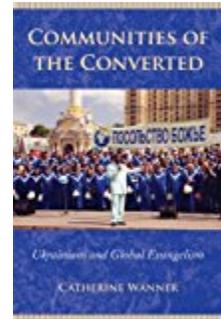


Catherine Wanner. *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. viii + 305 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4592-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7402-6.

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Evangelical Christianity and the Transformation of Postsocialist Society

The subject of Catherine Wanner's 2007 book is the establishment and growth of evangelism in Ukraine, where Western evangelical practices and symbols are not adopted "as is," but are reinterpreted and synthesized with local culture and values. Elaborating on her previous articles in *Religion, State, and Society* (2003) and *Slavic Review* (2004), Wanner seeks to explain the exponential growth of Baptist, Pentecostal, and charismatic Christian communities in this region, seemingly counter to Orthodox and Catholic traditions and the atheism advocated by the Soviet regime. According to Wanner, the answer lies in the core tenets of evangelism: "Evangelical practices have proven particularly adept at providing a means of remaking the self and reconstituting a sense of community on multiple levels, as individuals and as members of a national and global community of believers" (pp. 255-256). Rather than dwelling on the gap between the promises and the realities of Western capitalism, evangelical Christianity mitigates the uncertainties of postsocialist life by focusing on the spiritual transformation of the individual and the society.

The revival of religious practice after the end of the Soviet Union is not as surprising as one might think. Rather than eliminating the sacred, "[s]acralization occurred ... in many nonreligious spheres and served ... to keep alive religious sensibilities and dispositions ... [which] paved the way for a resurgence of organized religion once it became politically feasible" (pp. 8-9). Drawing from these persisting religious inclinations, global

evangelism brought "the hope that membership in a transnational community would help navigate the myriad forms of dislocation introduced after the collapse of the USSR" (p. 13). Believers are drawn to Baptist, Pentecostal, and charismatic churches due to their underlying set of moral principles and the expectation of individual commitment to these principles and the religious community. Morality, in other words, helps people transcend their local problems of scarcity, religious intolerance, and economic hardship; in addition, interactions with the local community are essential to the goal of complete social transformation based on moral principles.

The richly detailed historical sections begin in 1860s Ukraine. Wanner depicts a long-lasting, global evangelical tradition which survived multiple periods of social transformation marked by religious persecution and political repression, and resulted in self-exile and emigration. The roots of evangelism in Ukraine lie in the social upheavals that came with the end of serfdom. When the Soviets came to rule, they prohibited religious practice of all kinds. Despite their efforts at eradicating belief, the "failed promises, brutality, and violence ... kept existential yearnings and spiritual searches alive" (p. 54). As a result, many religious communities went underground. During World War II, they gained strength as earlier policies were overturned under German occupation, and western regions that had long religious traditions were incorporated into the USSR. Religious persecution returned in the 1950s, as the Soviet leadership con-

tinued its aim to replace spiritual belief with scientific fact. However, the release of political prisoners, many of whom were religious leaders, dispersed and strengthened religious communities. The state then required the registration of churches, believing this to be a way of promoting Soviet ideals over those of religious belief. Evangelical practices, however, questioned this view of a diametric relationship between religion and state. With their “strict obedience to God, respect for authority, and moral self-mastery ... evangelicals indirectly endorsed state authorities and validated socialist morality” (p. 83).

Wanner goes on to describe Ukrainian evangelical churches in Philadelphia and outside of Kyiv, presenting both their historical developments and more ethnographic accounts from clergy and church members. Emigration to the United States did not occur at a significant level until 1989, due to restrictions by both the USSR and the United States. However, when evangelicals emigrated, they sought to permanently transport their entire community to the new land. At the same time, evangelical missionaries from the west traveled to the former Soviet regions, building new churches and reviving old ones. Religion and religious identity became visibly, and simultaneously, local and transnational.

As the churches in Ukraine take some elements of American Baptist (or other Protestant) church practices and adapt or reject them locally, the Ukrainian American churches attempt to incorporate customs and traditions familiar to their diaspora congregations. As Wanner shows with the Russian-language Slavic Baptist Church and the Ukrainian-language Baptist Church, both of Philadelphia, church leaders synthesize global religious practices with local community traditions. The Slavic Baptist Church, for example, attempts to assimilate to U.S. culture by allowing English, loosening definitions of appropriate service clothing and ornamentation, and aligning itself with the American Baptist Church union. At the same time, it uses the Russian language and ethnic category to unite the multilingual and multiethnic congregation, and purposely chooses locations in predominantly Russian neighborhoods. In these ways, the Slavic Baptist Church tries to mediate itself as a Ukrainian church that walks the line between retaining tradition for the older generations, and Americanizing practices in order to become more relevant for the younger members.

Wanner moves away from discussing the development and transformation of evangelical congregations and towards an examination of those who convert to evangelical Christianity. Using the Embassy of God in

Kyiv, the largest Pentecostal church in Europe, as a case study, Wanner illustrates the role of conversion in melding the local and the transnational. The Embassy of God was founded by a Nigerian missionary, Sunday Adelaja, and, as a revitalization movement, the church “aim[s] to stem a sense of disintegration and demise of the familiar by revitalizing certain cultural elements to cope with change” (p. 244). Evangelism’s emphasis on a moral order based on the transformation of the individual and the society is appealing as it draws upon and extends converts’ deep-seated cultural value of survival through shared hardship.

Wanner illustrates how conversion involves both the will of missionaries to convert others and the desire of the missionized to transform themselves and belong to a religious community, both of which can be achieved through conversion. The core of Adelaja’s congregation, for instance, are former alcoholics and drug users, whose problems are often linked to the anxieties and uncertainties that arose with the end of socialism. Without the social support networks that formerly existed, many worshipers at the Embassy of God trace their conversion to a personal experience of the divine. Conversion is not a singular act that occurs through specific events and experiences, but is ongoing, remade, and relived every time converts tell their story to others in the process of evangelizing. As converts to proselytize, they engage with global evangelical practices as well as the concerns of their local community. “[A]lthough the Embassy of God draws on doctrinal elements of Pentecostalism that are widely practiced in the West, in Africa, and elsewhere, it is a distinctly Ukrainian church constituting a local response to immediate postsocialist circumstances” (p. 245). In a clear and precise way, Wanner highlights the links between the need of religious converts to be accepted by a community, the social and personal ruptures that led them to seek a spiritual conversion, and the solutions they find in evangelical belief in the reform of the individual and the society.

As a professor of history and anthropology, it is not surprising that Wanner attempts to meld historical accounts of evangelical communities and ethnographic observations and interviews with church leaders, members of their congregations, and recent converts. While both approaches are valuable in understanding the religious movement, at times, the contextualization of evangelicalism is a bit too particular, muddling her larger claim concerning the continuity of religious belief despite changing political systems, migration, various forms of persecution and tolerance, and schisms within the religious

communities.

Wanner's examination of the connections between evangelical communities in Ukraine, the United States, and other countries, however, is most enlightening. Further discussion of the current perceptions of evangelism, held by the evangelical communities and those outside of these communities, would help illustrate to what extent

these churches are able to fulfill their goal of morality-based social reform. As neither is often examined in light of the other, *Communities of the Converted* provides a much-needed voice in debates involving global evangelism and postsocialism. An examination of the alternative moralities available in times of social instability can further illuminate the role of organized religion in past and contemporary societies.

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