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Communication and conflict in the Evangelical community: analysis of the relations between Baptists and Pentecostals in the USSR in the second half of the 20th century

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Abstract

This article analyses a variety of communicative strategies between Baptists and Pentecostals in communities registered in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Although both denominations had a strong religious identity, the expansion of Pentecostals led to conflicts in the intra-community communication. By creating an alternative religious community Pentecostals produced their own hierarchical authority, which included women possessing special “spiritual gifts”.

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1. Introduction

The 20th century marked a unique time in the expansion of Evangelicalism all over the world, with Pentecostalism gaining the largest number of affiliates. Despite the government’s unprecedented and destructive interference into the life of religious communities, many processes that occurred in the USSR reflected global

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tendencies. The existence of a dynamical Evangelical community in the USSR became prominent during the Second World War, and the government could not ignore its presence. A network of factors which caused changes in the USSR's religious policies in the time of the Second World War led to the gradual legalization of religion and to the creation of institutional frameworks of different confessions, which were regulated by and loyal to the Soviet government (Zavatski, 1995).

The governmental policy aimed at the standardization of religious movements and at the creation of centralized religious institutional frameworks resulted in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists becoming the second largest religious institution in the USSR by the number of affiliates. The Council had been formed by 1944, and by 1948 it comprised 2766 communities with more than 183.000 members. Moreover, the overall number of Evangelical Christians was estimated at 500.000. This figure is considered to be imagined, but it occurs in a significant amount of sources.

The opportunity to be legalized prompted an increase in the number of confessed believers, who could satisfy their religious needs on the one hand; while, on the other hand, it provided the state with one more instrument for regulating such a specific sphere of life. Through imposing registration procedures on religious communities and ministers and fostering efforts to legalize and standardize the spiritual life of Evangelical Christians together with the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, the government gained powerful means of controlling and influencing people who had strong religious beliefs. Any violation of strict Soviet regulations on religion could result in the stopping of the registration of the community and its presbyter, and in some cases even to prosecution of religious activists and their leaders.

It is obvious that the state was pursuing its own goals in denying Pentecostals the registration of their communities and in forcing their administration to seek compromise with the All-Soviet Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Having declared Pentecostals ideologically unacceptable for the USSR the government made a decision to assign the task of "educating" Pentecostals to an organization which proved to be loyal to the state and ready to collaborate with. At the same time placing obvious competitors into the same space, as it were, provided the government with an opportunity to control from the inside the processes occurring in the community and thus increase the number of conflicts in a group, which had previously been rather homogeneous.

The practical details connected with the inclusion of the Church of Evangelical Christians into the All-Soviet Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, including the demands of Pentecostals and the incentives for their entering the community are thoroughly examined in the studies conducted by T. Nikolskaya and V. Klueva (Nikolskaja, 2010; Kliueva, 2015). It is noteworthy that right after the signing of the August treaty (1945) a number of strategies of communicating with Baptists developed inside the Pentecostal movement: 1) to reject any union with Baptists and to hold independent (and illegal from the State's perspective) prayer meetings until the Pentecostal union is legalized; 2) to co-operate with Baptists in common church services, but to exclude ecstatic prayer practices (glossolalia, washing of feet, Baptism in the Holy Spirit) from these services; 3) to join Baptist communities to steer away believers into Pentecostalism.

2. Data and methods

The aim of this research was to study the development of communication and also the resolution of conflicts on the grassroots level in the communities which were members of the All-Soviet Union of Christian Evangelicals and Baptists. The situation discussed in the article is important, in so far as historical and religious competitors were forced to be united in the same religious space. Their communication was subjected to the state control from the very beginning. The authorities were closely observing the experimental coalescence of the two religious groups. Their reaction can be observed through a study of reports and analytical notes written by members of the Council for Religious Affairs. They recorded not only the expansion of Pentecostal influence in Evangelical communities, but also their growing tendency towards independence. However, the strong narrative which developed in the Pentecostal community claimed that the rights of Pentecostals were infringed in the Evangelical community (Frantchuk, 2000).

In the given study communication strategies and models used by the two religious movements will be examined by way of the analysis of narratives and documents which existed inside the religious community. Materials and interviews gathered for the project "Women in Evangelical Community" and published in the book (Beljakova and

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