

Christian Mission in the 21st Century: An Orthodox Perspective

Consultation held at Minsk, Belarus, 4-7 February 2010

The centenary of the “Edinburgh 1910” World Missionary Conference was an important point of reference for a consultation on “Christian Mission in the 21st Century: An Orthodox Perspective” hosted by the St Cyril and St Methodius Theological Institute in Minsk, Belarus from 4 to 7 February 2010.

Though there were no Orthodox participants at Edinburgh 1910, the conference received a letter from Archbishop (now Saint) Nicolai Katsatkin of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Tokyo. Archbishop Nicolai reported that:

I am in friendly, more than that, brotherly relations with all the missionaries of other sections known to me, and so are our Christians with their Christians. So shall we be from our part always, because we know that the first duty of us Christians is to cultivate Christian love to all men, and particularly to our brothers in Christ. But, nevertheless, there is no real and full unity between us and other sections; more than that, we are far from such unity because we are divided in the Christian doctrine.

The Archbishop thus set a tone for cordial relations between Orthodox and Western Christians while being clear that no full unity could be attained until doctrinal differences are resolved. This laid important foundations for closer relations between the Orthodox and Western Christians during the 20th century – something which is recognised by the participation of Orthodox delegates in Edinburgh 2010.

The Minsk Consultation brought together more than 50 Orthodox mission leaders and thinkers from Russia, Finland, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Kenya and the USA as well as from host nation Belarus. It was organised by the Christian Education Centre St Cyril and Methodius University in Minsk (Belarus), the Institute of Theology, St Cyril and Methodius University in Minsk (Belarus), the Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Lviv (Ukraine) and the Orthodox Mission Network in the UK. Russian was the primary language of the Consultation with some sessions in English and simultaneous translation at all times.

In plenary sessions of the Consultation Valentin Kozhukharov of Bulgaria addressed the question of the lessons learned for mission from the experience of totalitarianism and atheism during the 20th century while Kenneth Ross of Scotland considered the lessons learned from the experience of colonialism and secularism during the same period. The Christian understanding of the person (doctrine of anthropology) and its relevance to mission today was expounded by Fr Vladimir Fedorov of St. Petersburg and Fr Heikki Huttunen of Finland. Personal reflection on this topic were offered by Alexander Ogorodnikov, who was a political dissident in the Soviet Union, and Fr Antonio Santi, who had been a Roman Catholic

missionary in Moscow during the Soviet period. Case studies of individual missionaries were presented by Fr Pavel Serdiuk who focussed on St Nicolai of Japan and by Olga Olenik who focussed on Lynette Hoppe, a recent Orthodox missionary in Albania. Local case studies were presented by Fr Martin Ritsi of the USA, John Ngige of Kenya, and Alina Awramiuk of Warsaw.

In terms of results of the Consultation, the following points may be noted:

- Participants were agreed on the importance of Orthodox Christianity recovering its missionary character and not becoming preoccupied with internal ecclesiastical matters.
- The minority status of the Orthodox Church today in almost all the countries which have historically been Orthodox, underlines the importance of mission in the local and national context.
- There is need for a concentrated focus on the challenge of communicating the gospel to people whose experience of living under totalitarian rule has eroded their sense of personal responsibility and initiative.
- There is need for intensive consideration of what it means to be human; and on the question of how our understanding of humanity today relates to the message of cross, resurrection and deification.
- It is also recognised that there is an important place for missionary initiative which aims to reach people beyond our own context with the gospel of Christ, especially those who until now have had no opportunity to hear the good news.
- The discussions about “inculturation” of the Orthodox faith in new contexts, particularly in Africa, revealed considerable resonance with the experience of Western missionaries, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, in the second half of the 20th century.
- As a contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 process the Consultation emphasised that every context is a missionary context and every Christian is a missionary.
- In today’s pluralistic world there is need to consider how Christian witness is best offered when several denominations are active in the same area.
- Strong resolve emerged in the course of the Consultation to form an ongoing network of Orthodox mission thinkers and practitioners. It is hoped that this would be closely linked with wider networks of Christians who have mission at heart.

Kenneth R. Ross
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