nasledie*. 210-211. The situation began to change for the church in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Lutherans were allowed to worship in Russian and, after the Edict of Tolerance passed in 1905, were afforded, in theory, almost full freedom. The Lutheran church, however, was only able to take advantage of these freedoms in isolated instances.

28 This concerns not only traditionally Orthodox ethnic groups - “the Evangelical Lutheran Church never openly tried to evangelize the non-Orthodox peoples of Russia and never carried out active missionary activity.” Olga Litsenberger sees this as one of the reasons why the Lutheran church found favor with Russian government officials. Litsenberger 2003. 12.

Protestant faith there is something cold and inhospitable to the Russian person. More than that – if a Russian believer were to say of a Protestant church building that it was 'mine,' it would be the same for him as dying.”<sup>29</sup> This despite the fact that the vast majority of the Lutheran church's members (and, since the 1840s, all of its pastors) were citizens of the Russian Empire.<sup>30</sup>

Some Protestant leaders were aware of their ambiguous status, especially in those places (e.g., large cities in the Russian Empire) where Lutherans lived in close proximity to the majority Orthodox population. With time they became more public about their desire to re-negotiate their place in society. After the abdication of Tsar Nicolas II, such a re-thinking became a necessity; soon active discussions with the Provisional Government about the future were begun.<sup>31</sup> It was already clear, in any case, that “the result” of political changes in Russia “is that our Church has been freed from state custody, but also is now free from those pillars which supported her.”<sup>32</sup> As Theophil Meyer put it, “God willing we will see a new era... for the Lutheran church here in the Russian state!”<sup>33</sup>

Given its history, however, it is no surprise that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia was shocked by the October Revolution and, as an organization, could provide very little resistance when the full force of Soviet repression was unleashed on the church. In the early years of Bolshevik rule, however, the church's leaders made strenuous efforts to reorganize the church and adapt to the new circumstances. Despite the effects of emigration, personal conflicts, efforts to repress and divide the church on the part of government authorities and the chaos of civil war, Lutherans did succeed, in the 1920s, to re-establish their church as a legal entity, and for the first time they had their own seminary, in Leningrad.<sup>34</sup> In addition, thanks to heroic efforts of individual believers and church leaders, Lutherans were able to contribute to efforts to eliminate the effects of famine in 1922-3,<sup>35</sup> but other than that simply tried to re-negotiate the church's relationship to the state in a way that it had done in the preceding centuries, i.e., in a way that it would allow the church to survive as an isolated group within Russian society.

At this point it would be worthwhile to pause to think about the significance of this nearly 350 year history. One might be tempted to judge the Lutheran church as too willing to give in to the state's needs in order to insure its own position of honor, comfort and stability. Yet, it must be kept in mind that seeking a path of greater independence and localization would have clearly had significant consequences, many of which might have turned out to have negatively affected the witness of the church in the country. It won't do, either, to condemn tsarist governments for their position on religion. It would be anachronistic to fault Russian leaders for a lack of religious tolerance. After all, where else in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe would there be such a wide variety of religious attitudes tolerated in one country? In what other capital city could Lutheran, Catholic, Armenian and Orthodox churches be seen, nearly side by side, on the main street of the capital? While one might wish that the situation had been different and that the country wouldn't have been caught up, from time to time, in moments of xenophobia, what country's history is free of such moments?

It is particularly tragic that believers of various ethnicities and confessions were unable to stop the repression and terror that would be directed towards them (and towards many other

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29 In Litsenberger 2003. 213-214.

30 Tamara Tatsenko. “From the History of the Lutheran Church in the Russian Empire.” ( “Iz istorii luteranskoj tserkvi v rossiskoj imperii” ) *Der Bote*. 2013:2. 18

31 Litsenberger 2003. 222-227.

32 *Inheritance*...20.

33 Ibid. 223. One could easily speculate that, had it not been for the October Revolution and the anti-religious efforts of Lenin and his followers, it is quite possible that *Russian* Lutheranism (as opposed to Lutheranism in Russia) might have been born a century ago. However, events would show that in the 1920s Lutherans were simply taking their last gasp of freedom before the government moved toward all-out annihilation.

34 For a bit on this history in English see: Edgars Kiploks. “The Lutheran Church in Russia.” *The Lutheran Quarterly*. 3:1. February 1951. 55-57. For a full descriptions (in Russian). Litsenberger 2003. 369-376, 410-417.

35 Litsenberger 2003. 278-286.

innocent victims) in the next, Soviet, period of the country's history. By the end of the 1930s, the Lutheran Church's structure had been disassembled, all its congregations closed, and year by year more of its historical buildings were destroyed. The story of the survival of the Lutheran understanding of Christian faith in the Soviet Union is the story not of how Lutheranism became Russian, but how the faith, for some, became even more deeply fused with ethnic identity, the identity of a repressed people (whether they be German, Finnish or one of the smaller ethnic groups).<sup>36</sup> Congregations began to gather in secret in Siberian exile, and, ever so slowly, some of them gained official recognition by the state – first a congregation in Karagada, then in Karelia, then in Novosibirsk, then in the Northern Caucasus... These congregations were strictly ethnic conclaves that hoped to remember and preserve the faith that was passed on to them by their parents and grandparents. During Perestroika and in to the 1990s the Lutheran church experienced significant growth...though this growth was, once again, related to questions of ethnicity. In the decades since, emigration of many of Lutheran heritage has dashed the hopes of those who sought a contemporary restoration of the Lutheran Church's status (even unofficially) as the “second state church.”

That said, it would be wrong to rush to the conclusion that the churches of the Reformation no longer have a place in this part of the world, and can make no contribution in post-Soviet societies. The recent history of the former Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS) will show that Protestants are trying to find their way to play a new role in society. By looking at the (largely) German heritage church, we acknowledge that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia (of largely Finnish-heritage) has sought out its own ways, largely influenced by so-called “Confessional Lutheranism.” Here we will limit ourselves to the more ecumenically open Lutherans of Russia as opposed to attempting to explain all the nuances of the development of Lutheranism in Russia and in other former Soviet states.<sup>37</sup>

Today the Lutheran Church in Russia is obviously dealing with a different set of challenges than it faced previously. In pre-Revolutionary Russia the issue was that the church was walled in. Today the most obvious obstacle facing the church is its extremely small size. Is it really possible for such a minuscule church to take on moral and political responsibility and help build a healthy society? Only time will tell. In the meantime, the church is seeking to answer the question in the affirmative, to show with its efforts to contribute to the country's intellectual and spiritual life here and now that it believes the Reformation tradition has something important to say for 21<sup>st</sup> century Russia.

How is it doing so? One of the priorities of the early leaders of ELCROS (particularly Archbishop Georg Kretschmar but also his successor, Archbishop Edmund Ratz) was to harness the past for the purposes of the present. To a large extent these efforts seem aimed at giving Lutherans confidence in their right to exist and at arming them with knowledge to protect them from ignorant accusations that their church is a “sect.” This has been visible, for example, in the church's main publication - *Der Bote*. Issued 3 or 4 times per year, the magazine demonstrates that one important priority for the church is to reclaim the best of their heritage by speaking to the core of Lutheran identity<sup>38</sup> as well as lifting up examples of faith and service from the period of the Russian Empire.<sup>39</sup>

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36 This and what follows has to do with the Russian part of the former Soviet Union; the situation of the Lutheran churches in the Baltics after their integration into the USSR was, of course, quite different.

37 Where the Lutheran churches (again, with the exception of the Baltics) are even smaller and have to deal with additional issues, e.g., majority Muslim populations in Central Asia. On the other hand the example of Russia can be used for other countries in the region insofar as there much about the history, mentality and even political situation that can be applied across the region.

38 e.g., 2008:3. Theme: Lutheran Identity. 2008:4. Theme: Diaconal work. 2009:1. Theme: Tolerance. 2009:1 and 2009:2 Articles by Archbishop Kretschmar on liturgy and unity. In 2010 (:2) and 2013 (:1), the theme of Lutheran Identity was once again central.

39 Including articles about the history of buildings (e.g., 2010:4), about Lutheran influence in society (2013:2) about superintendents/bishops of the church (2007:1, 2012:2) and about martyrs from among the faithful (2007:1, 2015:3).

At the same time there is another, no less important manner in which the historic nature of the Lutheran Church in Russia has been used for the purposes of the church today – to get its voice heard as a sort of official representation of all Protestants. Archbishop Kretschmar emphasized the deep roots the Lutheran church in the region and worked to show that the Lutheran church was not a threat to the Orthodox church.<sup>40</sup> The first Archbishops of ELCROS were well known to the leaderships of the Russian Orthodox Church because of their international connections in the fields of academic theology and ecumenism.

Today Archbishop Dietrich Brauer and other leaders from Moscow have made great efforts to bring forward the Lutheran church's long time presence in the country as a way of winning for the church “a place at the table,” especially in questions where politics and religion meet. These efforts appear to have had some success not only in the country's two largest cities, but also in places like Ulyanovsk, Samara, Perm, Omsk and Vladivostok. Thanks in part simply to their presence in the architectural landscape of these cities, historic congregational buildings gain attention from city governments. Congregations have been able to use this point of contact to establish productive working relationships with political leaders. Both on a national and a provincial level, then, Lutheran leaders frequently take part in government-led round table discussions and conferences dealing with various societal issues.<sup>41</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to say that the Lutheran Church's efforts are directed exclusively at restoring a glorious past and to regain their place as Russia's second Christian confession. The current leadership of the church is trying to help its members forge, for the first time, an identity that is both Russian and Lutheran. In that regard there are many attempts to utilize the heritage of the Reformation and to contextualize it for local needs. This is one of the main tasks of theological education in the church, for example.<sup>42</sup> Casting an even wider net of influence is Der Bote. The themes, articles and authors represented there point to a decision on the part of church leadership to prioritize the development of a Lutheran identity (with the help of sermons and theological articles in every issue) that is firmly grounded in the post-Soviet context.<sup>43</sup>

Two particular individuals carry a large part of the responsibility for this development – the President of the Theological Seminary in Novosaratovka, Dr. Anton Tikhomirov, and ELCR Archbishop, Dietrich Brauer.

Dietrich Brauer became the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia

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The church has made and continues to make special efforts to tell the stories of those who lived through the last years of the Russian Empire and early years of the Soviet Union and who suffered for their faith. Examples include articles about those who went to the Leningrad seminary (“The Last Graduates.” Nasha tserkov, September 2001. found at: [luteranstvo.info/istorija-religii/177-2011-11-02-22-26-18.html](http://luteranstvo.info/istorija-religii/177-2011-11-02-22-26-18.html)), the translation (from German into Russian) of Meyer's *To Siberia!* (1999) and of the collection of articles he edited, *Luther's Heritage in Russia* (2003), along with the memoir of Edith Muetel – *I Remember: From Petrograd to Petersburg through the Volga and Siberia – the Fate of a Pastor's Daughter*. St. Petersburg, 2015.

40 A typical example can be found in an interview with Archbishop Kretschmar in 1996. The journalist started in this way: “I would like to ask you about Lutheranism, about your personal mission and the mission of Lutheranism in Russia. What is the role of Lutheranism in Russia in your opinion?” Archbishop Kretschmar answered: “Lutherans came to Russia more than 400 years ago, partially of their own free will and partially because they were prisoners of war. They became a part of Russian society and didn't think much about what their mission here was.... We didn't come here as missionaries in order to attract others to Lutheranism. But since we are here we really do need to think about our place in comparison to the large church of the majority here in Russia and also with others. Maybe it is necessary to start by saying that we don't have any conflicts” with the Orthodox.” “We try to cooperate. For example just a few days ago I was at the office of His Holiness the Patriarch of All Russia Alexei II and there we conversed about the relationship of Lutheran and Orthodox churches throughout the world and particularly in Russia...”

As happens so frequently in these cases, the next topic of conversation concerned the history of Lutheranism and how it compares to the Russian Orthodox Church. <http://www.rondon.org/relig-091203105021>

41 A quick scan of news items in the church newspaper Luteranskije vesty shows this. Articles from 2014-2016 can be found in English translation at: [elcrosnews.blogspot.com](http://elcrosnews.blogspot.com).

42 At the Theological Seminary in Novosaratovka and through the “Equipping for Service” program of lay education significant time is devoted to learning about the history, theology and practice of the Eastern Christian tradition.

43 This, too, includes learning more about Eastern Orthodoxy: Cf., “Concerning Easter Morning,” “Holiness and the Saints.” (2009:1); “Ministers and Their Liturgical Garments in the Orthodox Church,” (2009:2) an article on the theology of icons (2014: 3) and on the Russian Orthodox tradition of “Holy Fools” (2015:2)

in 2011 and was elected Acting Archbishop of the ELC (made up of the church in European Russia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Urals, Siberia and Far East) in 2012; in 2014 he became the Archbishop. Particularly since then he has taken on the responsibility of laying out a vision for the church. He has done this in various ways,<sup>44</sup> though a look at two articles from a 2014 *Der Bote* is sufficient to gain a sense of the direction Brauer would like to give to this still-evolving Russian Lutheranism.

In the introduction to the issue dedicated to the Church and politics, Brauer, to a certain degree, is engaged in a discussion with the historic Lutheran Church in the Russian Empire. He says: “It is impossible to imagine Christian life shut up in a closed, pious religious space. It is always a full, multifaceted life, which happens in the place where we have been placed in relationship with other people in society. It is in society that we reveal ourselves, that we bear the fruit of our faith and witness to others about our values and hopes as Christians.”<sup>45</sup>

In the sermon that follows, he speaks about what he sees as the relationship of the Lutheran church to its past: “In the 20 years since the fall of the Soviet Union, many Lutherans who lived through the time of repression emigrated back to Germany. And we in Russia have become a very small church which is at the very beginning of its journey. What Paul wrote about the Christians of Corinth is relevant to us as well: 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' But we want to become again the Church of Jesus Christ in Russia. We reject any claim to play an important, influential role in society, as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We reject any attempt to look exclusively to the past and the achievements of the Lutherans in Russian history. Once again we are at the beginning.”<sup>46</sup>

The Archbishop goes on to lay out his vision of the foundation of the Lutheran Church in Russia at the beginning of its path, saying that it can be found in our theological heritage. Here, as elsewhere, he underlines freedom and grace. In particular, he quotes thesis 62 of Luther's 95 Theses: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” “The Gospel is something other than – and something so much more than – glory or recognition. The Good News of the Gospel is the Word by which God frees us,” and goes on to quote Galatians 5.1, where he notes the need to recognize this moment for what it is – a time of freedom...with which comes responsibility. Our faith frees us to see the world as could be if it were free of sin. Christ's example frees us to dream about (and work for) another kind of world, “no matter what regime is in power.” Brauer says he dreams that “we would preserve our freedom and allow others to be free,” that “democracy would develop everywhere and without violence,” that the “Church would preach the liberating Good News of God and would not be the marionettes of the state.” Noting the situation in Russia explicitly, he goes on to say that he dreams of a country where reforms would be possible, that had an independent legal system, that would be free of corrupt institutions, and where people for whom faith would be the “ultimate concern” would be called to serve and that “our small Lutheran church could contribute” to these processes. “These dreams may seem naive, but we should preserve our freedom to dream. As Paul writes: 'Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.’”<sup>47</sup>

Through these words of the Archbishop, it is clear that key Reformation themes will be important for post-Soviet Lutheran identity. There is no danger here of an intellectualization of dogma that would somehow disconnect it with everyday life. Instead we see that Lutheranism in this context, if it is to gain a following, will need to touch the depths of individual identity and reveal itself in a holistic way in the life of the believer. The Archbishop clearly wants the Lutheran church to carve out a special place in the Russian religious environment by being a small, moderate

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44 Including reports at synod assemblies and, most especially, through the book he co-authored with Dr. Anton Tikhomirov - *'And You Will Be Free Indeed!': Thoughts on Freedom in the Context of the Russian Evangelical Lutheran Church (I istinno svobodny budete': fazmysleniya o svodobe v kontekste rossisskoy luteranskoy tserkvi)* Moscow, 2015. This short book sums up the Lutheran understanding of freedom and responsibility in a way that clearly speaks to the priorities of the Archbishop.

45 *Der Bote*. 2014:2. 3

46 *Ibid.*5.

47 *Ibid.* 5-6.

voice of reason on issues of ethics and society. The pressure on Russian religious groups to support the policies of the Kremlin is high; this is especially true of those churches that have ties to the West, most especially in times when political relationships have seriously deteriorated. In church declarations and publications the ELC shows a willingness to ignore the “official” line, and instead stake out its own positions based on its own values.<sup>48</sup> The church is too small to risk outright opposition to the state, but by declining to repeat the “right words,” the words expected of them, and by asking questions and shifting attention to other issues, the Lutheran church in Russia is staking out unique ground. History has shown that even remaining silent during controversial questions is punishable.<sup>49</sup> Yet *Der Bote* from time to time brings up issues which it would be safer not to touch.<sup>50</sup> While avoiding being directly confrontational, articles there have given voice to believers in Ukraine and Georgia, giving readers in Russia a perspective they certainly wouldn't see in the secular media. In this way the Russian Lutheran church is humbly staking a claim to the right to have an independent voice

The efforts led by Archbishop Brauer are particularly important for a general audience within the church as well as for staking out the church's place in society; Dr. Anton Tikhomirov, on the other hand, writes as a systematic theologian for those who are interested in an intellectual approach to Protestantism. His many lectures in various educational institutions (including leading Orthodox institutions) help to explain Lutheran theology and its significance for Christian life. His two – rather short – books *Dogmatics Without Dogmatism* (Moscow 2013) and *The Truth of Protest* (Moscow 2009) are unparalleled in terms of expressing the values of Reformation theology with an authentic Russian voice. The latter's subtitle is “The Spirit of Evangelical Lutheran Theology,” and it is this *way* of thinking theologically, probably more than concrete theological positions, that is so new and fresh.

The chapter titles of *The Truth of Protest* leave little room for doubt concerning the confessional identity of the author. “The Revelation of the Cross,” “Faith,” “Justification,” “The Word of God,” and “the Church” clearly indicate that the author is from the Reformation tradition. Yet this is not a textbook on systematic theology. As indicated in the introduction, the book's purpose is to answer the question “How is Lutheranism different from Orthodoxy?” Tikhomirov relates his own experience, one shared by almost any Lutheran in Russia, of running into this question very frequently, and his book is an attempt to help those who ask the question (including many Lutherans!) find well-grounded answers.

An important first step in this direction is to try to avoid giving the sort of answers that are related to the “exterior” of church life, the kind of answers, Tikhomirov says, that you could even find in an old textbook on “scientific atheism.” The real place to start, instead, is the “most

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48 It is the nature of such pressure that it not be public, though through the example of 'loyal' groups gaining preference (which in the case of religious minorities means having the freedom to live out their ministry without facing state officials seeking out a technicality that will allow them to shut down the organization or cripple its work) it is quite clear that saying the “right things” has its advantages. The church's resistance, then, comes mostly through small hints and notable silence. One exception was related to the events surrounding the Crimea crisis in 2014. Archbishop Brauer issued a declaration that says, in part, “In the chaotic situation in which the people of Crimea found themselves, they declared their desire to join Russia. As citizens of the Russian Federation and living according to its laws, we accept their decision. But at the same time we cannot be unconcerned by the weakening of trusting relationships between Ukrainians and Russians. We pray to God for wisdom for all who are responsible for making political decisions upon which the future of the two countries will depend. We also express our hope that the unity of our Church Union remains despite these conditions, and we trust that our European and American partners will not let simple people suffer in the situation of tension between Russia and the rest of the world. As Christians we are called to think outside of the box, to be peacemakers for the whole world, preachers of the Good News of Christ and to act with love. As Christ says – 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'” [http://elkras.ru/arhiv/arhiv\\_novostei/newsinenglish/2014/april2014.jdx](http://elkras.ru/arhiv/arhiv_novostei/newsinenglish/2014/april2014.jdx). This declaration has since been removed from the Russian-language version of the church's site.

49 e.g., Pastor Ganzen, the only pastor to refuse to sign the letter of greeting to the Bolshevik government at the church synod in 1924, was later sent to the GULAG, and his refusal to sign the letter was named as one of the reasons.

50 *Der Bote* 2009: 3. Theme: “Fellowship. Crossing Borders.” 2014: 1. Theme: “Be at Peace with Everyone.” 2014:2. Theme: “‘My Kingdom is Not of This World!’ The Church and Politics.” 2015:3. Theme: Refugees.

important internal principle which makes Lutherans different from other confessions and Churches, the 'spirit of Lutheranism'. It is much more difficult to describe this spirit than simply listing the difference in dogmas and rituals.” However, a real acquaintance with Lutheranism can only happen in this way.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore Tikhomirov tries to show from the beginning that part of the “spirit of Lutheranism” is having the freedom to present one's own thoughts and opinions, rather than conforming to a certain theological orthodoxy; it is also about being ecumenically open, even if the context of a book which has as its stated purpose drawing contrasts with another Christian tradition.<sup>52</sup>

The first chapter, focusing on the theology of the cross, never mentions the Orthodox church as such, but manages at the same time to say that the cross is central to every Christian theology and also to point out that “the first and most important characteristic of Protestant theology is that it is radically focused on Jesus Christ and on His cross as the only Divine revelation.”<sup>53</sup>

Luther, especially the early Luther, clearly occupies a central place in Tikhomirov's theology. That, along with his preferred interpreters of the Protestant tradition - Jüngel, Althaus, and particularly Paul Tillich – remains clear in the chapters that follow. For the most part he speaks in a way that would be familiar to those fluent in 20<sup>th</sup> century Western theology, but his Russian “accent” nevertheless comes through as he mildly, though consistently, points to both continuities and contrasts between the Eastern and Western traditions. References to Russian literature, as well as adages and proverbs from the Russian language all contribute to showing how the “spirit of Lutheran theology” can speak to the post-Soviet person.

It is very interesting to note the ways that Lutheranism, in the works of Tikhomirov and Brauer, has adapted to the local context. We might note, for example, the particularly strong emphasis on freedom, honesty and concrete deeds of service and the relatively small amount of attention given to the questions of “faith” versus “good works” (a Western theological discussion that doesn't easily translate into the world of Eastern Christianity). However, the “sample size” of works of these two theologians is relatively small, and it is still too early to give any serious answer to the question of reception – will the visions of these theologians really form the life of the Lutheran Church in Russia in the future? Will the current church structures survive given the financial and social pressures on the church? Only time will tell. But as should be clear from this paper, the Lutheran Church in Russia is content neither to be a foreign element in society nor to simply morph under the pressures of the post-Soviet context. Instead church leaders are seeking out a new way to bring the inheritance of the Reformation to bear on its context. Even if the place of Protestants in Russia was never one of “protest and mere denial,” its isolation from Russian society in the imperial period means that its influence on society was severely limited. Today, however, despite limitations, church leaders are attempting to develop a Protestant theology that will be meaningful to the post-Soviet context. Their work, however humble, is a new chance for the Lutheran church to be an authentically local voice expressing the core values of the Reformation in a way that has the potential to have a positive impact on the religious and social environment of the country.

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51 Anton Tikhomirov. *The Truth of Protest: The Spirit of Evangelical Lutheran Theology. (Istina protesta. Dukh evangelicheskoy-luteranskoj teologii. )* Moscow, St. Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute. 2009. 8.

52 Ibid. 12-14.

53 Ibid. 42.