THE LIVING CHURCH CONFLICT IN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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There is a lot of misinformation regarding the Methodist Episcopal Church enthusiasm and support for the "Living Church" movement within the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1920s, particularly as regards the "support" of certain Methodist Episcopal Church bishops, e.g. Blake and Nuelsen. However, the matter is not simple, rather extremely complex.

Some things, however, are quite clear and need emphasis. Dr. George A. Simons, who was assigned to St. Petersburg as the Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church Russia Mission in November 1907, strengthened a fledgling Methodist Episcopal congregation in St. Petersburg, which began primarily among expatriate Swedes and Finns. Rev. Hjalmar Salmi, who was born in 1870 in St. Petersburg and was an ordained elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church, had been assigned to St. Petersburg in April 1907 by the Methodist Episcopal bishop of Europe. While the work tended to attract mainly expatriates, including Americans and German-speaking foreigners, the work slowly emerged as Russian-speaking and with a Russian constituency. The congregation had a number of meeting places but in 1914 property at 58 Bolshoi Prospect with an imposing wooden building was purchased from Woldemar Treublut by Simons and Dr. S. E. Taylor in Simons' name. The building was converted into a church and dwelling and was named the Methodist Episcopal Church of Christ Our Savior in St. Petersburg.

When the Bolshevik Revolution came, Simons at first welcomed it and sought to embrace it, but as he became aware of the anti-religious posture of the revolution, he made many anti-revolutionary statements which won him the disfavor of the Soviet Government. In any case, he was forced to leave Russia in 1918, much to his regret and against his will. When Simons departed, he left Sister Anna Eklund, who had been assigned in 1908 to St. Petersburg as a deaconess of the Methodist Episcopal Church Russia

1Unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes all documents cited in this article are from the archives of Bishop John L. Nuelsen, which are housed at the headquarters of The United Methodist Church in Zürich, Switzerland.
Mission, in charge of the mission and with a power attorney for property and other legal matters. She was assisted by Rev. Oscar Poeld, an Estonian-born Methodist Episcopal pastor who was assigned to St. Petersburg in 1921 by Bishop John L. Nuelsen and spoke Estonian, German, and Russian.

Bishop John L. Nuelsen, the Methodist Episcopal bishop assigned to Europe at the time of Simons' departure from St. Petersburg, retained him as Superintendent of the Russia Mission, while adding the Baltic states to his area of supervision. Simons hoped unequivocally to return to St. Petersburg, as soon as the governmental climate permitted it. The congregation in St. Petersburg, Sister Anna, and Rev. Poeld were devoted to him and also hoped that he would return.

Simons' first residence in the Baltic states was located in Reval (Tallinn), Estonia, from where he hoped to be able to give oversight to the work in St. Petersburg. Soon, however, it became clear that a relocation in Riga, Latvia would be more practical and, hence, after the purchase of the Elizabeth Street property in Riga, Simons moved into the building with his sister Ottillie and he remained in Riga until his reassignment to the USA in 1928.

Bishop Nuelsen clearly tried to be abreast of developments in Russia and made a number of trips to St. Petersburg and Moscow in this process. Also during the terribly difficult famine years of 1920 and 1921, the Methodist Episcopal Church sent carloads of relief supplies to St. Petersburg, which were processed by Sister Anna Eklund, Rev. Poeld, as well as Rev. Hjalmar Salmi, and others.

Once Simons had left St. Petersburg numerous questions began to emerge as to how to administer and direct the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Russia. The Board of Foreign Missions had appropriated extremely limited funds. The political, economic, social, and religious situation in Russia was becoming increasingly difficult. Simons was functioning as a Superintendent in absentia and wanted more than anything else to return to his former assignment in St. Petersburg. Sister Anna Eklund and Rev. Oscar Poeld continued the work under extremely stressful conditions, but the church owned property there and had a reasonably stable congregation, as well as congregations in the neighboring villages of Sigolovo, Handrovo, and Haitolovo. In the first two villages there were Methodist Episcopal Chapels and in Handrovo also a deaconess home.

Bishop Nuelsen was seeking new leadership for the Russia Mission and at the same time stronger ties to the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. In placing himself soon after the Bolshevik Revolution in opposition to Communism and the revolution, Simons was seen by the Soviet government as an anti-revolutionary and unofficially as persona non grata, something which Simons could not accept. The situation was further complicated by a much disputed, unauthorized trip Simons made back into Russia arriving in Petrograd on December 30, 1922 and departing for Riga,
Latvia on February 17, 1923. He did procure a visa and was able to move about reasonably freely without undue opposition. Bishop Nuelsen, under whose episcopal jurisdiction Simons served, was unequivocally opposed to Simons going to Russia for any purpose.

Nuelsen held Simons and the work he had done in Russia in high regard, but realized that it would be impossible for him to continue as superintendent of the Russia Mission. When the bishop returned from Russia on the S. S. Rügen, he wrote the following to Simons on October 11, 1922:

If I should follow the promptings of my heart I would say to you: "Go at once to Petrograd and resume the direction of the work." I do not know of anybody in the church who could do that work to greater benefit and delight of our people and who by knowledge of the language and conditions would be better qualified. However, I cannot do so and be true to yourself or to the work in Russia or to the church at large.

... The Government is very suspicious of anti-revolutionary movements. You are suspected of connection with anti-revolutionary organizations. Your presence in the country would greatly endanger our work. You are the very last one who would want, in any way, to injure the work, to which you have given the very best you have and with your love more than your life.

There is no thought of change in Government. I have not found anybody in Russia even among those who do not love the Government who look forward to a radical change. This is a vain dream of the emigrants abroad. The Russians in Russia consider the Soviet Government as stronger than ever and as permanent, capable of evolution but not in danger of revolution.

Having held the matter in suspense for the last few years watching developments, praying about it, hearing the advice of many leaders in the church—every one finding a measure of fault with me for not having made a change long before this time—hoping against hope that you may resume the work which you so dearly love and which needs you, I have now, after personal investigation in Russia reached the conclusion, not without heart-ache, that your connection with Russia must be terminated. I herewith relieve you of the Superintendent-Treasurership of the Russia Mission and appoint you Superintendent and Treasurer of the Baltic Mission.

In the same letter Bishop Nuelsen who offered Simons the position of Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal work in Austria, which Simons ultimately refused, but left open the option for Simons to remain in Riga, Latvia as Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Baltic states. Bishop Nuelsen also explained in this letter that he was separating the Russia Mission from that of the Baltic states.

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1Letter of Nuelsen to Simons dated February 2, 1923: "My dear Brother, it is difficult for me to understand how you could take it upon yourself under the circumstances to go to Russia. I realize very well how urgently you desire to visit your former Church in Petrograd and to see your many friends, but I think I was justified in expecting that you should consult me and obtain my consent before going to Russia.

"In fact in view of the existing conditions I maintain that you have no right to visit Russia without the formal approval of your bishop. Your action can hardly be regarded as anything but a case of maladministration."
Simons resisted strongly Bishop Nuelsen's decision and pled his case in a letter to the Bishop dated October 18, 1922, written from Riga, Latvia.

Before the Board and you take final action in this matter, I desire to call your attention to a few important points:

(1) The Methodist property in Petrograd, which was bought by me in 1914, still stands in my name. In October 1918 I gave Sister Anna Eklund, our Deaconess since 1908, power-of-attorney.

(2) In view of the present complicated circumstances, while the Methodist work in Petrograd is flourishing, it would surely not be wise to make any change at this time with regard to the property.

(3) My return to Russia is being strongly urged by our Methodist preachers, members, friends, and certain officials in Government circles, as well as by Sister Anna who is really the saviour of our Russian work. You will recall the long petition presented to our Riga Conference with about 120 signatures of Petrograd Methodists, requesting my return to Russia.

(4) Rev. Oscar Poeld is in possession of certain documents which he got in the Kremlin, Moscow, last June, granting me permission to come to Russia. Furthermore, a large number of personal guarantees from Soviet officials were voluntarily and gladly given in my behalf because of my humanitarian work for the Russian people from 1907 to 1918 and the Relief shipments during 1920 to 1922. In harmony with all the aforesaid facts the Central Soviet in Moscow authorized a visa, which was placed on my passport in the Russian office in Berlin, September 5th, 1922, without fees. This visa gives me the right to enter Russia from any border and to resume my work over there.

(5) For about a dozen years I have been the "Pastor Abroad" of the First M. E. Church in Decatur, Illinois, and naturally sustain a peculiarly intimate relation to that congregation as head of the Russia Mission.

(6) If in the judgment of the Board and yourself it should appear imperative to now separate the Baltic-Russia work, then I shall gladly surrender the supervision of the Baltic field in order to devote my entire time and strength to Russia, to which country I have dedicated my missionary zeal and affection. There, under God, I hope to labor till my day is done.

In spite of Simons’ resistance Bishop Nuelsen would not change his decision. Simons then decided to remain in the Baltic states under episcopal appointment, which he did until 1928, when he was asked to return to the USA. Nevertheless, in a letter dated October 24, 1922, he resisted the bishop’s decision even more strongly.

After careful perusal of all you have written and after much heart-searching meditation and earnest prayer, I still find myself under a high ethical compulsion to remain where I have thus far stood. I cannot do otherwise and still be a loyal brother to the many Russians to whom I gave the sacred promise to return to Russia as soon as God opens the way.

Austria is entirely out of the question for me. Whether you rescind your official decision or not, I shall, nevertheless, devote my strength and time to Russia, to Sister Anna’s humanitarian work as well as to the extension of our beloved Methodist work in such a manner as I shall be able to do, and in all this Ottillie [his sister] is avowedly determined to assist.

"Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen."
Simons was indeed in a difficult situation. He had been the prime mover of the Methodist Episcopal work in Russia and through his opposition to the Soviet regime would be henceforth regarded as a anti-revolutionary. In the early 1920s, as the “Living Church” movement emerged within the Russian Orthodox Church, Simons’ position placed him in opposition to that movement and those members within Methodism who wished to support it, for that movement and its leaders sought to work with the existing government in Russia. During his “unauthorized trip” to Russia mentioned above, he was careful to mention in his report to Bishop Nuelsen, dated February 26, 1923, his anti-Bolshevik tendencies, and that he avoided all contact with leaders of the “Living Church” movement.

1) Not one of our Russian Methodist preachers, workers, or members is a Communist or Bolshevik. This fact does not embarrass our Methodist work in the least.

2) Practically all Christian believers (Lutherans, Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Molokans, Mennonites, etc.), are outspokenly anti-Bolshevik. Also the Roman Catholic Church with its members, likewise the Synagogues.

3) I did not confer with anyone of the “Living Church” movement neither with priests of the Russian Orthodox Church. Was invited to participate in a large religious meeting February 15th, where Vedensky, the chief figure in the “Living Church” movement was to speak, but I did not accept. The first approach was made soon after my arrival in Petrograd.3

Patriarch Tikhon had clearly opposed the Soviet government and was convicted and sent to prison for that activity, which he made no effort to hide. Leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church who were sympathetic to the Living Church movement wanted to find ways to work with the Soviet government, and Tikhon was viewed by many as a monarchist and, hence, opposed to the revolutionary government. It is clear from two documents, dated 1922, of the Baltic Mission conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which Simons served as superintendent, that within European Methodism there was strong opposition to cooperation with the Living Church movement and its leaders in Russia. Simons shared this view and favored trying to work with the traditional Russian Orthodox Church.

Where did Bishop Nuelsen fit into this complex situation? He was thought by some to have placed all Methodist Episcopal hope upon the “Living Church” movement. His correspondence reveals otherwise. In a letter to Frank Mason North, Corresponding Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in New York City, written from Zürich, Switzerland on February 6, 1923, he stated:

The most divergent and contradictory reports are current concerning the “Living Church” and also concerning the attitude of the Soviet Government. We have a chance which no other Protestant Church has to obtain firsthand information and

3Page 7 of letter dated February 26, written from Zürich, Switzerland.
also to bring a message to Russia which makes clear to the Russians the spiritual foundation and the true function of a free, really living church. The issue is, to my thinking, not the recognition of the “Living Church” nor the commitment of the Methodist Episcopal Church. I am very clear on that point. The real issue is the service which we may render to Russia, provided Russia wants to accept it, and the service which we may render to the Christian people outside of Russia by presenting an authoritative report.

During his visit to Russia in 1923 (Boston Herald, Boston, Massachusetts), Nuelsen described his intent.

Dear Dr. Hartman:

I arrived here [Riga, Latvia] this morning having spent two weeks in Russia, visiting all the places where the Methodist Episcopal Church is at work, meeting our preachers in conference in Petrograd and stopping a few days in Moscow on my way to Kowno [Lithuania] where the Baltic Mission Conference will meet.

While in Moscow I had an interview with Patriarch Tikhon, as well as with Bishop Antonine, Vedensky, Krassnitsky, and other leaders, and attended a session of the newly formed Educational Commission of the Russian Church. In Novgorod I called on the bishop, who is an appointee and adherent of Tikhon, and had interviews with a number of priests, some of them belonging to the Tikhon party, others to the Living Church party.

They all were unanimous in testifying of the profound impression made upon the whole Church by Bishop Blake’s address to the Moscow Council. The leading priest, who, by the way, does not belong to the reformers assured me that in his Church, as well as in many other churches, prayers are offered for the Methodist bishops.

The Bishop of Novgorod, who is a personal friend and appointee of Tikhon, received me very cordially. I could not detect a trace anywhere of any prejudice against the Methodist Church on the part of the conservatives on account of the official visit to the Moscow Council. The visit is not looked upon as favoring the Living Church or any faction in the Church, but is considered as a service rendered to the whole Church.

Patriarch Tikhon received me very cordially in his private apartment at the Donskoy monastery. In my letter to him I left no uncertainty as to the Church which I represent. There was not the slightest tone of chagrin or surprise at the official representation at the Council.

An additional word about Tikhon as a further proof of the incorrectness of the press dispatches. I asked Tikhon straight out whether he suffered any ill treatment during his confinement. He emphatically stated that he was treated well, that he had no complaints whatever to make, that he liked the Donskoy Monastery where he was confined so much that he decided to remain there after his liberation. I also asked him whether he signed his confession under any compulsion on the part of the Government. He just as emphatically denied this allegation. “No compulsion whatever,” he repeated several times. He admitted that the suggestion was made that it would benefit the Church, if he would make a public statement of the change in his views. “But only a suggestion, no compulsion whatever,” he said again. When going to see the Patriarch I expected to see a man care-worn and bowed down by the tremendous problems and difficulties before him. But I looked into the smiling blue eyes of a seemingly happy, old gentleman, serene and satisfied, whose face or whose deportment did not indicate any special anxiety or burden.
Before Bishop Nuelsen's departure from Russia during a trip he made there in October 1922, he wrote a letter, dated October 7, to Mr. P. A. Krasikoff of the Commissariat of Justice in Moscow. In it he takes a bold stance in defending the suffering Russian Orthodox Church.

May I as a friend of Russia and exceedingly desirous of helping to bring about the consummation of this aim take the liberty to place before you a matter which is exercising a very disturbing influence in America? I am constrained to say that the sentence passed upon a number of clergymen of the Church of Russia has created a sentiment in America which is one of the greatest obstacles in the way of friendly relations. I do not question the attitude of the Russian Government in treating this matter as a purely political and legal issue and disclaiming any hostility to the Christian religion as such. But the reports coming to America have led our people to look upon this matter as a religious issue. Those bishops and priests are considered by very many as martyrs, hence the policy of the Russian Government is judged as anti-religious. It is my firm conviction that the efforts of all the friends of Russia in behalf of your great country would be much more successful, if the Russian Government would show leniency to these men.

When the "Living Church" movement began to emerge there were some sentiments within Methodism to see it as an opportunity to extend the influence of Methodism in Russia. The history of the movement within Russia is extremely complex, for it did have the support of a considerable number of significant Russian church leaders and officials. Since the Russian Orthodox Church historically was viewed by many as monarchist and intimately associated with the Tsarist regime, Patriarch Tikhon was seen by many as a monarchist. The "Living Church" movement sought to work with the existing Russian government or at least to exist alongside it and give direction to a new future of the Russian Orthodox Church.

One of the chief supporters of the Methodist Episcopal link to the "Living Church" movement with the Russian Orthodox Church was a man by the name of Julius F. Hecker. He was born in St. Petersburg, Russia and attended Baldwin Wallace College, from which he graduated in 1910. Thereafter he attended Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, NJ. George A. Simons averred in his 1910 annual Russia Mission Report that it was Hecker's intention to return to St. Petersburg, Russia to serve the Methodist Episcopal Church. Hecker served as a student pastor in the USA and after seminary, since he spoke fluent Russian, became assistant pastor of the Peoples' English Home Church in New York with the special charge for Russian members, which numbered some seventy-five at the time.

By the early 1920s Hecker was living in Moscow (Arbat) at Starokonyoushenny 39 and with the endorsement of Bishop John L. Nuelsen set up a correspondence school and maintained regular contact with the leaders of the "Living Church" movement. As he became more closely associated with this movement within the Russian Orthodox Church, Simons became more and more convinced that Hecker was the wrong person to represent the Methodist Episcopal Church in Russia. This was not, however, the opinion of Bishop Nuelsen, who wrote to Frank M. North on February 6,
1923: “I confess that I have more confidence in the judgment of Dr. Hecker than in that of some good men of decidedly reactionary tendencies.”

Hecker’s letters to Bishop Nuelsen during the early 1920s are a valuable resource for understanding the complex matter of the so called Methodist Episcopal Church support of the “Living Church” movement. Nuelsen seemed to trust, in large measure, Hecker’s judgments regarding developments within the “Living Church” movement. In spite of his openness to the “Living Church” Nuelsen had a more balanced view and wanted to maintain conversations with the broad spectrum of significant leaders of the Russian Orthodox. This is why he continued to maintain contact with Patriarch Tikhon. Hecker’s letters make clear that he was the one who was handling the contacts for Bishop Nuelsen in Russia with the leaders of the “Living Church” movement.

Hecker had spoken out in America in defense of the Bolshevik Revolution and was regarded by many as much too “red” to be associated with the work of Methodism in Russia. He remarked in a letter to Bishop Nuelsen written on January 8, 1923 from Moscow: “Three years ago I considered it my duty to speak in defense of the Russian revolution and for this reason I am now an exile in Russia.” Hecker became suspect on the part of the United States government, but it is very clear that he never became a Communist, but he was a sympathizer with the revolution. He believed that the revolution provided a viable social context for the witness of the Christian faith and for the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Hecker was asked by the leaders of the “Living Church” movement to assist the Russian Church with theological education, since its seminaries had been closed. He was to design correspondence courses for clergy and laity in church history, polity, systematic theology, Christian sociology, and Christian education.

The letter of January 8, 1923 mentioned above includes two valuable reports from Hecker to Bishop Nuelsen which give insight into the climate prevailing among the leadership of the “Living Church” movement and in general on the future of religion in Russia.

The first report concerns “Answers to Questions put to Rev. [Vladimir] Krasnitsky, January 6, 1923.” Hecker says these are Krasnitsky’s “written answers,” hence, they are not a record of oral comments. Krasnitsky was the Dean of the Moscow Cathedral and a primary leader of the Living Church” movement.

**Question 1:** When is the General Council expected to meet?

**Answer:** At the Conference which took place Dec. 25–29, attended by members of the Highest Executive Council of the Orthodox Church of Russia and by delegates of the Diocesan Administrative Organs, the General Council, it was decided, shall meet on the first week after Easter (April 9).

**Question 2:** How shall the delegates for the Council be elected?

**Answer:** The elections shall take place in the parishes, no limitation to representatives of the old Church tendency [those of non-“Living Church” persuasion] will be made.
**Question 3:** Will representatives of the Old church tendency be invited?  
**Answer:** Representatives of the Old [Church] tendency, bishops, as well as laymen, may come to the Council, if regularly elected.

**Question 4:** What is the present status of the movement of the Living Church?  
**Answer:** The movement of the Living Church has spread very widely in the Provinces. Organizations of the Living Church exist in all Opyesds (Countries) in the great majority of the Dioceses, in the Opyesds towns and even in the remotest district organizations in Siberia and local Conferences. It is also organized in the Ukraine where it prepares for Conference. At the last Conference (in Moscow) at the end of December of the leaders of the reform movement 80% were adherents of the Living Church (41 of the Living Church and 7 of other tendencies). The executive organs of the movement are active in the centers and in local communities.

**Question 5:** What new tendencies are cropping up in the reform movement?  
**Answer:** Since October a reformist faction of persons leaving the Highest Executive Council formed itself, joining the left wing of the reformist movement which works for the disintegration of the Church into independent congregations. For the last four months this faction has not published one printed sheet but has control of the funds of the Highest Executive Council which made it impossible to continue the publication of the central organ of the Living Church. Leaning upon the support of the extreme political elements, they have now the majority (8 out of 15) in the Highest Executive Council. Their administrative inability, their lack of a definite program, and connection with church elements, and their utter disregard of tradition gives reasons to hope that their influence will not last. There are also existing altogether anti-church groupings but they do not have the sympathy and the regard of the people.

**Question 6:** What are the principal obstacles in the movement of the Living Church?  
**Answer:** The principal cause hampering the development of the Living Church is the non-existence of a judicial basis in the revolutionary movement of the Church. The Soviet laws are directed against the counter-revolutionary administration of the Church, but until now has not produced any judicial basis which would make it possible for the Church in its revolutionary activity to develop freely and independently of the personal views and sympathies of individual government functionaries. On the whole the civil authorities do not hamper the movement but the personal character of local functionaries does at times create difficulties.

**Question 7:** What tactics do representatives of the old Church tendencies use against the Living Church movement?  
**Answer:** The old Church party makes use of the constitutional provision which separates the Church from the state and organizes autocephalic Churches which do not recognize the Highest Executive Council of the Church. Thus are appearing local heads which pretend candidacy for the Patriarchate. The Soviet authorities do not prosecute these autocephalic formations and the struggle remains a Church affair.

**Question 8:** What position does the Living Church take to the Near East problem, particularly in regard to the Patriarchate of Constantinople?  
**Answer:** The Living Church, although a church revolutionary movement, stands for the preservation of the dogmatic, liturgical and ethical unity with the Catholic (Byzantine) Church. It prays for the Eastern Patriarchs in all its services. On the third of January the representative of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Russia, Archimandrite Ianov, received a telegram from the Patriarch in Constantinople with the request to support the protest at Lausanne of all Orthodox Churches against the removal of the Patriarch from Constantinople, requesting action by the Highest Executive Council. The Chairman of the Highest Executive Council
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requested the representative of the Ankara government in Moscow to send a telegram to Reuf Bey, Chairman of the Ankara National Assembly, requesting him to leave the Patriarch in Constantinople. Rev. Krasnitzky was charged with the mission and he told the representative of Ankara of the spiritual ties which unite the Russian Christians to the Patriarch of Constantinople. He was assured that this request will be heeded.

Question 9: What influence will the new Union of Socialist Soviet Republics have upon the unity of the Church of Russia?

Answer: The strengthening of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics undoubtedly will have its influence upon the Church as a sole organization recognizing the truth of the Russian social revolution and preparing the way for the Living Church throughout Russia.

Hecker also included a report, "Religion of the Future: discussed by Churchmen, Liberals and Communists," on a forum he attended in Moscow on the subject "Religion of the Future." It is quite interesting, since it is a report from a secular context, rather than a religious or church context. The report is included here in full as sent to Bishop Nuelsen.

Is religion dying in Russia? Or has the revolution given it a new impulse of life? If religion is to remain an integral part of the life of the Russian people, what shall be its content, what its organized expression, what its goal?

These questions are continually discussed by Russians. Serious minded people meet in houses and talk informally about them. Frequently large public meetings are held where representatives of different trends of opinion: churchmen, liberals, evangelicals, communists, and atheists cross their spiritual swords. Great crowds attend such meetings and the intensity and passion of these spiritual combats are the best testimony to the incurable religiousness of the Russian people.

Having lived through the political and socio-economic phases of the great revolution one may safely conclude that at present the Russian people have entered the stage of a spiritual-religious revolution which is fought with not less intensity and passion though fortunately without violence.

The Line-up in the Conflict

The real cleavage in the conflict on which churchmen, liberals, evangelicals, and Tolstoyans form a united front against atheists and Communists, is the issue whether the future of religion is to be with or without God. Whatever else separates the various Churches and religious movements, the question of God or no God is now the real issue of the conflict. "We shall never give up God!" cried passionately Bulgakoff, the leader of the Tolstoyans, at a meeting where the "Religion of the Future" was debated and the crowd cheered him in response.

Not all Communists are of course atheists. There is a faction which calls itself Christian Communists. Neither are all atheists Communists. Mr. Clemenceau is an atheist, yet far from Communism and he has not a few friends in Russia. There are again Communists who believe their movement to be the new religion of the future, although, as Lunarcharsky expressed it, "A religion without God and without guarantees of a future life."

Recently the Commissar of Public Education, Lunarcharsky, challenged leaders of religion to debate with him the question of the "Religion of the Future." Those who received special invitations were Bishop Antonine, leader of the right wing in the reform movement of the Orthodox Church, Archpriest Vedensky, leader of the left wing of the reform movement in the Orthodox Church, and Bulgakoff, leader of the Tolstoyans of Moscow.
The very outward appearance of these men sitting next to Lunarcharsky, the leading prophet of Communism as a religion, symbolized what they stood for.

Bishop Antonine, now Metropolitan Bishop of Moscow, the leading spirit in the removal of Patriarch Tikhon, is an hoary old monk with crude features and rustic manners. With a stature like an old oak he stands firm on the old monastic traditions and leads the fight against any Protestant-evangelical tendencies in the Church. He is against any radical changes either in the government of the Church or in its doctrines. He was shrewd enough to recognize the Patriarch’s mistake of nonrecognition of the revolutionary government and he seized the opportunity of putting himself in power by exposing the Patriarch’s counter-revolutionary designs and by recognizing the new political and social order. As to the “Religion of the Future,” he does not believe that it is to be much different from the religion of the past. To use his own words, “The Church needs no surgical operation but only a dose of castor oil to purge its system.

Archbishop Vedensky of Petrograd, probably the most popular scholarly orator of the Orthodox Church, spoke for the left wing of the reform movement. He too personifies by his appearance the ideas for which he stands. Slender in stature, with fine features and mellow voice, using the choicest literary language to convey his ideas, earnest and bold with great spiritual insight, he cuts a fine figure of a modern prophet. He is not an ecclesiastic and the cult of the Church is to him but the stagings in the frame of which the spiritual drama of the Church is acted. Religion to him is “meeting God, is the holy captivity of man by God; it is the blood which feeds the heart and through the heart the whole spiritual being of man.”

“My son, give me thine heart!” this call of God is the basis of the “Religion of the Future,” was the conclusion of his passionate appeal, which found its response by stormy and prolonged applause from the majority of the audience.

Bishop Antonine and the young priest Vedensky are the two poles of the reform movement in the Orthodox Church. To the former, religion is embodied in the cult and the traditions of the Church, to the latter, religion is a matter of the heart. Church and cult being but the stage and the staging where the soul meets God but not exclusively there.

The Tolstoyan Bulgakoff, secretary to Tolstoy until his death and one of his most faithful disciples, stood up as the spokesman for a nonecclesiastical and non-dogmatic religion.

Like his great teacher, he is a religious anarchist and Communist and as such he attacks both the Church and the state as organized violence, the former enslaving the conscience of man and the latter his civil life.

“Whether the Religion of the Future,” said Bulgakoff, “will accept the religious principles of Tolstoy, or whether a new prophet will arise, one thing is sure, it will be a religion of a free people who will worship God, each in his own way and who voluntarily give up their property and the domination over others.”

In his speech he violently attacked the Communists for their dictatorial measures, for their practice of capital punishment and other repressive acts. The chairman of the meeting who was a Communist made no attempts to stop him and the immense audience thoroughly enjoyed the breezy atmosphere of free speech.

In conclusion Lunarcharsky spoke representing the Communist point of view on the future of religion. He refuted the arguments of his opponents who charged the Communists with crude materialism and asserted that their emphases upon the economic aspect of life is not a denial of spiritual culture but a necessary condition to make spiritual values accessible to everybody. Wherever there is poverty, wherever a few live at the expenses of the many, there is ignorance, disease, crime, and immorality. A politically free and economically independent people will develop its own spiritual culture.
The religious ideas of the past with their monarchial idea of God and a feudal hierarchy in the Church have outlived their time and must pass away. The same is true of many other religions and moral values which are at present a handicap to the free development of a practical, social, and moral idealism. He asserted to his audience that the Communists who have declared war on religious superstition and otherworldliness will, however, not resort to suppression by force but continue to battle with the sword of the spirit, and believe that their ideas are going to win out in the end.

The decisive factor in the discussion, however, was the audience. In the immense crowd there were men and women of all races and all walks of life. In spite of the fact that they differed radically on questions of theology, they were united by one holy passion to learn the truth about God and religion.

If readiness to pay is an index of interest, these people fully showed it. They paid the price of an opera ticket to get in and only half of those who wished to attend could find admittance. For five hours without recess they listened to the fiery speeches of the orators. Their eager faces and their impassioned applause seem to me the surest sign that, even though old forms of religion be dying, the spirit of religion is more than ever alive in the hearts of the Russian people.

J. F. Hecker
Moscow, New Years Day 1923

There can be no question that Hecker's involvement with the "Living Church" leaders and the attendance of Bishop Blake and Dr. Hartman at the Holy Synod of The Orthodox Church of Russia, which was primarily under the leadership of the "Living Church" leaders, and an official communique from that body "To the Bishops, Pastors and Laity of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America" strengthened the view, especially in Russia, that the Methodist Episcopal Church unequivocally endorsed the new movement in the Russian Orthodox Church. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, the Board of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church withdrew the endorsement of the delegation to the Synod. Bishop Bast quoted a leading paper in Copenhagen in a letter May 8, 1923 to Bishop Nuelsen as follows:

The Church-Conference in Moscow. The American-Methodist delegation called home. To Reuters Bureau is telegraphed from Wichita, Kansas: The Board of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church has resolved to call the Methodist delegation, in which they exculpate themselves from some expressions, which Bishop Blake used in the conference in Moscow."

Hecker was not under episcopal appointment to Russia and was not an official representative of the Methodist Episcopal Church, though he did act at times, it seems, in concert with requests of Bishop Nuelsen. In a letter of February 21, 1922 to the Bishop he was very clear about the precarious nature of his position, having spoken out as an American citizen on behalf of the Bolshevik government.

As to my personal relation to our work in Russia, I believe it would be inexpedient at present to appoint me to the position of official representative of our work in Russia and this for two reasons: first, I have promised Dr. Simons that I shall not aspire to the position of Superintendent of our mission in Russia, even though I am convinced that he himself is not the man to work successfully in Russia under the present regime and there is no hope that the old will come back.
Secondly, I am still *persona non grata* with the U.S. Government and probably will remain such until America will change its present policy toward Soviet Russia. Our church can hardly be represented by someone who has not the approval of the government and therefore I prefer to go to Russia unofficially and work more or less as a free lance. In this position I can do more in aiding any of the men you should send. I have made good connections with many of the influential leaders of the Soviet government and I expect to return in about two months to Moscow as the guest of Lunarcharsky, minister of education of the Soviet Government. Shall be glad to hear your opinion to my plans and suggestions for Russia.

It is true that some Methodist Episcopal *Christian Advocates*, official church newspapers, printed part or all of the communique from the Synod, particularly the following paragraph:

> In these dark days of our Church crisis, you, beloved brethren from distant America, came to our aid. The presence in the council of the most reverend Bishop Blake and Dr. Hartman will not remain forgotten in the history of the Orthodox Church. The kind and energetic cooperation of Bishop Nuelsen with our supreme administrative church organ gives us the assurance, that you, in spite of all the lies and calumnies directed against us, our church and our government remained the faithful good Samaritan, who does not pass us with indifference. The presence of one of your brethren, Dr. J. F. Hecker, who with all his soul entered into the hard work of reconstructing spiritual enlightenment in Russia, convinced us, that you unselfishly desire to help us. Like John Wesley, your spiritual father and founder of the revival movement in England and America, stood forth with the living word in the difficult days of decay of the Anglican Church as you became a living force for the spiritual recovery of the American people after the revolution; as you, bleeding away in the civil war of America, fought for the abolition of slavery, thus we are striving to become a living force for the spiritual regeneration of our people and for its liberation from social and spiritual slavery. We struggle for the unity of the Church, for brotherhood and peace of the nations and we entirely trust in our Lord Jesus Christ whose Church the gates of hell shall not overcome.

This is only one paragraph of a longer letter signed by Chairman of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Russia, Metropolitan Eudokim of Odessa and Kharkoff, Metropolitan Benjamin of Jaroslav, Metropolitan Peter of Siberia, Archbishop Konstantin of Gomel, Bishop George of Dmitroff, Archpriest Sergius Konarsky, Archpriest P. Krassotin, Protodiakon Segius Dobroff, and A. Novikoff, secretary and member of the Holy Synod. It is clear from the communique that the leaders of the movement hoped for the spiritual and financial support of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

While the above paragraph with its references to Wesley and the emergence of Methodism in America as a post-revolutionary church which brought strength to a healing nation resonated with many Methodists, by far the majority were extremely wary of an attempt of a church to cooperate with a government which espoused atheistic Communism. The leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church strongly opposed the commitment of Bishop Blake to raise $50,000 for theological education in the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless Blake raised some $30,000 which enabled the opening of a seminary and the reopening of another.
Clearly there was never any official support by the Methodist Episcopal Church, by any of its agencies, or by its General Conference of the "Living Church" movement within Russian Orthodoxy. Clearly Bishop Blake and Dr. Hartman by their presence at the Holy Synod gave the impression of such support, but the Russians did know that the delegation had been recalled. Furthermore, Bishop Nuelsen had a much more balanced view and had a personal relationship with Patriarch Tikhon about which many, Russians or Americans, knew little or nothing. Nevertheless, a statement in his book on the history of Methodism in Europe gives the impression he was at least sympathetic to an atmosphere of open discussion on some of the matters raised by the "Living Church" movement. "The old church in Russia was divided during these years [early years of the Bolshevik Revolution]. One may suppose, however, that such movements can make easier the relationship with the free churches of western Europe, from the standpoint of the old church in Russia, as well as from the standpoint of younger offshoots."^4

Julius Hecker, as bright as he was, clearly was a thorn in the flesh of this entire matter. As a free-lance Methodist educator in Moscow with some support from Bishop Nuelsen, though not under appointment, he too gave the wrong face to the Methodist Episcopal relationship to the "Living Church" movement. George A. Simons was unquestionably opposed to the movement and felt that relationships should be fostered with the traditional leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church.

This is an unfortunate chapter in the religious history of the 20th century for the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. There are clearly, however, positive aspects of this complex story which should be illuminating for the 21st century. The relationship established between Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop John L. Nuelsen evidences a level of conversation among church leaders that affirms the reality that Christian leaders can rise above adversity and difference and converse about the present and the future of life, humankind, and the church with genuineness and without malice.

^4 John L. Nuelsen, Theophil Mann, and J. J. Sommer, Geschichte des Methodismus von seinen Angängen bis zur Gegewart (Bremen: Verlagshaus der Methodistenkirche, 1929).