

# EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

VOL. 30, NO. 2, 2022

## Protestants Riven by War in Ukraine

*Editor's note: Although historically close, relations between Ukrainian and Russian Protestants had become strained even before Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In 2014, Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Ukraine's southeastern Donbas region led to the severance of longstanding relationships between ministries in the two countries [see East-West Church and Ministry Report theme issue on the Ukrainian crisis, vol. 22 (2014), no. 3, and multiple responses in vol. 23 (2015), nos. 1 and 2.]*

*Ukrainian Protestants supported the pro-democracy sentiment of the 2013-14 protests on Kyiv's Maidan Square that preceded the Kremlin's military intervention, and valued the freedoms it gave their churches in post-Maidan Ukraine (see Mikhail Cherenkov, "Churches as Agents of Change in Eurasia," East-West Church Report, vol. 26 (2018), vol. 26, no.3, 15-16; "Two Local Pastors Discuss Politics and the Church in Ukraine," East-West Church Report, vol. 29 (2021), no. 3, 11-14.)*

*Ukrainian Protestants were also alienated by the muted response from some Russian Protestants to multiple cases of torture and theft suffered by their fellow believers in occupied Ukraine from 2014 onwards (see Joy Ireland and Mark R. Elliott, "Detention, Threats, and Violence Against Christian Minority Believers in Eastern Ukraine and*



Irpin Bible Seminary building, near Bucha, after Russian occupation (Source: IRPIN BIBLE SEMINARY)

## Theology after Bucha

ROMAN SOLOVIY

3 April 2022

As soon as Russian troops occupied some Ukrainian regions, we began to receive witness accounts of numerous atrocities they had committed against the civilian population. Initially, I began reading these testimonies about the executions of civilians, numerous sexual crimes, and mass looting with fear and some disbelief. Was this really possible today, in our country? Was it really possible for soldiers of a country so proud of its culture and thousand-year Christian tradition to demonstrate such satanic malice and cruelty?

As the days and hours passed, however, the number of testimonies grew, dispelling any lingering doubts. Yesterday and the day before, Ukrainian troops liberated the entire territory of Kyiv Region. What they saw in the towns of Irpin, Hostomel, Bucha, and dozens of surrounding villages is indescribable. Hundreds and hundreds of unarmed civilians shot dead with their hands tied. Burned bodies of raped women. Corpses strewn in the streets of towns, filling basements, decomposing in looted apartments. Towns and villages razed to the ground. Russian military vehicles stuffed with booty (household appliances, jewelry, underwear, perfumes, plumbing fixtures). Russian soldiers at post offices in bordering regions

(continued on page 2)

*Crimea (February-December 2014)" and "Church and Christian NGO Seizures, Restrictions, and Damage in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (April 2014-March 2015), East-West Church and Ministry Report, vol. 23 (2015), no.3, 2-9.*

*This year's invasion has alienated the two communities even more, perhaps irrevocably. Particular anguish has come from the discovery of mass atrocities following the Russian military's withdrawal from areas to the northwest of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, in late March. Two neighboring suburbs especially affected, Bucha and Irpin, contained an atypically large Protestant population, being home to more than two dozen mission organizations, including Youth With A Mission, Samaritan's Purse, and Mission Eurasia, in addition to a dozen Protestant churches, including a 700-member Baptist church.*

*In Bucha, one of those found shot dead by the roadside was Vitaly Vinogradov, dean of Kyiv Slavic Evangelical Seminary. Among a group of nine civilian men identified as executed by Russian troops in Bucha was the son of Liudmyla Nakonechnaya, a graduate of Irpin Bible Seminary (see Yousur Al-Hlou et al, "New Evidence Shows How Russian Soldiers Executed Men in Bucha," New York Times, 19 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/russia-bucha-ukraine-executions.html>.)*

*The profound impact of these events is expressed in the following passages by Rev. Dr. Roman Soloviy, who is based in western Ukraine. They originally appeared as Ukrainian-language public social media posts. ♦*



Rev. Dr. Soloviy  
(Source: ROMAN SOLOVIY)

sending everything they have looted to their families somewhere in Saratov or Tambov...

I do not know how to live with this. I think with even greater horror—what else will we learn when we liberate the rest of our territories? We have liberated only a small part of our country from the invaders, yet such an abyss of evil has opened before us that we can already say that the crimes of Srebrenica and Rwanda are being repeated today in Ukraine. Six weeks ago I could have given a lecture or preached a sermon on how to forgive enemies and support victims of violence. But today I can only weep.

I used to be tormented by the question of why many survivors of the Holocaust later committed suicide. We may recall Paul Celan, the poet; Jean Améry, the philosopher; and Primo Levi, that great witness to the horrors of Auschwitz (in which my grandmother also perished). But now I understand that the level of violence and human depravity that they experienced deprived them of ways to return to everyday life, normal relationships, openness, and trust in other people. Like Elie Wiesel, they found themselves in such an abyss of evil that it later proved almost impossible to turn away from it.

Who knows how to pray with a woman raped for a week by a Russian soldier, who then shot dead her sick mother when the woman refused to go with him to Russia? What words may be said to the elderly residents of a boarding house that was mercilessly fired upon by a Russian tank? What can be said to people who have been through hell on earth, brought to them by a Russian military drunk on power and impunity? How to comfort a wife whose husband ran out to seek help because she had gone into labor, but who was killed near their home? How to mourn civilians who have been tortured to such a degree that it is impossible to identify them?

I am not yet ready to talk about this today. Long and painfully, like the Jews after Auschwitz, we in Ukraine will have to seek answers to these questions. To form the contours of our own theology—a theology after Bucha.

But, no matter what, we believe that we will hold on to our humanity.

### 11 April 2022

My short text of 3 April, “Theology after Bucha,” received publicity that I did not expect. On the first days of April the truth about the war crimes committed by the Russian occupiers in Ukrainian towns and villages around Kyiv was revealed to the world. Born of pain and despair, my text did not contain any answers. It was merely an attempt to pose some crucial questions, which we will have to ponder for many years to come, should God preserve us. Just as the Jewish people strove to understand where God was when their bodies burned in the crematoria of concentration camps, we Ukrainians will have to search long and hard for answers to the question: Where was God when the Russians killed civilians, raped women and children, shot up cars, threw grenades into basements where civilians were hiding?

The Ukrainian tragedy unfolding before our eyes forces us to rethink radically many important Christian doctrines, or at least to understand their content in the context of our new reality. What does the sovereignty of God

mean? And how does it correlate with His kindness and love? What does the image of God mean in fallen humanity? Is it present in a killer and a rapist? How is it possible to forgive what cannot be forgiven because the victims of violence are no longer with us, and the one who could say “I forgive” is no longer on this earth?

As a professor of historical theology, I am well aware of the answers to these questions offered by Christian theology, from [2nd-century St.] Irenaeus [of Lyons] to [20th-century Reformed theologian Jürgen] Moltman. But this is not enough. We need answers that will allow us, Ukrainian Christians, to trust God and at the same time to remain radically honest with ourselves and with Him. ♦

**Roman Soloviy** is director of the Eastern European Institute of Theology, Lviv, Ukraine. He holds two earned doctorates in theology and philosophy from Lviv National University and Dragomanova National Pedagogical University, Kyiv.

Destroyed copies of St. John’s Gospel found near Mission Eurasia headquarters, Irpin, following Russian occupation (Source: SERGEY RAKHUBA). The Kremlin-backed authorities in the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic banned an edition of the same Gospel as “extremist” in November 2019 [see the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 29 (2021), no. 3, 8].



## Russian Protestant Responses to the War in Ukraine

*Editor's note: Any attempt by Russian Protestants to restore relations with fellow believers in Ukraine will have to engage with the raw pain expressed by Rev. Dr. Soloviy. Initially, the dominant Russian Protestant response to the 24 February invasion was horror. Leaders of the Unions of Evangelical Christians-Baptists across the former USSR—including those of Ukraine and Russia—appealed to Putin to turn to peaceful negotiation. Briefly posted online in early March, a petition signed by some 250 Protestant representatives, mostly in cities across Russia, further condemned their nation's actions as fratricide, and called for repentance.*

*As with public demonstrations in Russian cities, however, vocal opposition quietened in the wake of the passage of legislation allowing up to 15 years' imprisonment for criticism of the Russian armed forces (see "Russia Criminalizes Sanctions Calls, 'Fake News' on Military," Bloomberg News, 4 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-04/russia-to-punish-sanctions-appeals-and-fake-news-on-military>).*

*The Kremlin has subsequently co-opted some religious representatives in the promotion of its narrative defending its invasion as a "special operation" to "de-Nazify" Ukraine, as during the Second World War. Addressing a 29 March parliamentary roundtable entitled "World Traditional Religions Against Nazi and Fascist Ideology in the 21st Century," leading Pentecostal bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky affirmed his strong support "for everything said" by other religious representatives at the event. This included denials of civilian casualties caused by Russian shelling of the besieged Ukrainian port of Mariupol, calls for Ukraine to be "cleansed" from Nazism, and claims that Russia was currently "a weapon in God's hands." Muslim leaders present provided particularly aggressive rhetoric. Applauded by Moscow Patriarchate representatives, if not Bishop Ryakhovsky, the chief mufti of Chechnya proclaimed Russia's actions a jihad in which demonic opponents should be beheaded, while fellow North Caucasus mufti Ismail Berdiyev concurred: "We have to destroy them totally... there must not be any Ukraine" ([in Russian] "Kruglyi stol na temu: 'Mirovye traditsionnye religii*



**Russian parliamentary roundtable entitled "World Traditional Religions Against Nazi and Fascist Ideology in the 21st Century," 29 March 2022. Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky sits to the left of the Armenian cleric in a black pointed veyghar cowl.**

(Source: <http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/photo/71210/> [CC-BY 4.0])

*protiv ideologii natsizma i fashizma v XXI veke," 29 March 2022, State Duma of the Russian Federation, <http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/video/events/71233/>).*

*Participation by Bishop Ryakhovsky in this event sparked outrage in Russia's Pentecostal community. In an emotional video address, dissident pastor Albert Ratkin accused him of swapping "the Word of God, truth, and purity for nice offices, buffets, and canapes" ([in Russian] "V Gosdume Rossii episkop Riakhovskii rasskazal, kak ubivat' s ljubov'iu," YouTube, 13 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02-3ApXwSuo>). In his open letter, Bishop Vitaly Kogan (Maksimiuk) of the Association of Siberian Pentecostal Churches said that he could not believe his ears: "What happened, Sergei Vasil'evich [Ryakhovsky]? Most Christians in Russia are silent now, and I do not judge them. But it is one thing to stay silent, and quite another to speak in support of those who are razing peaceful Ukrainian cities to the ground and crushing a fraternal people with tanks" ([in Russian] "Episkop Vitalii Kogan (Maksimiuk) Sergeiu Riakhovskomu: Ia bol'she ne podam tebe ruki," Baznica.info, 15 April 2022, <https://baznica.info/2022/04/episkop-vitalij-kogan-maksimyuk-sergeyuryaxovskomu-ya-bolshe-ne-podam-tebe-ruki>).*

*Bishop Ryakhovsky defended his actions in his own video response by claiming that the government roundtable had been about fascism in general terms, not Ukraine specifically. He declined to address the invasion of Ukraine or the recently discovered atrocities against civilians north of Kyiv ([in Russian]*

*"Lichnoe obrashchenie Sergeia Riakhovskogo," YouTube, 15 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duONRSQCmWk>).*

*Even after Bucha, however, some Ukrainian and Russian Protestants have sought dialogue. In a discussion of Christian leadership during war, Pastor Yuri Sipko, a former leader of Russia's Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, agreed with Pastor Anatoli Kaliuzhnyi of Kyiv's New Life Church that "subservience to the powers of this world"—such as by serving on state bodies in the belief that this would protect the Church—constituted "denial of the truth for the sake of worldly recognition" ([in Russian] "Khristianskoe liderstvo i voina," YouTube, 5 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3Klh8qFTMo>).*

*Pastor Sipko also offered his own heartfelt response to the atrocities discovered outside Kyiv in a 5 April public social media post, here translated from the original Russian:*

*Bucha gives me no peace. Especially the lies of public officials—the streams of lies convince me that the process of dehumanization has gone so far that it cannot be reversed.*

*In response to the fact that atrocities have been discovered, the Ukrainian authorities say, "We are documenting everything. We are investigating everything. We will identify the perpetrators. Punishment is inevitable."*

*The Russian authorities say, "It's all fake. It's all staged. It is all part of a global information attack against*

*(continued on page 4)*

## Russian Protestant Response *(continued from page 3)*

Russia.” Childish denials.

So what is the conclusion?

It is obvious. Before the Russian forces arrived, the town was thriving. When they left, it was a cemetery.

I am a Russian citizen, so this is particularly shameful and painful.

It is one thing for our military to cause such destruction in our name. It is another for Christians to line up to declare their support for this insanity. Religious leaders are not shying away from expressing hatred towards the whole Ukrainian people and calling upon our government to destroy Ukraine without mercy.

Public records that show the leaders of religious organizations fully support the government’s actions make all of them accomplices.

And so I bowed before God! The Lord is weeping. I also wept.

It is Lent. We are approaching Easter. And we have been killing Ukraine for 40 days. We have been crucifying Christ for 40 days!

To what depths have Christians sunk if they approve of this?

Pilate showed more humanity. ♦



Left: Vitaly Vinogradov, dean of Kyiv Slavic Evangelical Seminary, found shot dead by the roadside in Bucha on 3 April. (Source: ROMAN SOLOVIY)

Right: Andriy Shostak, a student of Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, found killed in Motyzhyn village, west of Kyiv, on 11 April. (Source: UETS)



# “Everything Will Be Ukraine”: Evangelical Holistic Mission During Wartime

MYRA WATKINS

In wartime Ukraine, Evangelical leaders have shifted their focus and practices towards holistic ministry. Pastor Mykola Romaniuk of Irpin Bible Church—one of 13 Evangelical churches in the town of Irpin (Kyiv Region)—has been leading a small team that transports evacuees to safety and provides refuge in church facilities. “We were here for 20 years, and neighbors never set foot in our church,” he remarks. “Now they are living in our basement, praying with us, and



Pastors Ivan Rusyn (left) and Fyodor Raychynets (next left) of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary (Source: UETS)

have become our friends.”<sup>1</sup> After evacuating to Lviv in western Ukraine, Romaniuk has found that God has given his church a new ministry, “with the homeless, the handicapped, and the nonbelievers of our town.”

Ivan Rusyn, president of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary (UETS) in Kyiv, co-ordinates relief with his seven remaining colleagues from the offices of the Ukrainian Bible Society, where he sleeps on the floor at night. The team was forced to evacuate the seminary as it found itself only a thousand feet from the frontlines. “It is a catastrophe,” he said. “There is fear in the eyes of the children.” Rusyn has vowed to stay in the Ukrainian capital as long as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains: “This war has completely redefined my understanding of mission and holistic ministry. You cannot show compassion from a distance.” He believes that Christian leaders who remain in Kyiv and other cities “are the incarnated witness of Jesus Christ.”

A colleague at UETS, Pastor Fyodor Raychynets stayed in the Kyiv area in order to serve as what he calls the “rear guard” to those on the frontline. He assists people who suffer the most, such as hungry and afraid elderly sheltering in their basements without electricity. He also helps the territorial defense with medicine, clothing, and shoes, but not weapons. He prays to retain his humanity in the face of war.<sup>2</sup>



Unable to leave Kyiv for some days after the Russian invasion, students and staff sheltered in the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary's basement. (Source: UETS)

Russia's 24 February invasion has stranded an estimated 13 million people in affected areas of Ukraine, unable to evacuate due to heightened security risks.<sup>3</sup> As bombardments force people to seek cover in bomb shelters, millions of Ukrainians live in uncertainty and under imminent threat. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 6.5 million people are internally displaced in Ukraine. Four million have fled the country, with many seeking refuge in neighboring Poland. The numbers are rising daily.<sup>4</sup> Since all Ukrainian men between the ages of 18 and 60 cannot leave the country and may be conscripted to military service, women and children typically flee alone and have endured significant trauma.

Close to the Polish border, an estimated 200,000 people have settled temporarily in Lviv, the unofficial western capital of Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Churches and seminaries are among the organizations welcoming them. According to one pastor in Lviv:

**If it were not for so many people suffering here, I would consider this the most exciting time. The church has become all I (and Jesus) always wanted it to be. I feel the most alive when random people from the train station are sleeping all over my apartment. And doing Sunday morning has never been easier! I woke up at seven today without any idea what I will be preaching, and I have a sermon in my head already! We will have to do church in our café today, because the meeting hall is full of people sleeping on the floor and on the stage—and not just today, [but] last Sunday as well.<sup>6</sup>**

As the weeks go by with no end to the war in sight, however, this pastor admits that weariness is setting in. He simply moves forward, doing the task that is before him. His church has taken in several hundred refugees per week, but some only stay for a few days in transit to Poland. The pastor and his team also co-ordinate efforts with churches in Ternopil [85 miles southeast of Lviv] and Krakow, Poland, transporting humanitarian relief to cities under siege as well as evacuating people out of those areas to safety. The co-ordinating pastor from Krakow drove to Lviv on 2 April in a van filled with food and items requested by the church that were not available in Ukraine. The co-ordinating pastor in Ternopil reported that, in the month since the 24 February invasion, they evacuated more than 300 people out of Kyiv, transported 500 people to the Polish border, distributed eight tons of humanitarian aid, and housed more than 3,000 refugees in their church.<sup>7</sup>

While these stories and sentiments provide only a snapshot of similar Evangelical efforts and perspectives throughout Ukraine, several common themes emerge: solidarity with fellow human beings, compassion, and hospitality towards refugees.

In Ukraine there is a new popular saying: “Everything will be Ukraine!” [Ukrainian: *Vse bude Ukraina!*] To Sergiy Tymchenko, director of Realis Christian Center in Kyiv, this saying means that the Ukrainian spirit of courage, mutual support, and sharing personal resources will spread beyond Ukrainian borders to the rest of the world. Tymchenko first experienced what he calls “this amazing atmosphere of boldness, solidarity, and love” during the pro-democracy Orange Revolution on Kyiv's central Maidan Square in 2004. He says that it is this spirit (indeed, the Spirit) that now inspires many Ukrainians to give their lives for others as Russia's military shells Ukrainian cities.

Tymchenko observes that for many Ukrainians, a spirit of sacrificial love is becoming a new norm, even when up against the bloody aggression of a tyrant in Moscow. He reasons that this spirit is not limited to any ethnicity or social group, but is fitting for all humanity, because it gives dignity, confidence, joy, and fulfillment beyond anything that could be obtained by merely human means. He believes that God “dropped the spark of this Spirit onto my beloved Ukraine when He saw the great suffering experienced by my forefathers in my homeland.” For this reason, Tymchenko sees the influence of Ukraine uniting and inspiring people, so we are all now “becoming Ukraine.” In this sense, he hopes that even in Russia “everything will be Ukraine.”



Kharkiv church members unload a food truck sent by Nadácia Integra (Slovakia) via Realis Christian Center. (Source: REALIS CHRISTIAN CENTER)

This, Tymchenko thinks, “is precisely what Jesus meant when He told his disciples that they must love their enemies.”<sup>8</sup> While he understands the struggle to maintain human dignity and love in the face of the unspeakable atrocities of war, he finds strength in solidarity with fellow Ukrainians and others who seek what he calls a “blessed society.”

Tymchenko further identifies this special spirit as the Hebrew word *mishpat* (justice), promised by God to us. In the Old Testament, *mishpat* is usually concerned with the care and cause

(continued on page 6)

## Wartime Mission *(continued from page 5)*

of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor, and protecting the oppressed. While the action here is justice, the motivation is mercy. Mercy (Hebrew: *chesedh*) is God's unconditional grace and compassion.<sup>9</sup> "Justice" is often joined with *tzedek*, or righteousness, which refers to a state of moral good in which God's people are to treat those around them with decency and fairness, recognizing that all people are created in the image of God with inherent dignity and worth.

Jesus describes such influence and service in His Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus' disciples, we act as a preservative in the world—"salt"—but only when we live virtuous lives. Jesus, the light of the world, then illuminates a sin-darkened world through the witness of His disciples, meaning that we should not withdraw from the world, but shine brightly so that others can glorify the Father in heaven [Matt. 5:13-16]. On this text, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that a community of Jesus Christ seeking to hide itself ceases to follow Him.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as Christ's disciples, we do not seek visibility for ourselves, but so that our good works may glorify Him. As Bonhoeffer also says, "It is by seeing the cross and the community beneath it that men come to believe in God. But that is the light of the Resurrection."<sup>11</sup>

In Ukraine, Evangelical pastors and their churches are serving beneath such a cross. Seeking to bind the wounds of people who have experienced tremendous loss and witnessed extreme brutality, they find words inadequate. In his brief text of 3 April, "Theology after Bucha," Rev. Dr. Roman Soloviy asks, "How to mourn civilians who have been tortured to such a degree that it is impossible to identify them? I am not ready to talk about this today" [see current issue of the *East-West Church Report*, 1-2].<sup>12</sup> Pastor Raychynets similarly prays for strength; that he will retain his humanity as more atrocities come to light in Bucha, his own town. He admits that he is scared, not of missiles flying over his head or explosions nearby, but "for what we still have to hear, learn, and how to live with it."<sup>13</sup>

This is perhaps not the time for words, but for listening, lament, embracing, and acts of service. Formerly based in Donetsk, Joshua Searle of Spurgeon's College in the UK points out that in the incarnation and crucifixion, God "participates in the existential hell of human suffering in a mind-blowing, logic-defying demonstration of divine solidarity with humanity in pain." He



Young members of Irpin Bible Church at a June 2022 service to celebrate 25 years since its foundation (Source: IRPIN BIBLE CHURCH)

further considers this self-sacrificing love and compassion (*agape*) to be the ultimate revelation of God expressed in eternal solidarity with humanity—God suffers with us.<sup>14</sup> We must dwell on this with people who are suffering—and as people who are suffering—before we can move on to resolution and victory.

Faced with the evil of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer posed the question: "How then does love conquer?" Learning to love our enemies takes us on the path of the cross, he observes, but on this path we fellowship with the Crucified. "The more we are driven along this road," says Bonhoeffer,

**the more certain is the victory of love over the enemy's hatred. For then it is not the disciple's own love, but the love of Jesus Christ alone, who for the sake of his enemies went to the cross and prayed for them as he hung there. In the face of the cross the disciples realized that they too were his enemies, and that he had overcome them by his love.**<sup>15</sup>

We may dwell on this for a long time, for there is no more profound truth—no alternative reality—that we can move onto which will help us maintain our humanity in the face of unspeakable atrocities. There is no other source of compassion we can expect to find.

Rooted in biblical compassion, Christians therefore find hope and healing and can minister to others, as is taking place currently in western Ukraine and Poland. Through hospitality, they are able to meet some of the most fundamental human needs. As so many internally displaced people have arrived in the Lviv region near to Poland, congregations are offering both

church venues and homes. As well as such fundamental needs as a place to sleep, safety, food, and water, church leaders and members often provide a warm embrace and a listening ear. While there is a lack of experience in this area, churches also met such needs during the Revolution of Dignity [pro-democracy demonstrations that toppled the Putin-backed regime of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014]. Back then, weary and injured protesters were welcomed into churches' sacred spaces, where they were able to sleep and receive medical treatment.

With some Ukrainian churches now shifting towards longer-term housing for displaced people, I believe Kinbrace—a ministry to refugees started in Vancouver, Canada, in 1998—offers a simple framework that could be adapted to aid their endeavors. Although an overwhelming majority of those fleeing



A volunteer center opened in May 2022 by Irpin Bible Church in Hostomel, near Kyiv—previously the scene of fierce fighting (Source: IRPIN BIBLE CHURCH)

are Ukrainian, some cultural differences exist between their country's regions, and Kinbrace's motto—"refugees are the you and me of another place"—reinforces the biblical view of loving your neighbor as yourself. Co-founder Loren Balisky says her ministry's values help to identify in practical ways "the biblical ethic of kinship that we find in Scripture." In trust, they affirm dignity, and commit to the best in one another. In mutual transformation, they strive to listen well, to learn, and to grow. In celebration, they are intentionally grateful amidst joy and sorrow, and they seek to discover hope. In prayer, they see themselves as fellow sojourners held by grace, and so they journey into the mystery and love of God.<sup>16</sup>

When offering hospitality, it is important to temper expectations of ourselves and others. Refugee advocate Dr. Christine Pohl offers guidance, reminding us that we cannot separate the goodness and beauty of hospitality from the difficulty of providing it. Hospitality requires more than beds and blankets, soup and bread, as communities are pressed to enlarge their circle of care. Paradoxically, it involves crossing social boundaries as well as affirming distinctions. Hospitality should be offered with grace and enthusiasm, yet it often takes place in the context of limited resources.<sup>17</sup> This is a poignant reality during war.

May God strengthen, sustain, and cause the churches in Ukraine to flourish during this difficult time. May God protect and heal Ukraine. ♦

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Jayson Casper, "Ministries Evacuate as Russians Reach Irpin, the Evangelical Hub of Ukraine," *Christianity Today*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/irpin-ukraine-russia-war-evangelical-christians-evacuate.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Wingfield, "As a pastor serves bread to the elderly in Ukraine, he prays to retain his humanity," *Baptist News Global*, 17 March 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/as-a-pastor-serves-bread-to-the-elderly-in-ukraine-he-prays-to-retain-his-humanity>.

<sup>3</sup> "A month since the start of the war, almost a quarter of Ukraine's population



Pastor Mykola Romaniuk of Irpin Bible Church at a June 2022 service to celebrate 25 years since its foundation (Source: IRPIN BIBLE CHURCH)

Loc. 1658.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> [In Ukrainian] Roman Soloviy, "Teolohiya Pislja Buchi," *Politkom*, 3 April 2022, <https://politcom.org.ua/teologija-pislja-buchi>.



An elderly lady in liberated Lypivka, west of Bucha, receives food after a month of Russian occupation. (Source: REALIS CHRISTIAN CENTER)

are [sic] displaced," UNHCR, 25 March 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/3/623da5894/month-since-start-war-quarter-ukraines-population-displaced.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Operational Data Portal—Ukraine Refugee Situation, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Westervelt and Ryan Kellman, "Lviv takes in displaced Ukrainians, but space and resources are strained," *NPR*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2022/03/16/1085675211/ukraine-russia-displaced-refugees-lviv>.

<sup>6</sup> Text message to the author, 13 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> WhatsApp message to the author, 24 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Facebook post by Sergiy Tymchenko, 11 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, New York, NY: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, 2010, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Touchstone, 1995,

<sup>13</sup> Email to the author from Dr. Mark Elliott, 5 April 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua T. Searle, *Theology After Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018, 270.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, op.cit., Loc. 2093.

<sup>16</sup> Mark R. Glanville and Luke Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999, 127.

**Myra Watkins** and her husband Mike served in ministry in Lviv, Ukraine, 1993-2004 and in Kyiv, 2007-11. They continue to work with the churches they helped develop, now led by Ukrainians. Myra is currently studying for a doctorate at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky. This article is abridged from her paper of 8 April 2022.

# How Sergei Bulgakov Speaks to Today’s “Urgent Task”

SCOTT LINGENFELTER

The modern Russian state continues to sail on the winds of imperialist power, towing much of the Russian Orthodox Church in its wake. President Putin and Patriarch Kirill are committed to securing a pro-Moscow “Russian World” [Russian: *Russkii mir*] beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, even as their nation’s military impels millions of Ukrainians—many native Russian speakers—to make harrowing treks in search of refuge in the West. Both president and patriarch suggest the ongoing fighting is akin to the liberation of Ukraine from Nazi influence during the Second World War, even as indiscriminate Russian shelling targets innocents in theaters, hospitals, and schools. Unsettled by a combination of disgust and government intimidation, thousands of Russia’s best and brightest are also fleeing to Western capitals in search of a new life.

All this is hard to take in for those of us who experienced firsthand some of the events of 1991, when the oppressive edifice of the Soviet Empire appeared to crumble. It is not just that 30 years have passed in the blink of an eye. It is what is evidently unchanged that disturbs this writer. It is almost enough to make one despair. Almost, but not quite—the Kingdom is always more than we know.

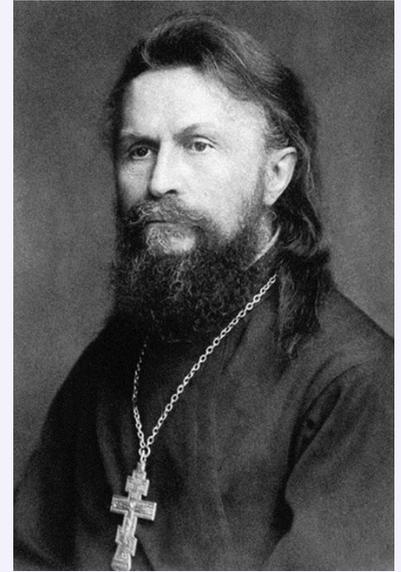


Destroyed tanks in Yahidne village, Chernihiv Region, Ukraine, May 2022 (Source: REALIS CHRISTIAN CENTER)

For encouragement, we can turn to a Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944). Amid a similarly traumatic upheaval a century ago, he was forced to piece together a new life in Europe after being expelled by the Bolsheviks on the day of the Soviet Union’s founding in 1922, along with other opposition intellectuals aboard the so-called “Philosophers’ Ship.” This followed his remarkable personal journey from Marxist economist to Orthodox priest during the twilight years of Imperial Russia, including periods in both Kyiv and Moscow. Bulgakov was thus exiled from the land he loved, and his career was severed by both revolution and

war. Yet he would go on to become one of the most brilliant Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century and a prominent ecumenist. In Paris during the dark days of Nazi occupation, throat cancer robbed Bulgakov of his voice towards the end of his life. Yet his message still resounds today, as if from a distant shore.

Forged against the turbulent events of his own lifetime, Bulgakov’s convictions about the church’s ministry in the public square hold fresh relevance. Just as a general strike forced the Russian Imperial government to offer limited civil and political concessions in 1905, Bulgakov published an essay entitled “An Urgent Task” [Russian: *Neotlozhnaia zadacha*], his critique of the Empire’s predicament.<sup>1</sup> Russia’s alliance of autocracy



Fr. Sergei Bulgakov  
(Open source)

and Orthodoxy disgraced the faith, he wrote, and made it complicit in criminal administrative measures and censorship. Bulgakov charged “official ‘Orthodoxy’” with being “a direct police instrument”—astonishing defiance from someone whose forefathers had served in the ranks of the Russian Orthodox Church since the reign of Ivan the Terrible. At the same time, Bulgakov pressed Orthodox hierarchs and government officials—stubbornly resistant to change—to pursue the task of securing religious liberty and developing socially minded educational programs.

For the Russian Empire of 1905, religious liberty was a relatively new and radical notion, while greeted with enthusiasm by indigenous religious minorities such as the Old Believers. Despite the intervening period of official atheism, today’s Russia sustains considerable religious diversity. Recent surveys by the Moscow-based Levada Center and the Russian Public Opinion Research Center affirm that religious belief has increased sharply since the Soviet collapse. The Levada Center notes a trajectory from 31 percent in December 1989 to a peak of 88 percent in February 2017, with 80 percent in April 2022. Notably, the percentage of “very religious” has doubled to nine percent since 2014. Yet church attendance and formal affiliation have declined, especially over the past two years, with some 43 percent of respondents stating in April 2022 that they do not attend religious services. (The impact of COVID-19 is not explicitly factored here.)

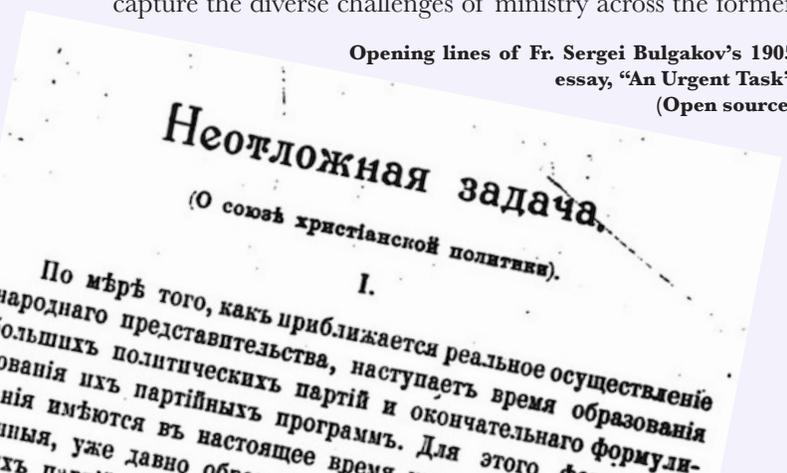
All told, religious identification within the Russian Federation is currently at 71 percent Orthodox, five percent Muslim, four percent “other” (including Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist), and four percent atheist (a further 15 percent responded “none”). The nature of belief appears varied. Around half of respondents believe in life after death and religious miracles; a similar number believe in the “evil eye” or spells. Data from 2021 also point to an aging Orthodox community, with 75 percent older than 60 identifying as such, but only 43 percent in the 18-24 cohort. While Protestant affiliation is weighted towards this youngest age group (two percent), so too is the proportion of non-believers (22 percent).<sup>2</sup>

Surveying the wider former Soviet expanse, the World Christian Database finds only modest change over the past decade. Reportedly, Orthodoxy has grown by 0.18 percent and Protestantism by 2.84 percent, while Catholicism has declined by 0.35 percent, even in Catholic strongholds such as Lithuania. Growth of Pentecostal communities is consistent across the former Soviet territory, however, notably in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup>

The malignant legacy of the watchful state continued throughout the Soviet era, and genuine religious liberty still faces stiff headwinds in much of the ex-Soviet space. Deference to an increasingly authoritarian Russian state is mainstream within not only the Moscow Patriarchate but also Protestantism. The Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church of Russia affirmed robust support for Putin and his policies in Ukraine back in May 2014, for example, and personal conversations with Russian Evangelicals have revealed admiration for their president as a “spiritual giant” appointed for this hour in their nation’s revival.<sup>4</sup>

For helpful regional perspective on the contours of church growth in the uncertainties of the current context, I have turned to four veterans of Evangelical ministry in the former Soviet bloc who, like Fr. Bulgakov, have closely experienced times of promise and peril. They are: Olga Lukhmanova, professor of English at the Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod; Greg Nichols, North Region Leader with Greater Europe Mission, based in Prague; Steve Van Zanen, chair of theology at LCC International University, Klaipeda, Lithuania, as well as European region leader for Resonate Global Mission (Christian Reformed Church in North America); and “Kolya,” the regional coordinator for a ministry in Central Asia (whose country I have anonymized as “\*stan”). While offered before Russia’s 24 February invasion of Ukraine, their responses capture the diverse challenges of ministry across the former

Opening lines of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov’s 1905 essay, “An Urgent Task” (Open source)



Moscow Kremlin (G. FAGAN)

Soviet bloc, as its expanse continues to be affected by the centrifugal forces accompanying its demise.

- Olga: In 1993 one could ask to teach a Bible class in a local school or have Christian student meetings on university premises. Around 1997, as Russia’s Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations was adopted, things started to change. We are still free to gather, rent, or own buildings, and worship openly in public spaces, and the heads of Christian denominations are part of the President’s Council [for Cooperation with Religious Associations]. But the [2016 so-called Yarovaya] Law is worrisome, and we have heard about churches being sued and even closed for “violating” that law. At least one local church in my city was sued because an African student reposted an invitation to a church event on her social media page. It was classified as “unlawful religious practice,” and the student was kicked out of the country. This is just another instance of Russian laws being used to mean whatever is expedient. The law... can be used to close any church or para-church organization at any moment. ...[T]here is a definite slant towards a strengthening authoritarianism and ideological conformity at all levels of society.
- Greg: If [Ukraine’s political and economic] ties to Russia wane, we could see an increased popularity of Evangelicalism [in Ukraine]. If they strengthen, we could see an increased popularity of Orthodoxy. The huge change is that Ukraine is a sending country now: In the Czech Republic, Russian and Ukrainian immigrants are doing church planting.. The [Czech] national churches do not seem interested to work with refugees more than contributing a small amount of money.
- Steve: For Protestants in Lithuania, freedom and independence led to an initial period of dramatic growth that did not last long. Getting into NATO—and even more the EU—created opportunities for Lithuanians that were previously unimaginable, and many of them emigrated to find more lucrative work in Western Europe. Some of them have returned after establishing some financial security, but lots have settled down in the West. Many churches have shrunk quite significantly since our first period in Lithuania [1999-2003]. One group I know of went from 50 to 500,

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## Bulgakov's "Urgent Task" (continued from page 9)

then back down to 100. Those who suffered and struggled in Soviet times often find the lack of full commitment on the part of today's believers discouraging. I see congregations as relatively fragile, with a leader's misbehavior often leading to dissolution of the congregation.

- "Kolya": In \*stan, the conditions for Christian communities have changed mostly from worse to better. Unlike churches in the surrounding countries, who continually experience opposition [and] oppression from government institutions, we have enjoyed relative freedom of religion and thought. There is almost no interaction between the Orthodox and Protestants, despite the government's ongoing efforts to consolidate these two large groups.

The better to control, I might add. Bulgakov believed this kind of interference was best met by collective action—for him an important corollary of religious liberty. Since the aim was a free church in a free state, he wrote in "An Urgent Task," there should be "no distinctions among nationalities, religions, or denominations."

My other three panelists report a mixed picture in this respect:

- Olga: The relationship between the Orthodox and Protestants remains cool, distant, and full of distrust. My very sweet Orthodox neighbor who used to come for help (even in understanding the Slavonic liturgy) grew very distant and cold once she found out I attended [and help lead] a "heretic" church [Vineyard]. There are individuals and communities that are different: An Orthodox priest here in town has been a friend and co-worker and the [Orthodox] Transfiguration Brotherhood actively seeks healthy ecumenical connections. [Yet] they have to hide their friendship with Protestants because the official line remains rigidly anti-Protestant. Evangelicals... have all sorts of false images of Orthodox believers and their faith, but are... slightly more familiar with Orthodox authors (for



Orthodox faithful following a service at the Intercession Women's Monastery, Kyiv, October 2018 (G. FAGAN)

example, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh [1914-2003], [Fr.] Alexander Men' [1935-1990] or [Fr.] Alexander Schmemmann [1921-1983]) than an average Orthodox believer would be of Evangelical authors. There is definitely more Biblical knowledge in the Evangelical churches and less nominal Christianity.

- Greg: Younger pastors are not as willing to keep strong lines of separation between Union [of Evangelical Christians-Baptists'] churches and Pentecostal or independent churches. Most Ukrainians that I talk with are strongly anti-Russian. They tell stories of the frontlines and feel Russia has invaded Ukraine. I have talked with many who have divided families with relatives in Russia. Some of them no longer wish to speak with each other, despite the fact that they are all believers.

In the Czech Republic, denominations seem stuck—especially the Baptists—but they are trying to plant new churches and have some successes. The Evangelical Alliance here cooperates very deeply with the M4 leadership and methodology [a Norwegian Evangelical initiative]. The Catholic Church has very few Czech priests and relies on Poland and other countries to supply them.

- Steve: Here [in Lithuania] the biggest interconfessional issues are Protestant-Catholic, since Catholicism is dominant. From my perspective, the relationship is surprisingly good: One of our students was recently baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church, and I was surprised that her priest was positive about her getting a degree in Evangelical theology.

Nothing pained Bulgakov more about the Church than social ignorance and isolation. In "An Urgent Task," he recounts cringing when hearing senior prelates mechanically mouth "charity" as the answer to deep structural problems while social and political crises spread rapidly throughout the Russian Empire. Inspired by his own experience in seminary and associations within the Russian intelligentsia, he began



Worshippers at St. Andrew's Greek Catholic Church, Lviv, Ukraine, October 2018. (G. FAGAN)

to focus on socially minded theological education. His key proposal was to revise the seminary and academy curricula to include courses on social science.

In November 1934 Bulgakov returned to this concern in his celebrated Hale Memorial Sermon, entitled “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology.” This was delivered at the Episcopal Church’s Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Chicago during the depths of the Great Depression. In tones reminiscent of Erasmus, Bulgakov wrote that development of a modern Christian humanism was the main task—or “chief outreach”—of Russian theology. His ideas still ring true to some Orthodox thinkers today. English theologian and Russian Orthodox priest Fr. Andrew Louth, for example, recently acknowledged that not coming to terms with modernity has proved “a very general failure within the Orthodox Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Members of my Evangelical panel also speak to these concerns, now closely linked to demographic trends:

- “Kolya”: Leadership development is another major issue that local pastors and ministry leaders talk about. The decreasing number of young people in churches due to active emigration—especially among Russian-speaking churches—has caused many problems in sustaining ministries. The most effective ministry initiatives lately are related to churches responding to various social issues. The idea of holistic or integral mission is becoming more prominent among the churches.
- Olga: I think we need to be more aware of current cultural challenges—modern attitudes of consumerism, shortening attention spans, difficulty of engaging with long texts, influence of social media... world tendencies [exerting] influence on our minds, hearts, and lives.

How might all this find expression in years to come? My panel sees ever more disparate trends across the former Soviet bloc:

- Olga: I think we Russians need to pray and think hard about what it means to be faithful in our generation.



A rare Protestant demonstration in support of religious freedom in Moscow, June 2005, when public demonstrations were difficult but not impossible. (G. FAGAN)



A billboard in Rivne, western Ukraine, in early March 2022: “Be with us, Lord, protect and have mercy on us.” (Source: ANTONI BOKUN)

How to participate in the life of our country, which is in constant turmoil and [undergoing] reform [that is] often thoughtless and bureaucracy-driven? Whether to accept or to protest what is going on, and, if protest, how? My country has been in turmoil for the last 30 years, and it is not about to change. At some point, President Putin will have to go—even if just because of age—and what happens then is anyone’s guess.

Over the last few years I have become more engaged in contemplative prayer... with the fathers and old masters of the Church (the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola). I hope the movement towards reclaiming Christian heritage and the riches of the Church will remain and strengthen.

- Greg: If compassion ministries in Ukraine are transparent with their financial records, they will win the hearts of the people. But for this culture that is an uphill battle. I [also] wonder if Ukraine can fast-forward through the megachurch disillusionment. I suspect not, so I think we will see the rise and disastrous fall of some large churches. I think the younger generation want smaller and authentic [churches and relationships]. We may see women pastors of Evangelical churches (but probably not).

In the Czech Republic, the church will have to discover relevance in a society that seems to have all its needs met... [and] prove it is the place to find the unspoken need of worship and fellowship. Based upon what I currently see, refugees will be rejected by the Czech-led churches, and we will see more vibrant churches comprised of non-Czechs. What will that do to society in general? It could make people curious, or it could relegate Christianity to the “lesser” educated.

- Steve: The priority for economic advancement continues to lead young Lithuanians—Christian and otherwise—towards emigration. It also pulls those who do not emigrate away from committed church involvement. One of the biggest questions for me is the net effect of Brexit. Will we see fewer leaving [Lithuania] and more returning? Lithuanians want to be integrated into Europe but retain their distinctiveness as a more socially conservative society. Will that continue or shift as younger people, without memory of the struggle against the Soviets, take leadership?

- “Kolya”: The recent growing Islamization of
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society, ongoing political instability, the effects of the pandemic, and economic problems have the most impact upon how the church is developing in \*stan. In some ways, these trends pose many new opportunities to enhance the witness of the church, but in other ways these also have a limiting effect on the church's growth. The issues of inter-ethnic conflict and tension—sometimes related to border disputes—affect the unity of the church. Other key issues include increasing authoritarianism, which directly affects freedom of religion and restrictions for Christians and other religious minorities; economic and political instabilities due to ineffective leadership; and increasing digitalization of various aspects of social life.

Recovery of a richer Christian heritage and sustaining commitment amid increasing authoritarianism, ideological conformity, mass migration, inter-ethnic conflict, and now a major war in Ukraine. This is a heady mix to be facing 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet system. If Bulgakov is right, being faithful in our generation still means staying on task by defending religious liberty and developing coalitions dedicated to holistic education and ministry—albeit with new wineskins. If there is a key message for us from Bulgakov's eventful vitae, it is not simply to keep moving, but to move on. ♦

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> [In Russian] *Voprosy zhizni*, vol. 9 (September 1905), 332-360. An English translation may be found in the anthology *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia 1890-1924*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> "Religiosity," Levada Center, 18 May 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/05/18/religiosity/>; [in Russian] "Velikii post—2021," VTsIOM, 15 March 2021, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/velikii-post-2021>.

<sup>3</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *Christianity by Major Tradition and Movements in the Former Soviet Union Since 2010*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Mark R. Elliott, "The Russian Christian Take on Putin and Ukraine," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Article 8): 49. See also Kate Shellnutt, "Why Russian Protestants Voted for President Putin," *Christianity Today*, 21 March 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/march/russia-protestants-president-putin-election.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Putin's Religious War," *Beyond Belief, BBC Radio 4*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00162mp>.

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# In Pursuit of Happiness: Faith and Well-being in Hungary

HAROLD DELANEY AND ANDRÁS VARGHA

Hungary has experienced great changes in the years since the Iron Curtain on the Hungarian-Austrian border was dismantled in May of 1989, with profound implications for both the freedom and subjective well-being of the Hungarian people.

One of the clearest indications of a lack of well-being in a nation is a high suicide rate. Back in the mid-1980s, Hungary was renowned for having the highest suicide rate in the world.<sup>1</sup> At 45 per 100,000 population between 1983 and 1987, it was almost four times the rate in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Since 1987 Hungary's suicide rate has shown a remarkable decline, however. In 1995 it was 33 cases per 100,000 population, 21 in 2005, and had fallen to 19 by 2015. This was still the third highest suicide rate in the European Union.<sup>3</sup> Yet the decrease in suicides in Hungary since 1985 was over three times greater than in any other former Eastern Bloc state.<sup>4</sup>



A Budapest tenement courtyard (G. FAGAN)

During the same period, by contrast, the U.S. suicide rate initially declined from 13 per 100,000 in 1985 to 10 in 2000. Yet after that it rose steadily to reach 13 again in 2015.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. suicide rate has since continued to rise while Hungary's has continued to fall, so that in 2016 the age-adjusted suicide rate in Hungary was lower than that in the U.S. for the first time, and by 2019 the U.S. rate was over 14 while Hungary's rate was below 12.<sup>6</sup> Such a phenomenon raises questions about how the great

changes Hungary has witnessed since the 1980s—including in the sphere of faith—may have improved the well-being of the Hungarian people.

Suicide is clearly a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors, including characteristics of both the individual and the culture in which he or she lives. A recent study in Hungary indicates that the most important risk factor

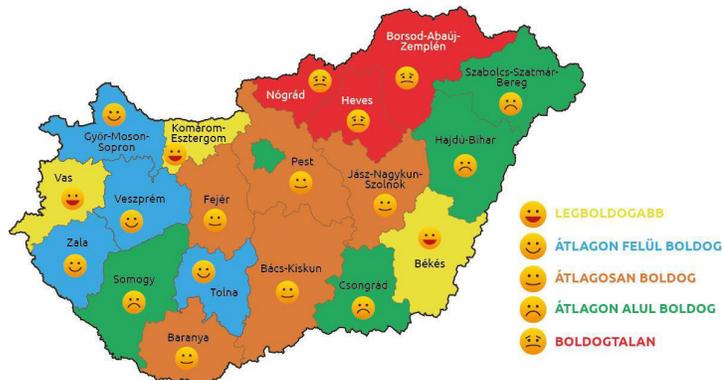
for suicide is being unemployed or experiencing a long-term illness, while one of the most protective factors is practicing a religion.<sup>7</sup> Genetic factors plausibly also may have contributed to the historically high suicide rate among Hungarians. Yet the forces resulting in the striking decline in suicide rates in Hungary in recent decades must be found elsewhere than in stable factors such as genetics.

## Declining suicide rates

Unemployment has been shown to be a relevant factor in suicide in individual cases. However, trends in employment do not explain the consistent overall decline in suicide rates in Hungary. From less than two percent in the 1980s, unemployment increased sixfold to over 10 percent in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> It dropped below seven percent in the early 2000s, but had risen back to over 10 percent by 2010, while suicide rates continued to fall. Since 2013 unemployment has fallen precipitously, sinking to four percent in 2018. Thus, while unemployment has fluctuated greatly since the 1980s, suicide has continued to steadily decline year after year.<sup>9</sup>

Given income has risen consistently and substantially in Hungary over the past three decades, this appears to be a more promising predictor of the country's suicide rates than unemployment. The average income (GDP per capita) in Hungary was \$18,968 in 2021, more than five times the average of \$3,312 in 1990. Income rose at a moderate rate in the 1990s, at an average annual increase of five percent over the decade. It then grew rapidly in the 2000s—at an average annual rate of 11 percent over the decade—before reverting to slower, but continued growth of 3.5 percent a year between 2010 and 2021.<sup>10</sup>

This is not the whole story, however, as a comparison of the average level of happiness in the various counties of Hungary indicates. The average income in Budapest is 36 percent higher than the European Union mean, yet the happiness level of the Hungarian capital is below the national average. By contrast, the average income in most Hungarian counties is half or even less than the E.U. mean, but the happiness level in several of those counties is above average.



Happiness map of Hungary in 2018. (Yellow = very happy; blue = above average happiness; brown = average happiness; green = below average happiness; red = unhappy.) The map was constructed by ELTE's Positive Psychology Research Group under the leadership of Attila Oláh and with the cooperation of András Vargha. (Source: <https://dailynewshungary.com/happiness-map-of-hungary-2018-where-do-the-happiest-hungarians-live/>)

Here, we turn to important insights garnered by recent international scholarship over the past two decades into the role played by fundamental human freedoms—including freedom of religion or belief—as factors contributing to a nation's sense of well-being rather than despair. Surveys of representative national samples in countries representing 90 percent of the world's population have shown that although average well-being in a country rises together with per capita income, this is strongly related to well-being only for average annual incomes of up to approximately \$10,000.<sup>11</sup> Having sufficient money to buy food and shelter is critical for a sense of well-being, but once such basic needs are met, other factors are far more important in determining happiness.

One factor with particular relevance to ex-Communist Hungary is the degree of individual human freedom. A 2005 study using nationally representative samples gathered from over 70 countries, with a total sample size of more than a quarter of a million people, revealed that perceived personal freedom in a country correlates very highly (.78 out of 1) with average life satisfaction.<sup>12</sup> A more recent study using samples from 146 countries confirms that the freedom to make one's own life choices was a highly statistically significant predictor of the average levels of both life satisfaction and positive emotions reported by people in a country.<sup>13</sup>

## Other non-monetary factors

Other non-monetary factors driving the sense of well-being in a country become apparent if one compares countries doing better than would be expected, given their average income, with those doing worse than expected. In surveys conducted between 1995 and 2007 in 88 countries encompassing almost 90 percent of the world's population, all 14 Latin American countries surveyed reported higher levels of well-being than would be expected based upon their average income. By contrast, all 22 former Communist countries surveyed—including Hungary—reported lower levels of well-being, despite incomes as high or even higher than those in Latin America. One plausible reason is that virtually all the Latin American societies are strongly religious, whereas this is not generally the case in ex-Communist nations. Three-quarters of Latin Americans endorsed statements such as “God is very important in my life,” while only a quarter of those in ex-Communist countries did so. The strength of a country's democracy and religiosity thus appear to be more important predictors of its citizens' well-being than the average level of personal income.<sup>14</sup>

Another recent finding is that “societies that experienced Communist rule for a relatively long time show lower levels [of subjective well-being] than those that experienced it only since World War II.”<sup>15</sup> Hungary had a higher average subjective well-being than all of the 10 countries of the former Soviet Union included in the 1995-98 Wave 3 of the World Values Survey. The United Nations' *World Happiness Reports*, published annually from 2012 through 2022, further reveal that Hungary ranked fourth out of all countries surveyed in the increase in average

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## Hungarian Happiness *(continued from page 13)*

life satisfaction between 2008-12 and 2019-21.<sup>16</sup> Hungary thus moved over the last 10 years from clearly below average in happiness in 2012 (110th of 156 countries surveyed) to clearly above average (51st out of 146 countries surveyed) in the most recent 2022 report.<sup>17</sup>

### Religious factor?

Questions remain, however. Two comparable former Communist bloc countries—Poland and Romania—rank somewhat higher in life satisfaction than Hungary (Poland—48th, Romania—28th), despite having somewhat lower per capita incomes (Poland—\$17,815, Romania—\$14,792).<sup>18</sup> Further research is required to determine whether the explanation partly lies in the differing levels of religiosity in those countries. Hungary, where 56 percent identify as Catholic, has a much larger segment of population who are religiously unaffiliated (21 percent) than the one percent religiously unaffiliated in Romania—where 86 percent identify as Orthodox—or the seven percent religiously unaffiliated in Poland, where 87 percent identify as Catholic. Furthermore, only 59 percent of Hungarians say they believe in God, in contrast to 95 percent of Romanians and 86 percent of Poles.<sup>19</sup>

Yet this is while Hungary has made strong efforts to promote religious life in recent decades. In 1991, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, it was the first country in East-Central Europe to pass a law requiring the restitution of, or financial compensation for, properties confiscated from religious organizations during Communist rule.<sup>20</sup> By 2007 major religious communities in Hungary had submitted over 8,000 property restitution claims, of which roughly 20 percent resulted in property restitution and another 20 percent in financial compensation. In addition to returned property, the Hungarian Reformed Church received the equivalent of \$5.2 million in compensation, amounting to over a quarter of the government's payouts to religious organizations.<sup>21</sup> Hungary's Constitutional Court further ruled that transferring public funds to religious communities was warranted in the light of earlier religious repression. One outcome of this ruling was that 17 percent of secondary schools and six percent of universities had become church-run institutions by 2008.<sup>22</sup>

Among the latter is the Károli Gáspár University of the Hungarian Reformed Church, which has developed a strong graduate program in psychology since the fall of the Communist regime. Psychology scholars from Károli Gáspár and Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), both in Budapest, have monitored levels of happiness across Hungary's different regions in recent years. A further program focusing on the psychological well-being of Hungarians is the International Well-Being Education Network, launched in Hungary in 2014. To date this has involved more than 7,000 teachers giving lessons on happiness to more than 100,000 pupils in elementary and secondary schools across the country.<sup>23</sup>

A previous educational program launched in Hungary in 1994 also attempted to impact the well-being of students.



Toppled Communist-era monuments, Memento Park, Budapest (G. FAGAN)

Youth at the Threshold of Life (YTL) was a curriculum written by Gábor Grész and David Robinson—staff with Timóteus Társaság (Campus Crusade for Christ Hungary)—and approved by the Ministry of Education, with the backing of the National Institute of Health Promotion, for use in Hungarian public schools. The program was supported by Dr. Dénes Bánhegyi, then the National AIDS Coordinator, with the goals of decreasing sexual promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, drug use, and of preparing students for adulthood and marriage. By 2001, 4,000 educators representing 500 schools were trained in using YTL, and while 8 out of 10 were atheists, more than 70 percent taught the entire YTL curriculum—which included several Christian elements, such as showing the *Jesus* film. By 2010, 411,260 Hungarian students in 899 cities and villages had been part of a YTL classroom.<sup>24</sup> The original 43-part curriculum has been expanded into a three-volume teachers' manual, building on the philosophy of education and values in C. S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, with the different volumes addressing "Authentic Self-Esteem," "Intimate Relationships," and "Motivating Goals." The curriculum has now been used in 62 countries around the world.<sup>25</sup>

### Rise in marriage rate

Perhaps one of the more important "enduring fruits" (John 15:16) of the YTL program is that, after hundreds of thousands of students over the past 25 years have been taught the benefits of a committed marital relationship, Hungary has now achieved the highest rate of marriage in Europe, with its rate in 2020 of 6.88 marriages per 1,000 people being more than double the EU average of 3.2. Although the Hungarian government's expanded family benefits policy likely contributed to the 90 percent increase in marriage rates in the last 10 years, it is also possible YTL's long-term efforts promoting marriage may have helped create an environment in which such a policy could be embraced.<sup>26</sup>

While impacting just a few students a year, in 2012 the current authors began to offer a course called "Sigmund Freud

Debates C. S. Lewis” to undergraduate students in psychology through Károli Gáspár University. This online course utilizes a book by former Harvard professor and Christian psychiatrist Armand Nicholi, entitled *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*. Here, Freud’s arguments for atheism are contrasted with Lewis’ arguments for belief in God. We have found that, while belonging to a largely secular milieu, inquiring Hungarian undergraduates welcome the opportunity to consider issues of faith in an academic setting. They are typically impressed by how C. S. Lewis’ conversion from atheism to the Christian worldview as a young Oxford professor transformed his life for the better.

### Cloud on the horizon

The current review has stressed the tremendous improvement in the psychological and economic well-being of Hungarians over the past 30 years. Looking to the future, however, a cloud on the horizon concerns personal freedom, which we have noted as one of the strongest predictors of well-being in a country. After receiving the highest rating of “Free” every year from 1990 through 2017,<sup>27</sup> the U.S.-based human rights organization Freedom House has rated Hungary’s status as “Partly Free” every year from 2018 through 2021, based on its detailed analysis of political rights and civil liberties in Hungary.<sup>28</sup>

Citizens’ own perceptions of their freedom are evaluated in the *World Happiness Reports*, based upon responses to a single question about freedom: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” Here, the mean ranking of Hungarian citizens’ responses was lower than 29 of the 36 countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in the most recent report.<sup>29</sup> The *World Happiness Report* authors note that, over the last 15 years, the sense of freedom to make key life decisions had the lowest initial levels—but the fastest growth—in Central and Eastern Europe compared to other regions of the world. Hungarians’ average ratings of their freedom increased over this period, but at a slower rate—and since 2010 the country has on average ranked 115th out of the roughly 145 countries surveyed.<sup>30</sup>

We hope that freedom in Hungary will grow in the coming years so that—emerging with other nations from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic—the country can continue to make strides not only in economic prosperity, but also in the spiritual and psychological well-being of its people. ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Dalma Böszörményi and Harold Delaney, “A hurting Hungary,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, vol. 1 (1993), no. 2, 6-7; Zoltán Rihmer et al, “Decreasing suicide in Hungary,” *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 177 (2000), no.1, 84.

<sup>2</sup> Zoltán Rihmer et al, “Suicide in Hungary: Epidemiological and clinical perspectives,” *Annals of General Psychiatry*, vol. 12 (2013), article no. 21.



András Vargha at the Károli Gáspár Institute of Psychology  
(Source: A. VARGHA)

<sup>3</sup> “Just over 56,000 persons in the EU committed suicide,” *Eurostat*, 16 July 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180716-1?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Feurostat%2F>.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Bowen, “Suicide in former Eastern Bloc states and the church’s response,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, vol. 20 (2012), no. 1, 4-7.

<sup>5</sup> “QuickStats: Age-Adjusted Rate for Suicide, by Sex—National Vital Statistics System, United States, 1975–2015,” CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], 17 March 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6610a7.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “Suicide-rate estimates, age-standardized. Estimates by country,” World Health Organization, <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.MHSUICIDEASDR?lang=en>.

<sup>7</sup> Kitty Almasi et al, “Risk factors for suicide in Hungary: A case-control study,” *BMC Psychiatry*, vol. 9 (2009), article no. 45.

<sup>8</sup> András Bozóki and Eszter Simon, “Hungary since 1989,” in Sabrina P. Ramet (ed.), *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 204-32.

<sup>9</sup> “Hungary Unemployment Rate,” Hungarian Central Statistical Office, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/hungary/unemployment-rate>.

<sup>10</sup> “Hungary GDP—Gross Domestic Product,” <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/hungary>.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Inglehart et al, “Development, freedom, and rising happiness: A global perspective (1981-2007),” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 3 (2008), no. 4, 264-85.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 141.

<sup>13</sup> John F. Helliwell et al, “Happiness, benevolence, and trust during COVID-19 and beyond,” in J. Helliwell et al, (eds), *World Happiness Report 2022*, 13-52, especially Table 2.1, <https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/WHR+22.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Inglehart et al, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, “Genes, culture, democracy and happiness,” in Edward Diener and

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## Hungarian Happiness (continued from page 15)

Eunkook M. Suh (eds), *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000, 171.

<sup>16</sup> Inglehart and Klingemann, op. cit., Figure 7.2. John F. Helliwell et al, Statistical appendix for *World Happiness Report 2022*, Figure 13.

<sup>17</sup> “Hungary—World Happiness Index,” <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/world-happiness-index/hungary>.

<sup>18</sup> John F. Helliwell et al, op. cit., Figure 2.1; “Romania GDP—Gross Domestic Product,” <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/romania>; “Poland GDP—Gross Domestic Product,” <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/poland>.

<sup>19</sup> “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” Pew Research Center, 10 May 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Gelpert, “The laws and politics of reprivatization in East-Central Europe: A comparison,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Business Law*, vol. 14 (1993), no. 3, 357.

<sup>21</sup> “Property restitution in Central and Eastern Europe,” U.S. Department of State, 3 October 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/93062.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Balázs Schanda, “Religion and the secular state in Hungary,” 2009, <https://classic.iclrs.org/content/blurbs/files/Hungary.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://iwenhappinesslessons.com>.

<sup>24</sup> John J. Dwyer, “Freedom’s challenges and Youth at the Threshold,” 2022, <https://johnjdwyer.com/post/freedoms>; “Changing a Nation,” 2022, <https://johnjdwyer.com/post/changing>; David Robinson and Gábor Grész, *The Outrageous Promise: A Story of God’s Love Beyond the Iron Curtain*, 2010, 252-54.

<sup>25</sup> <https://ytl.academy/why-ytl/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Hungary has highest number of marriages in Europe,” *Hungary Today*, 19 May 2022, <https://hungarytoday.hu/number-of-marriages-eu-highest-number-hungary-european-union-weddings/>; “Family Min: Expanded family benefits correlated with increase in marriages, childbirths,” *Hungary Today*, 7 August 2021, <https://hungarytoday.hu/family-min-family-benefits-increase-marriages-childbirths/>.



Encouraging happiness: a florist in downtown Budapest  
(G. FAGAN)

<sup>27</sup> Freedom House, Historical data files available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2019>; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2020>; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2021>; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2022>.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Helliwell et al, Statistical appendix for *World Happiness Report 2022*, Figures 25-27. See also *World Happiness Report 2019*, Table 2.2.

<sup>30</sup> John F. Helliwell et al, *World Happiness Report 2022*, 32-33. John F. Helliwell et al, Statistical appendices for *World Happiness Reports 2018-2022* and data from 2005-2016 included in *World Happiness Report 2017* “Chapter 2. Online Data,” available at <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2017/#appendices-and-data>.

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©2022 ISSN 2576-344X (formerly 1069-5664)  
Indexed by American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies (ABSEES), OCLC Public Affairs Information Service (formerly PAIS), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Christian Periodicals Index.