

Current Developments and Challenges to Theological Education in Russia

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Abstract

Theology as a study subject in higher education and as a scholarly discipline has been recognised in modern Russia for a period of less than thirty years. Secular universities as well as theological institutions of various Christian denominations are engaged in developing theological education for their respective purposes. This article seeks to present recent legal changes that significantly influence the development of theological education in Russia. At the same time the article seeks to highlight current challenges that Protestant (evangelical) theological institutions are facing in terms of state accredited programmes in theology and ministerial training. The article also presents some suggestions to overcome these challenges as well as offering ideas for further development.

Keywords

Theological education; Russia; Russian Orthodox Church (ROC); Theological Scholarly and Educational Association (TSEA); Russian Protestants; Protestant (evangelical) theological schools; Eurasian Accrediting Association (EAAA)

Introduction

As stated in the title, this article consists of two parts. The first part presents recent developments in theological education in Russia. It aims to make readers aware of the rather rapid and turbulent developments which have taken place over the past couple of years in Russia in the area of theological education, especially in the area of legal provisions for programmes in theology issued by the Russian Ministry of Education. This concerns the overall development of theological education within the framework of state and legal recognition of such education. It is important to be aware of what is going on in the wider

context because it has significant impact on the development of theological education among Russian Protestants.¹

The second part deals with the current state of theological education among Russian Protestants and the political, cultural, and internal challenges these groups are facing when developing theological education mainly for the purposes of training ministers and religious personnel. Despite their existence in Russia during the past thirty years, Protestant theological schools are still struggling with issues of having qualified faculty, with levels of enrollment, conducting research, and in keeping up with government regulations for their licensed programmes. However, some major developments are now taking place that should help foster theological education among Protestants in Russia.

Current Developments in Theological Education in Russia

Theological education is a young discipline within Russian academia. There was no possibility of studying theology at universities in Russia prior to 1917, when the only option for pursuing a theological education in the country was within the framework of clergy training within Orthodox educational institutions. The October Revolution in 1917 worsened the existing situation. During the time of the Soviet Union, theological education in Russia became almost nonexistent. Only after the Second World War, were Orthodox clergy allowed to build up theological education within their schools in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Odessa, while evangelicals in the Soviet Union had the opportunity to study the Bible and other subjects through the so-called ‘Correspondence Biblical Courses’ in Moscow, beginning in 1968.²

¹ The term ‘Russian Protestants’ refers to Christian denominations that are not part of the Orthodox or Catholic Christian traditions. Russian Protestants include all types of churches that belong to Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Presbyterian, and Methodist denominations as well as various Lutheran and Reformed churches.

² For a helpful overview of the history theological education in Russia among Orthodox as well as Protestants see Петр Пеннер, научите все народы... Миссия богословского образования, М.: Библия для всех, 1999, pp. 188–245 [Peter Penner, *Teach All Nations... Mission of Theological Education*]. See also Vladimir Fedorov, ‘Theological Education in the Russian Orthodox Church (in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus)’, in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, ed. by Dietrich Werner et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), pp. 514–524.

It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s that it became possible to speak of introducing theology into the context of the state educational system and of the organisation of private theological schools representing various Christian denominations and other religious confessions. Theology was recognised as an essential part of higher education in 1993 when the state educational standard for theology was approved. However, it was not until 17 February 2000 that ‘Theology’ as an educational discipline was introduced into the List of Disciplines of Higher Professional Education at the meeting of the Inter-ministerial Council on Education in Russia. Since that time, state and private universities (mostly Orthodox) have begun offering theology as an accredited study programme in Russia at bachelor’s level, and from 2011 at master’s level.³

Several programmes subsequently appeared at various state and private universities. However, finding qualified faculty to teach professional blocks of courses within theological programmes as well as providing students with relevant theological textbooks became a fundamental problem.⁴ When speaking about ‘Theology’ here, what is meant is the various theological courses united in several groups (Systematic Theology, Sacred Texts, Church History, Practical Theology, Theological Languages, Church and State Relations, and Ethics).

Educational institutions had two options for teaching professional disciplines to students pursuing theological studies. The first was to let their own full-time faculty members who had received scholarly degrees in philosophy, history, linguistics, and other social sciences teach theological courses although they had not been formally trained in theology. The second option was to invite specialists from the

³ New state standards in theology for bachelor’s and master’s programmes were approved in August 2020. See Кодификация РФ [Codification of Russian Federation] <<https://rulaws.ru/acts/Prikaz-Minobrnauki-Rossii-ot-25.08.2020-N-1110/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].

⁴ The State Educational Standard for Theology, as well as for other disciplines, usually consists of three clusters of disciplines: a foundational cluster which includes history, a foreign language, and a number of courses in humanities, such as philosophy, sociology, etc.; a natural sciences cluster (mathematics, information sciences, etc.); and a professional cluster which includes courses that pertain to the given programme.

Orthodox theological institutions who did have degrees in theology (Candidate of Theology and Doctor of Theology) from the Orthodox schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg to teach, even though those degrees were not recognised within the state educational system.

During the past fifteen years, two major issues with this second option have clearly emerged besides the fact that, according to state regulations, such adjunct faculty are not qualified to teach state accredited programmes. The first issue concerns the invitation of specialists from Orthodox seminaries whose faculty members greatly depend on their ecclesiastical authorities to decide whether they may teach at state institutions. Difficulty arises with this when faculty suddenly lose the favour of the authorities and are barred from teaching within such institutions. This issue is gradually receding as the ROC is becoming more involved in teaching theology at state universities.

The second issue is that invited faculty members from religious educational institutions are accustomed to different standards of education. They tend not to be familiar with the structural, methodological, and administrative provisions, norms, and regulations required by the state educational standards.

To combat the issue of a lack of qualified faculty with recognised degrees, it became necessary to raise the status of theology to the level of a scholarly discipline, and in 2015 theology was first recognised in Russia as an academic discipline. In May 2015, theology as a scientific discipline was approved by the High Attestation Commission.⁵ This recognition gave a green light to being able to defend a dissertation in theology as a Candidate of Science or Doctor of Science. In May of 2016, the High Attestation Commission approved the creation of a Dissertation Committee in Theology which could grant degrees in historical and philosophical sciences with specialisation in theology. In August 2017, the Russian Government issued a resolution that allowed twenty-three universities to award scholarly degrees independently from the High Attestation Commission as is the practice of most universities

⁵ This commission is responsible for granting degrees of Candidate of Science (PhD) and Doctor of Science in Russia. See the order of the High Attestation Commission that approves theology as a scholarly discipline and the possibility of defending dissertations in theology in Russia, <<https://phdru.com/admission/theology>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

in the world.⁶ For this new practice, a one-time dissertation committee consisting of specialists in the topic of the presented dissertation would be formed. In April of 2018, the deputy minister of education issued an order allowing the creation in the following month of the United Dissertation Committee, which would be able to grant degrees of Candidate and Doctor of Theology.

The first Candidate of Theology dissertation was defended in June of 2017,⁷ and the first Doctor of Theology (equivalent to German Habilitation) was defended in May 2019.⁸ Shortly afterwards, the Department of Biblical Studies of St. Petersburg State University awarded their first PhD dissertation in theology with the degree Candidate of Theology in July 2019.⁹ It should be noted that all these new defences at both the Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies (CMIPS) in Moscow (seven Candidates of Theology and two Doctors of Theology) and at St. Petersburg State University (Candidate of Theology) were made by ROC clergy, meaning that they can all now officially lecture within any accredited programme in theology at any state or private educational institution in Russia.

Parallel to these steps to qualify ROC scholars at the state level is another recent trend in developing theological education in Russia. In June 2017, the CMIPS, in cooperation with several leading Russian universities, organised the first all-Russia conference entitled ‘Theology

⁶ See the Russian government order enumerating the universities that can award degrees themselves, <<http://static.government.ru/media/files/JnFTLJA581O4J7RuZuruWKeKZAYWC1V7.pdf>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

⁷ Pavel Khondzinskii, with the dissertation ‘Разрешение проблем русского богословия XVIII века в синтезе святителя Филарета, митрополита Московского’ [Resolution of Problems of Russian Theology in the 18th Century in Synthesis of Moscow Metropolitan Filaret], <<http://www.doctorantura.ru/ru/materials-dissovet/applicants/2379>> [accessed 20 February 2020]. This dissertation and its defence aroused much debate about its quality and the legitimacy of granting an accredited degree. Source: <<https://phdru.com/sciproblems/hodzinsky/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].

⁸ Oleg Davydenkov with the dissertation ‘Христологическая система умеренного монофизитства и ее место в истории византийской богословской мысли’ [Christological System of Moderate Monophysitism and Its Place in the History of Byzantine Theological Thought], <<http://www.doctorantura.ru/nauka/dissertations/theology/373-soiskateli/3821-davydenkov>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁹ Alexander Andreev with the dissertation ‘Книжная справа Ирмология в Москве в XVII веке’ [The Reform of the Hirmologion in Moscow in the 17th Century], <<https://disser.spbu.ru/zashchita-uchenoj-stepeni-spbgu/198-andreev-aleksandr.html>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

in Education in the area of Humanities’, held in Moscow. As the outcome of this, the presidents of nine universities decided to found the Theological Scholarly and Educational Association (TSEA)¹⁰ with the goal of uniting universities which offer state accredited programmes in theology, or that have departments which offer theological courses to students of a respected university without having an accredited programme in theology because that does not fit with the specialisation of the university (as is the case with the National Nuclear Research University, for example).¹¹

The TSEA was founded in February 2018 and received a blessing from the Patriarch of the ROC. This association is open to participation by educational institutions, the ROC educational institutions, and religious schools that belong to the culture-forming religions in the country that are part of the Interreligious Council of Russia (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism).

A few words should be said here about the CMIPS, because it became the driving force behind all processes for the development of theological education in Russia, and is the centre for planning scholarly research and the training of scholars in the framework of TSEA.¹² This ROC educational institution began the process of analysing the experience of theological departments at state and private institutions, promoting exchanges of that experience, and detecting effective models of collaboration between educational institutions, the state offices of the regulation of education, and religious structures in various regions. Its main goal is the creation of an all-Russia model of theological education on the basis of life tasks and the global challenges our country, and human civilisation in general, is facing today.

¹⁰ See the TSEA website at <<http://www.nota-theology.ru>>, which offers information about recent trends and developments in state theological education in Russia between 2018 and 2020 [last accessed 19 March 2021].

¹¹ See the Department of Theology website of the National Nuclear Research University at <<https://theology.mephi.ru>> [last accessed 19 March 2021].

¹² See the website of Cyril and Methodius Institute for Postgraduate Studies at <<http://www.doctorantura.ru>> [last accessed 19 March 2021].

In May 2018, TSEA organised a seminar entitled ‘Lines of Development of Theology in Education’. The seminar’s final resolution makes the following statements:¹³

1. We should accept as our primary task the necessity of defining the content of the subject matter of Theology as a scholarly discipline. Then we should recommend the strategy for the development of theological education in Russia and a road map for implementing that strategy with the active participation of the scholarly and educational community from traditional religions and state authorities. A number of common problems can and should be resolved with active participation of the Interreligious Council of Russia, Federal Educational Department in Theology, and Theological Scholarly and Educational Association (TSEA).
2. We should support the initiative of developing TSEA as a center of integration of progressive scholarly-educational materials through active involvement of secular and religious educational institutions of higher education.
3. We should accept the importance of scholarly and practical seminars and recommend holding them regularly under the auspices of TSEA. Those seminars will foster the raising of competencies of the administrative staff in organizing the study process and accelerate the adoption of state licensing and accreditation regulations by religious educational institutions that will allow them to enter the secular educational sphere and will also help to create a body of qualified experts within the professional theological community.
4. We should recognize the special importance of developing the system of further professional education in religious educational institutions for establishing the scholarly branch of Theology, and for development of a system of theological education in general. Thus, it will be necessary to introduce some changes into the Federal Law on Education and the Federal Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations.
5. We should initiate a discussion of the ways for improving the juridical regulation in the area of theological education on the level of state legislation as well as internal ROC regulations.

Such resolutions include understanding theology as a tool for creative interaction between religious traditions, preserving the cultural memory of the peoples of our country, and using the moral and ideological resources of Russia’s traditional religions in education, science, social life, politics, law, and international relations. It seems this resolution

¹³ The text of these resolutions in Russian can be read on the TSEA website, <<http://nota-theology.ru/content/public/upload/files/rezolyuciya.pdf>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

offers an ambitious plan for developing theology in the state educational system which is initiated and lead by the ROC.

The creation of TSEA is justified by the fact that theology, when entering a secular educational environment, is able to provide effective support to the Russian government in addressing key strategic goals, including the education of responsible citizens, the growth of social justice and social solidarity in the country, and thus ensuring the sustainable and safe development of the country in a multicultural and multinational space.

Therefore, TSEA's agenda is straightforward. It intends to organise clusters of universities with a specific profile (medical, military, technical). These clusters will develop an exemplary model of theological departments in universities where theology will be taught to all students of the respective university.¹⁴ Another goal is to create groups of universities that will tackle specific problems using theological instruction, for example, theology and spiritual and moral security among the youth. It reflects the importance of this topic in the context of religious security in Russia.

Another area that needs to be noted here concerns research and the publishing of textbooks for theological education. The TSEA promotes eight theological journals on its website.¹⁵ A random browsing through the contents of the first three issues of the new journal *Questions of Theology* reveal that there are very few articles which can be attributed to the subject matter of theology. The articles appear more accurately attributed to the area of philosophy, history of the Orthodox Church, or simply religious studies. The titles of the published articles reveal that there are relatively few scholars presently conducting research in the areas pertinent to theology as is the practice in other parts of the world. These areas (biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, and so on)

¹⁴ A good example that attracted media attention is the creation of the Chair of Theology at the National Nuclear Research University, where students were obliged to attend theological lectures taught by Orthodox priests. See, Livejournal <<https://volodn.livejournal.com/189083.html>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

¹⁵ See, Научно-образовательная теологическая ассоциация [Theological Scholarly and Educational Association] <<http://nota-theology.ru/publications/magazines>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

continue to remain neglected in the newly developing theological studies within Russian academia. It is to be hoped that the number of theological journals so far available will find enough scholars who produce and publish quality research pertinent to theological studies comparable to that carried out in Europe and North America.

For the successful implementation of theological curricula, students should have access to quality theological literature. In 2015, the CMPIS launched an ambitious programme of writing and publishing sixty theological textbooks at the bachelor's level for the Orthodox seminaries in Russia, with the aim that those works would soon become standard textbooks for all programmes in theology taught at state and private universities. A significant number of Orthodox and secular scholars are involved in this programme, and over twenty textbooks have so far been published.¹⁶ Through the involvement of TSEA, theological departments of state and private secular universities have now joined this endeavour, meaning that all the textbooks created in this series originally intended for the ROC will most likely be used by any educational institution that offers programmes in theology.

The most recent development took place in March 2019 when the High Attestation Commission issued a new version of the document that recognises theology as a scholarly discipline.¹⁷ In this new version, theology is divided into three kinds: Orthodox, Islamic, and Jewish. This probably means that the only way to receive a scholarly degree of Candidate or Doctor of Theology will be by being an adherent of one of these three religions. Those who belong to other religious confessions will probably have no other option than to defend their dissertation in other branches of the humanities, such as history, linguistics, philosophy, or religious studies which have nothing to do with religious confessions.

¹⁶ See the website of the recently founded publishing house Poznaniye <<http://www.poznaniye.ru>> that actively publishes any quality research in theology conducted in Russia [last accessed 30 October 2020].

¹⁷ The new version of this document, called in Russian 'Passport of a scientific discipline', which describes the areas of research in which an individual can be awarded a scholarly degree of Candidate or Doctor of science in Russia, can be read at the website of the High Attestation Commission at <<https://vak.minobrnauki.gov.ru>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

What does this all mean for theological education in Russia in general, and for the development of Protestant theological education in particular? The ROC is now establishing its leading role and will define the agenda for the development of the subject matter for theological studies, which will most likely be dogmatic and devoted to the study of Orthodox and Patristic traditions.

The secular educational system does not really know what to do with theology. Most programmes are oriented toward training specialists in the area of church-state relations, and do not differ much from the subject matters of philosophy and religious studies.¹⁸ Theological courses are taught by the Orthodox priests who have received state accredited degrees. The main goal is for the graduates from those programmes (who clearly will be representatives of the Orthodox clergy) to enter public schools to teach religion.

In addition, there is a very rapid tendency for creating Departments of Theology at state universities which mostly educate students in exact or natural sciences rather than in the humanities. Optional courses in theology are taught mostly by Orthodox clergy. This situation can be compared with that of the Soviet Union when all students at higher educational institutions were supposed to study scientific Communism, regardless of which programme they were following (be that physics, art, or even metallurgy).¹⁹ However, despite the desire to introduce theology into secular universities as a common extracurricular subject for students, it is unlikely that this initiative will find much response among students who are overburdened with their own studies and would not be interested in courses that mostly deal with

¹⁸ See the list of bachelor's theses defended in the theological department of the Ural State Mining University, <http://edu.ursmu.ru/upload/doc/2019/10/05/kaf._tg.pdf> [accessed 15 January 2020].

¹⁹ See the article, Марина Лемуткина [Marina Lemutkina], 'Назад в светлое будущее: в вузах откроются кафедры теологии' [Back to a Brighter Future. Departments of Theology will be established in State Universities] (14 June 2016) *MK.RU* <<https://www.mk.ru/social/2017/06/14/nazad-v-svetloe-budushhee-v-vuzakh-otkroyutsya-kafedry-teologii.html>> [accessed 30 October 2020]. A desire to use Orthodox Theology as a means to impart some kind of basic ideological foundation to university students is obvious due to the current absence of overall ideology in Russia.

history and religion.²⁰ For example, the oldest Department of Theology, which was established at the Russian University of Transport in 2001, was dissolved in August 2020.²¹

However, the ROC's attempts to establish Departments of Theology wherever possible (it mostly happens at technical universities) will probably fail because it is based on private initiatives of the schools' administration and not on any developed strategy from the Ministry of Education. State universities will not spend budget money to support activities by theological departments. It seems that Russian academia does not really know what to do with theology, which should develop in vibrant dialogue with related subjects in the humanities.²² What perspectives for further development might the Departments of Theology in the Universities of Transport or Mining have?²³

Nevertheless, if theology as a subject matter continues to be promoted at state universities, the changes described above in the development of theological education in Russia have a number of implications for Russian Protestants. If there is any Protestant theological institution willing to accredit its theology programmes, it will probably have to go through TSEA, which is under considerable Orthodox influence.²⁴ That means that the state accrediting agency in Russia will follow the TSEA recommendations in this matter. Another

²⁰ See the list of courses offered by Department of Theology at the National Nuclear Research University in Moscow, <<http://theology.mephi.ru/process/courses>> [accessed 15 October 2020].

²¹ Source: University of Transport < <https://www.miit.ru/depts/181> > [accessed 20 October 2020].

²² The debate on the emergence of theology as a part of national university training in Russia is still ongoing. See Бокова О.А., Кондрашов В.Д. Дискуссия о теологии в российской высшей школе // Вестник ЛГУ им. А.С. Пушкина, 4, (2015): 194–201 [Olga Vokova and Dmitry Kondrashov, 'Discussion about Theology in Russian Higher Education'] <<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/diskussiya-o-teologii-v-rossiyskoy-vysshey-shkole>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

²³ There are two volumes of the recently established yearly journal Теология и образование [*Theology and Education*] for 2018 and 2019 which contain over a hundred articles on various aspects tackling the development of state accredited programs in theology in state and private (Orthodox and Islamic) institutions. See <<https://elibrary.ru/contents.asp?id=40889476>> [accessed 3 November 2020].

²⁴ The only protestant seminary in Russia that has accredited its programme in theology is Zaokskii University of Seventh Day Christian Adventists. See <<https://zda.zau.ru>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

possible consequence may lead to private (Evangelical) theological schools (seminaries) losing their licences (through active checks by the state inspection on the supervision of education) which allow them to train clergy (workers) by awarding them bachelor's and master's diplomas.²⁵ Evangelicals will probably be driven into the area of additional training, which is not considered a higher education.

Theological Education among Russian Protestants

After presenting a short history and state of affairs in the development of theological education among Russian Protestants, I will highlight some challenges that Protestant (evangelical) theological schools are facing. Protestant theological educational institutions were founded by missionary denominations (Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Adventists, Baptists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals) in the 1990s. The main goal in founding such institutions was to train leaders for churches in their respective denominations. The teaching staff in these schools was represented by foreign professors, but in the last ten to fifteen years they have mostly been replaced by indigenous faculty who hold a master's or PhD degree from those schools or from institutions abroad.

Despite being in existence for only twenty to thirty years, Protestant theological schools have been able to implement significant changes and achieve good results in training church members for ministry. However, when looking at those schools using the criteria of state accredited theological education at universities, we can see only a low level of theological reflection. Sometimes, there is a lack of indigenous qualified faculty, limited research and few scholarly conferences, as well as meagre library resources.²⁶ Cooperation and partnership between schools, hindered for many years by mistrust and

²⁵ There is still a discussion as to whether religious institutions of higher education of any denomination or religious confession are allowed to award bachelor and master's degrees to their graduates on the basis of their current licences, which allow the training of clergy and religious personnel.

²⁶ These aspects were identified by Peter Penner back in 2005 in his chapter 'Case study EEST/CEETE', in *Theological Education as Mission*, ed. by Peter F. Penner (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2005), pp. 247–269 (p. 264). It seems that 20 or 30 years are just not enough to compensate for 70 years of the total absence of development in the area of theological education in Russia.

unresolved issues of the past, is now being developed through various initiatives.²⁷

One of the difficulties is that church unions have not always taken ownership of educational institutions. In their opinion, it is very good to have educated ministers, but they are not truly ready or have the resources to invest in theological education. Previously, every church tried to have its own Bible Institute. The knowledge of existing state regulations for running an educational institution brought an understanding that accredited education, even at a college level, is not something that churches or church unions are capable of organising and supporting.

Mikhail Nevolin gives two reasons to explain the current state of affairs in theological education among Russian Protestants:

The first reason is unclear policy in some denominations that do not have certain expectations of their ministers to have theological education. The second one is an inability of most churches in Russia to support a full-time paid pastor. This means that in addition to theological education, a person should receive secular education to be able to support himself and his family.²⁸

As a result of this there are fewer young people who are interested in entering seminaries in order to pursue a ministerial career. Therefore, most schools have had to close their residential programmes.²⁹ The alternative to the residential programme became the growth of all kinds of non-residential, modular programmes offered by seminaries. To follow these, students attend the seminary several times a year for intensive courses. The quality of this educational approach significantly differs from that achieved through the full-time residential training.

²⁷ Peter Penner and Anne-Marie Kool, 'Theological Education in Eastern and Central Europe', in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, ed. by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang and Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), pp. 541–544.

²⁸ Михаил Неволин, Христианское образование на распутье // Христианский мегаполис (2016) [Mikhail Nevolin, 'Christian Education at a Crossroads', *Christian Megapolis*] <<http://www.christianmegapolis.com/христианское-образование-на-распутье/>> [accessed 16 January 2020].

²⁹ There are a few schools that still offer a full-time residential programme in theology. St. Petersburg Christian University and Zaokskii Adventist University are among those. However, even these institutions are wondering whether they should continue the programme as the total number of students amounts to less than a dozen.

The advantage of the part-time approach is that the student body is represented by church ministers and church members who are already involved in some kind of ministry and are highly motivated in gaining knowledge and skills. In addition, these students remain in their cities and their churches, whereas the majority of graduates from residential programmes in Moscow and St. Petersburg never return to their home churches and find secular jobs in these cities. Though this new modular system has solved the problem of logistics and students entering theological schools to pursue education, such an approach to education damages the level of graduates and hinders the prospects for future theological development in the domain of evangelicals as such.

Zaokskii Adventist University is the only Protestant institute in Russia that has a state accredited programme in theology. However, the Adventists are a minority among the Protestant denominations, and they rarely draw students from other denominations. If a seminary can offer state accredited diplomas, it may attract more students, but the dim prospects of getting a decently paid job in a local church discourage young people from studying at theological schools. The graduates of theological schools in many cases do not pursue further study, nor engage in dialogue with other religious confessions or any kind of representatives on the side of secular human sciences. At its core, studying at theological schools does not seem to change students; in most cases, they receive degrees but do not undergo a deep scholarly transformation.

To summarise the current state of affairs in theological education among the Russian evangelicals, it is appropriate to cite Mark Elliott's conclusion in his 2007 article 'Contemporary Crisis of Protestant Theological Education in Countries of the Former Soviet Union' which is still mostly relevant today:

Full-time Protestant seminaries have a very uncertain future due to their large number [this has changed during the past 10 years], the declining growth-rate of churches, the weak links between theological schools and churches, the lack of strict criteria for selecting applicants, the weakness of the curriculum, which does not provide enough practical skills, the existing distrust of churches, and the lack of financial involvement of churches in the management of seminaries. Finally, the situation of schools is complicated by the fact that fewer potential students and their parents see reasons to invest

years of study in something that is unlikely to ultimately lead to the opportunity to earn a decent living. More and more often, those who think about entering a seminary ask themselves the question: ‘Why would I spend three or five years of my life studying in order to ultimately remain as poor?’³⁰

We now proceed to presenting some recent challenges and developments facing Protestant theological schools. Over the past couple of years (2018–2020), the State Inspection on Control of Education has begun planned checks of theological schools in the area of their compliance with the Federal Law on Education and State Licence Regulations. These checks were part of a general trend to decrease the excessive number of universities in Russia.³¹ It is necessary to note that theological schools have never undergone such checks and most of them were not ready to pass the inspection’s scrutiny.³² In most cases, the inspection looked at the schools’ compliance with the formal legal requirements. The schools were not used to fulfilling these requirements because of their sheer number and cost. As a result, some of the schools lost their licences and are now obliged to move into the area of additional education.³³

Additional education, however, can only be taught to those who already have college or university diplomas. Secondary school graduates

³⁰ Mark Elliott, ‘Contemporary Crisis of Protestant Theological Education in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union’, *Protestant Newspaper* (September 2013) <<http://www.gazetaprotestant.ru/2013/09/sovremennyj-krizis-protestantskogo-bogoslovskogo-obrazovaniya-v-stranax-byvshego-sssr/>> [accessed 21 January 2020]. For more on the history of Protestant theological education in Russia during the past 30 years see a collected volume of articles by Mark R. Elliott, *The Arduous Path of Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education* (Wilmore, Kentucky: First Fruits Press, 2020).

³¹ During the past 20 years the number of higher educational institutions in Russia rose to close to 3000 compared with the 600 there had been in the whole of the USSR. In 2020 the number of universities in Russia is now around 800.

³² For a detailed presentation and interpretation of the checks undergone by some schools see Mark R. Elliott, ‘Increasing State restrictions on Russian Protestant Seminaries’, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 40, no. 4 (2020), article 2 <<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss4/2>> [accessed 2 November 2020].

³³ Two evangelical seminaries have lost their licences: The Eurasian Theological Seminary of Christian Evangelical Faith (Pentecostal) in 2018, and The Moscow Theological Seminary of Evangelical Christian Baptists in February 2020. In December 2019, The Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church was denied permission to accept new students and in April 2020 its educational licence was withdrawn. See, ‘Rosobrnadzor halted the licenses of Islamic Institute and Lutheran Seminary’, *Interfax Education* (9 April 2020) <<https://academia.interfax.ru/ru/news/articles/4454/>> [accessed 22 October 2020].

cannot enter such study programmes because the level of award is merely at certificate level, equivalent to a type of course programme. Those schools which were able to keep their licences, usually through protracted court litigations with the State Inspection on Control of Education, did learn a good lesson however. They now understand the importance of strictly following regulations and the necessity of working together in battling the common ‘foe’.

Another external challenge is the issue of degree recognition of faculty working in those schools. The most promising graduates from theological schools, after gaining bachelor’s diplomas (not recognised in Russia), were sent to continue their studies at the master’s and PhD level in western seminaries, to find on their return to Russia that these degrees were not recognised. The process of nostrification (official degree recognition) is highly complicated, almost impossible, because the previous education from the Protestant seminaries in Russia cannot be accredited.³⁴

The internal challenges to Protestant theological education in Russia seem to remain the same as in previous years. Church unions who serve as founding bodies of theological schools lack clear vision for the development of theological education besides the necessity to train pastors. Since most of the leadership of Protestant denominations were not able to get theological education themselves, or were usually only educated formally for the sake of having a diploma, they cannot see theological education beyond the scope of meeting the immediate needs of having more leaders, or they are preoccupied with other burning church issues.

Theological education in Russian Protestant churches where pastors usually belong to the older generation (though the situation is gradually changing) is not in high demand. Historically, believers were

³⁴ The situation is quite different in the Ukraine where, since 2016, hundreds of graduates from the non-accredited theological schools were able to pursue the nostrification procedure and have their diplomas recognised by the Ukrainian government. See, for example, ‘The First Certificates of State Recognition of Educational Diplomas of Religious Schools were issued in Ukraine’, *Orthodox Life* (21 December 2016) <<https://pravlife.org/ru/content/v-ukraine-vydany-pervye-svidetelstva-o-gosudarstvennom-priznanii-dokumentov-duhovnyh-vuzov>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

not able to get an education during Soviet times. Therefore, the majority of ministers in evangelical churches have no theological education (except for the diploma from a technical school which gives a work specialty), and they are not seeking it because they do not see the need for and value in it. They communicate the same approach to their church members, who do not understand why theological education is necessary.

This affects the level of culture in the evangelical churches in Russia. Theological education which strives to teach students the capacity for critical thinking and reflection may represent a challenge to church traditions, as churches are mostly interested in upholding and passing on the existing traditions without much theological reflection and deep analysis of church practices. Educated church members can represent a threat to that status quo. Thus, there is a greater separation between churches and theological schools.

To bridge the existing gap between seminaries and churches the schools need to be more proactive in offering practical courses to local churches and at the same time conduct sound research in the area of practical theology, and implement its results into church practices.³⁵ Analysing contemporary church life and ministry and offering specific advice that would foster church ministry might be highly appreciated.

Another way to foster Protestant theological education would be to establish specific and working collaboration between theological schools. Until 2020 there was no effective collaboration, cooperation or exchange in education and research among the Protestant theological schools in Russia. During the past twenty years several evangelical seminaries in Russia did participate in projects carried out by the Eurasian Accrediting Association (EAAA), however this participation was mostly in the interest of the individual development of each school and the receiving of resources from and through EAAA rather than collaboration on mutually beneficial projects. Nevertheless, during the past several years thanks to EAAA projects, the leadership and faculties

³⁵ For example, St. Petersburg Christian University offers practical seminars to local churches which can be taught both at the university and in churches.

of Russian evangelical seminaries have been able to establish good relationships with each other.

The situation changed in 2020 when several evangelical schools expressed a desire to create an Association for the Development of Evangelical Education to facilitate joining forces in various areas of theological education where each school does not have sufficient resources to work effectively by itself. These areas comprise legal requirements, collective representation before the state modernisation of education, methodological work, research and others areas. This association is now going through official registration.

Another collaborative effort was initiated by the Zaokskii Adventist University — as noted above, the only Protestant school in Russia with a state accredited programme in theology. They have been working on creating and accrediting their master's programme in theology in collaboration with St. Petersburg State University;³⁶ however on 25 August 2020 the Ministry of Education approved a new state standard for theology at master's level, according to which the educational institution will have to set a profile for its taught programme that corresponds to the specific confession of one of three religious traditions (Christian, Islamic, Jewish).³⁷ This means that theology in Russia has become *de jure* confessional. Whereas state universities offer programmes in Orthodox or Islamic theology with specialisation in state-confessional relations, Protestant theological schools will now, in close collaboration, have to develop their own Protestant Theology programme and have it recognised at a state level. Recognition might prove difficult due to the fact that there is no legal notion of Protestantism in Russia. There are two unions of Lutheran churches in Russia as direct heirs to classical Protestantism, but even they do not have the word 'Protestant' in their official name.

Another area that needs mutual collaboration among Protestant theological schools is that of academic conferences and research

³⁶ A closer association with renowned state universities in Russia was suggested by Peter Penner, 'Guidelines for the Mission of Theological Education in the FSU', in *Theological Education as Mission*, ed. by Peter F. Penner (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2005), pp. 255–268 (p. 360).

³⁷ See footnote 3.

conducted by faculty members.³⁸ Research is costly, and each school separately is not able to fund quality research and other activities connected with it (e.g. scholarly publications). The other factor that explains why evangelical schools do not engage effectively in theological research is that Protestant theological schools navigate between the church and academia. The main purpose of the seminary is to train students for ministry; thus the faculty members are expected to teach a lot of practical subjects. The churches await graduates who can engage well in the practical ministry of preaching, counselling, teaching and administrating churches. Theory is viewed as something far removed from real life. There are few evangelical Christians who would like to pursue serious theological studies. There is, with rare exception, no research conducted, scholarly conferences are held sporadically, and there are few publications by evangelical scholars. As a result, there is little presence of Russian Protestant scholars in the wider research circles and in the public space in general.

Conclusion

Within our brief discussion of the situation, this article presented the extremely rapid development and changes that are taking place in theological education in Russia in general, and among Russian Protestants in particular. These changes can be explained by the overall political, cultural, and religious climate and developments in Russia. During the past thirty years of religious freedom, the ROC (as the major religious confession in Russia with its thousand-year history and tradition) has rebuilt its own foundation after the totalitarian and destructive reign of Communism in the matters of faith and religion.

Now, having firmly established its own structure, the ROC is entering into the public sphere, including education. It seems that theology, recognised in Russia as an educational and academic discipline, can serve as an appropriate tool to present and spread its ideas

³⁸ St. Petersburg Christian University holds a yearly theological conference in which Russian and western scholars from both state and denominational institutions participate regularly. Every year the Moscow Theological Seminary offers a conference for baptistic schools of different kinds.

and agendas among the intellectual circles in the country,³⁹ thus accounting for the current changes observed in the sphere of the state system of theological education. However, there are some doubts whether theological studies can be significantly developed to the level at which they are conducted in the West.

As far as theological education among Russian Protestants is concerned, it appears that after thirty years it is coming to a new stage of its development. Various external, as well as internal, challenges and general developments in state theological education will definitely cause evangelicals to reflect, and rethink their position, and introduce major changes in the way they run their seminaries and pursue their goals in accrediting programmes. We observe now a greater collaboration and sharing of resources in order to strengthen the mission of educating and training Christians for the work of ministry. There are hopes that Russian Protestants will succeed in gaining the recognition of Protestant Theology in Russia and entering the public space through presenting sound scholarship and quality research, thus making the voice of Russian Protestants better heard in this country.

³⁹ There are some sceptical views with regard to the development of Orthodox theology in Russia. Binding and interweaving with the state power structures brings certain disadvantages. Through that power the Orthodox Church does attract young students, but that attraction may primarily be to do with power and money rather than an interest in theological and pastoral vocations. The same is happening with many other state churches in Europe.