

# Bad Ecumenism: The American Culture Wars and Russia's Hard Right Turn

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<sup>1</sup>I think “Kantian-ish,” awkward as the term may be, is a better descriptor for me than “spiritual but not religious.” The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) emphasized what we might call epistemological humility with respect to spiritual reality and metaphysical speculation.

<sup>2</sup>Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), esp. 15–69. See also Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, tr. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2010).

Born in northern Indiana in 1980, I was raised in a conservative evangelical Protestant enclave community, and thereby hangs a tale. While I will try not to tell it like an idiot, this tale is certainly full of sound and fury. My fundamentalist milieu was characterized by an apocalyptic ethos that went hand-in-hand with urgent engagement in what I like to call the quasi-ecumenism of Biblical literalism—though “interconfessional culture wars” might be a more immediately accessible descriptor—with implications for church-state relations, interfaith dialogue, and even geopolitics. This tale may be framed as one of “bad ecumenism,” the offspring of fundamentalist resistance to modernity and Cold War anti-Communism. Ironically, the associated movement has, of late, been forging an alliance with Moscow. Far-right voices in both Europe and North America have been looking to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a moral exemplar and a beacon of hope. Bad ecumenism has ushered in an era of right-wing fellow travelers.

But what do I mean by bad ecumenism? In answering this question, I would like to begin by placing my commitments on the table. I’m a believer, if not in the specific dogma of any religious tradition, then, at least, in the value of interfaith dialogue. I also believe that the unaffiliated, or “nones”—the atheists, the agnostics, and the “Kantian-ish” sorts like myself<sup>1</sup>—ought to take interfaith dialogue seriously and ought to take

part in it, seeking common ground and, where possible, making common cause with representatives of various faith traditions toward the general good in our pluralist society.

Why? I have pragmatic, philosophical, and personal reasons for the value I place on “good ecumenism” (broadly defined—I do not believe universal Christian unity to be an attainable or even desirable goal, as in my skepticism I can conceive of it happening only in an authoritarian way) and on the participation of the unaffiliated in it. Pragmatically, religion has proven remarkably persistent; whether atheists and agnostics would like it to persist is beside the point. As Soviet experience shows, repression—and I would add that such repression is, regardless of effectiveness, unethical—cannot eliminate it. Ignoring religion, when it retains substantial social significance, is not a good option either, and this is where my pragmatic reasons intersect with my philosophical reasons.

Our pluralist society consists not merely of atomized individuals, but also of various social groups and communities, among which religious communities are numbered. I will not concede the fundamental importance of the separation of church and state, but at the same time it would be undemocratic to exclude members of religious communities from participation in the public sphere. In this respect, there is much of value in the re-

cent slim volume *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, particularly in the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor regarding the appropriate means for participation of religious believers in the public sphere. Once holding to an essentially strict early Rawlsian position that religious reasoning should be excluded from the public sphere, Habermas now concedes that religion has important cultural resources that ought not to be lost to modern democratic societies. Taylor, meanwhile, adds that in inviting various constituencies into dialogue and debate in the pluralist public sphere, we should set a democratic goal of preventing any one of them from dominating others.<sup>2</sup>

I agree with both points, and it seems to me that if the unaffiliated refuse to engage with religious believers, this will do nothing to discourage the kind of religious radicalism that does seek to dominate society, and will most likely encourage it. This leads to my personal reasons for supporting interfaith dialogue and the participation of the unaffiliated and unbelieving in it. I may have grown up with a kind of fundamentalist evangelical Protestantism that I find in many respects wrongheaded, but there are many kindhearted, generous, good people in it. I have seen some evolve on culture wars issues, and there are signs that more broadly, despite the numerous examples of fundamentalist backlash currently underway in evangelical institutions, some sections of evangelical Protestantism are changing for the better.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, some of my close friends are moderate and progressive Christians (of various stripes, including evangelicals), and they demonstrate the ability of believers to act in the public sphere in good faith, not seeking to dominate society by imposing exclusively religious values on others in the form of coercive law, even though their positions are informed by their faith.

Here there is much room for common ground, and it will be better for all of us if we seek it.

All of this contrasts sharply with bad ecumenism, which we can categorize as a strategy of fundamentalists who feel threatened. Like good ecumenism, it seeks, if not full unity, then at least cooperation between members of various Christian churches (and at times also with social conservatives outside Christianity). But that is where its similarity with good ecumenism and good-faith interconfessional initiatives ends. In contrast to these, bad ecumenism is oriented not toward the general good, but toward the goal of conservative Christian political domination through the coercive imposition of shared “traditional values” that in fact dehumanize and, when enshrined in law, discriminate against women, members of the LGBTQ community, non-Christians, liberals—in short, a variety of “others.” Perhaps because I was socialized in Christian Right institutions to become a culture warrior in this vein, when it comes to approaches to discussions of fundamentalism, I have something to bring to the table in dialogue with non-fundamentalist believers.

Let’s examine the current orientation of some American social conservatives toward Moscow as a specific example of how bad ecumenism operates. On October 28, 2015, Franklin Graham—son of “America’s pastor” Billy Graham, and current president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan’s Purse—met with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus’ while on a visit to Russia. During his audience with the patriarch, Graham opined that U.S. President Barack Obama “promotes atheism,” adding: “Unfortunately he does not have a Christian worldview.” In a subsequent press conference, Graham contrasted Obama with Putin,

<sup>3</sup> On conservative backlash in evangelical institutions of higher education, see Christopher Stroop, “Special Report: Have Evangelical Colleges Succumbed to ‘Theological Paranoia’?” *Religion Dispatches*, January 19, 2016. [religiondispatches.org/special-report-have-evangelical-colleges-succumbed-to-theological-paranoia/](http://religiondispatches.org/special-report-have-evangelical-colleges-succumbed-to-theological-paranoia/), accessed May 25, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Miranda Blue, “Franklin Graham Praises ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law, Criticizes US ‘Secularism’ In Russia Visit,” *Right Wing Watch*, November 11, 2015. [www.rightwingwatch.org/content/franklin-graham-praises-gay-propaganda-law-criticizes-us-secularism-russia-visit](http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/franklin-graham-praises-gay-propaganda-law-criticizes-us-secularism-russia-visit). Accessed April 23, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Priest Mark Hodges, “Russian Orthodox Patriarch: Americans for Natural Marriage Are ‘Confessors of the Faith,’” *PravMir*, November 3, 2015. [www.pravmir.com/russian-orthodox-patriarch-americans-for-natural-marriage-are-confessors-of-the-faith/](http://www.pravmir.com/russian-orthodox-patriarch-americans-for-natural-marriage-are-confessors-of-the-faith/). Accessed April 23, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Pat Buchanan, "Whose Side Is God on Now?" Patrick J. Buchanan – Official Website, April 4, 2014. [www.buchanan.org/blog/whose-side-god-now-6337](http://www.buchanan.org/blog/whose-side-god-now-6337). Accessed April 23, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Hanchett, "Buchanan on Strained US-Russian Relations: 'What is the Matter with This Country?' Putin Is an 'Ally' Against Islamic State," *Breitbart*, April 23, 2016. [www.breitbart.com/video/2016/04/23/buchanan-on-strained-us-russia-relations-what-is-the-matter-with-this-country-putin-is-an-ally-against-islamic-state/](http://www.breitbart.com/video/2016/04/23/buchanan-on-strained-us-russia-relations-what-is-the-matter-with-this-country-putin-is-an-ally-against-islamic-state/). Accessed April 23, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Erik Rush, "How to Disarm the Mainstream Media," *World Net Daily*, October 24, 2012. [www.wnd.com/2012/10/how-to-disarm-the-mainstream-media/](http://www.wnd.com/2012/10/how-to-disarm-the-mainstream-media/). Accessed April 24, 2016. Erik Rush, "Obama Backs Nazis, Crickets from the Press," *World Net Daily*, March 12, 2014. [www.wnd.com/2014/03/obama-backs-nazis-crickets-from-the-press/](http://www.wnd.com/2014/03/obama-backs-nazis-crickets-from-the-press/). Accessed April 24, 2016. Erik Rush, "Homofascists, Christians, and the State as 'God,'" *World Net Daily*, June 3, 2015. [www.wnd.com/2015/06/homofascists-christians-and-the-state-as-god/](http://www.wnd.com/2015/06/homofascists-christians-and-the-state-as-god/). Accessed April 24, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Alexey Zygmunt, "The Problematics of Violence in Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Discourse," *State, Religion and Church* 2:2 (2015): 29–53.

thanking the latter for "protecting Russian young people against homosexual propaganda."<sup>4</sup> For his part, Patriarch Kirill, putting aside doctrinal differences between Protestant and Orthodox believers, declared opponents of marriage equality to be "Confessors of the Faith," adding, "This gives us a sign of hope: there are people among Western Christians akin to us in ethical principles, sharing them with the Russian Orthodox Church."<sup>5</sup> Over a year earlier—just after Putin's annexation of Crimea, and in a moment in which Graham may still have had doubts about Putin's KGB past—another Catholic American, the prominent paleoconservative political strategist, pundit, and former Reform Party presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, strongly hinted that God is now on Russia's side.<sup>6</sup> He has remained something of a Putin apologist since.<sup>7</sup> And it is not difficult to find other apologists for Putin among hard-line American conservatives, a fact that has important geopolitical implications. For example, Erik Rush, a columnist for the far-right website *WorldNetDaily* and a repeat guest on Fox News who charmingly looks forward to a time when "the political disenfranchisement of liberals, progressives, socialists and Marxists can begin in earnest, and in the open," has defended Putin's approach to Ukraine. He has also been known to tweet memes in which Obama is portrayed as weak and effeminate in comparison to Putin, and to rail against "homofascists," who exist, of course, only in the fevered imagination of fundamentalists.<sup>8</sup>

This rapprochement between American religious and social conservatives and the Kremlin might seem odd, given not only festering post-Cold War resentments among Russians toward the West, but also given the fact that the "sectarian" represents one of the two major classes of "enemies" in contemporary Russian Orthodox dis-

course about spiritual warfare. It may also strike us as odd on the U.S. side, given lingering Cold War mistrust and recently heightened international tensions over Ukraine. So how did we get here? What unites both parties is their fundamentalist conservatism—in particular their anti-gay animus, their focus on "the natural family," and their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of LGBTQ rights as human rights. Indeed, as Alexey Zygmunt has argued, the second primary "enemy" in post-Soviet Russian Orthodox discourse about spiritual warfare is the "sodomite."<sup>9</sup> Even so, shared anti-LGBTQ animus is hardly a sufficient condition for the arguable emergence of a "right-wing international" centered on Russia.<sup>10</sup>

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In 1999, during my senior year of high school, I was approached by my Midwestern K-12 Christian school's orchestra director, who, as it turned out, also organized short-term mission trips with OMS International. Formerly known as Oriental Missionary Society, and apparently recently rebranded as One Mission Society, OMS was known only by its initials at that time. These days, its website proclaims that, "on average, one person comes to Christ every 31 seconds through the ministries of One Mission Society." One of the ways this Greenwood, Indiana-based missionary organization achieves these conversions is by mobilizing youth for short-term mission trips to a number of countries.<sup>11</sup>

Denominational affiliation meant very little to my family or to many in my wider social circle. In my early childhood, my family had attended a Baptist church and a Wesleyan church, followed by an independent Christian church (historically related to the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ

denomination, part of the Restoration Movement), followed by a full-throated embrace of the non-denominational Protestant bandwagon. What was very clear throughout these peregrinations was that in order to be Christian, one needed to fight to restore officially sanctioned prayer in public schools, to reverse the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (we were taught that abortion was a literal holocaust), to stop the advancement of LGBTQ civil rights, and to elect Republicans. Failing to deny evolution and global warming was highly suspect, but not necessarily an automatic indication that someone was out of the true Christian club. Over time, in conjunction with the political battles surrounding these issues, I observed how even Catholicism, once highly distrusted by evangelicals, became less and less dubious to us. The same thing has now occurred with Mormonism.

But Orthodoxy? Orthodoxy was hardly on our community's radar screen. While my dad, as I recall, knew one Orthodox convert from Protestantism, I do not remember ever discussing the specifics of his faith. I can recall other instances, though, in which I got the sense that Orthodoxy was "exotic" and "dubious" among evangelicals. When I accompanied the school orchestra teacher to a rural part of Russia's Vladimir Oblast for our "English camp" missionary project in 1999, I imagined us attempting to convert atheists, assuming there were still quite a few of them in Russia given the Communist Party's repression of religion. In fact, I'm not sure any of the students—whom we "tutored in English" by reading from an English translation of the Bible (not a very pedagogically sound method), and with whom we shared our testimonies, as evangelical Protestants do—were atheists. Our project was undertaken in coordination with local Orthodox structures, however, and

a priest joined us for some meals and regularly led prayer services for the Russian students, which actually made me feel good. Something about the idea of converting Christians to another form of Christianity struck me as off-putting. When I went back the following year, however, and worked with many of the same people, there was no longer any involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church, and I felt increasingly uncomfortable with the entire project (not least, however, because I was in the midst of my own crisis of faith).

As it turns out, this was precisely the time of a major rift in relations between Russian Orthodox Christians and conservative American Protestants, who had indeed been proselytizing in Russian public schools, on a very large scale, under the guise of providing a Christian ethics curriculum. This initiative was coordinated by a coalition of far-right ministries known as the CoMission, with Campus Crusade for Christ (since rebranded as "Cru") at the helm, and it represented itself very differently to its Russian partners than it did to its American evangelical supporters.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the disbanding of the CoMission and the way in which it scandalized the Russian Orthodox leadership and the Russian government, Protestant missionary efforts did help to export the American culture wars to post-Soviet Russia.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, however, much of what the American Protestants brought to Russia has since been "nationalized." Culture-war initiatives have been reconceptualized in terms of Russian traditions and Orthodox Christianity, something that is not in fact out of keeping with the old Slavophile Russian discourse of moral superiority.<sup>14</sup> Especially since the beginning of Putin's third term, the Russian state has enthusiastically embraced op-

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Stroop, "A Right-Wing International? Russian Social Conservatism, the World Congress of Families, and the Global Culture Wars in Historical Context," *The Public Eye*, Winter 2016, 4–10.

<sup>11</sup> See the organization's website, <https://one-missionssociety.org/>. Accessed April 24, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce Wilson, "How Antigay American Fundamentalists Indoctrinated Russia's School Children, 1992-1997," *TWOCARE*, May 4, 2014. <http://www.twocare.org/how-antigay-american-fundamentalists-indoctrinated-russias-school-children-1992-1997/>. Accessed April 24, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> This is a topic Xenia Loutchenko and I touched on when I interviewed her on May 8, 2015. See "Religion and Politics in Russia: An Insider's View. Xenia Loutchenko Interviewed by Christopher Stroop," *The Wheel* 3, Fall 2015, 30–35.

<sup>14</sup> See Stroop, "A Right-Wing International?"

position to LGBTQ rights and to some extent opposition to abortion, and has positioned itself, increasingly successfully, as the global standard bearer for the defense of “traditional values.” But what has brought the American culture warriors, who were used to leading rather than following in these matters, into the fold?

The American Christian Right’s modern institutional structure—the same that brought me to Russia on short-term mission trips in 1999 and 2000—has its roots in Cold War anti-Communism. Opposition to Communism was what brought conservative evangelicals back into the American mainstream in the 1940s and 50s, as Angela Lahr, Jonathan Herzog, and others have shown.<sup>15</sup> Even the initial opposition of Christian Right groups to the Civil Rights Movement (a part of their history that now embarrasses them) was sometimes framed as anti-Communism.<sup>16</sup> Communism and secularism were conflated in right-wing American Christians’ minds, and it is clear that Franklin Graham, who was socialized in the Cold War conservative evangelical environment, still thinks in these terms. “Secularism, which is almost no different from Communism, is an atheistic movement,” he remarked on his recent visit to Russia in the context of suggesting that Americans are losing religious freedom, while Russians are gaining it.<sup>17</sup>

For their part, Russian political and religious leaders are only too happy to proffer this narrative to American fundamentalists such as Graham. Russian social conservatives were heavily involved in founding the World Congress

of Families, one of the most significant examples of bad ecumenism on the present world stage. And at WCF IX, which took place October 27–30, 2015, in Salt Lake City, Alexey Komov—WCF’s Regional Representative for Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States; the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society’s representative to the United Nations; and a member of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Patriarchal Commission on the Family and the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood—argued that since Russians and East Europeans had already survived an era of anti-religious persecution, they were now prepared to “help our brothers in the West” in their struggle against the “new totalitarianism” of “political correctness” and sexual revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the parallel Komov draws between the Bolsheviks’ persecution of believers in the Soviet Union and today’s phony “religious freedom” struggle of the American religious right is a clear-cut case of false equivalence. But prominent figures in the American religious right are buying this narrative, as the statements Graham made while in Moscow show. Ironically, as they imagine their religious freedom to be threatened by the “new totalitarianism” of latter-day “secularists,” whom they persist in equating with Communists, they are looking to a newly resurgent conservative Russia as an ostensibly morally superior alternative to hold up against an America supposedly in moral decline. In these times of newly tense US-Russian relations, which some are comparing to the Cold War, we can thank bad ecumenism for the curious emergence of right-wing fellow travelers. ✱

<sup>15</sup> Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Hemant Mehta, “Liberty University, Whose Founder Once Denounced Martin Luther King, Will Host Donald Trump Today,” *Friendly Atheist*, January 18, 2016. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2016/01/18/liberty-university-whose-founder-once-denounced-martin-luther-king-will-host-donald-trump-today/>. Accessed April 24 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Blue, “Franklin Graham.”

<sup>18</sup> I thank LGBTQ rights researcher L. Cole Parke, of Political Research Associates, for providing me with a recording of Komov’s presentation.



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