

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN UKRAINE:  
A LIMITED STUDY OF SEMINARY STUDENTS IN KIEV

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding a person's spiritual formation is a life-long study. But I believe that understanding spiritual formation cross-culturally is an even more difficult task. One of the simplest definitions of spiritual formation is "The grace-driven developmental process in which the soul grows in conformity to the image of Christ" (Boa 2001). This process will look differently for every person.

I have been called by God to help train the first generation of youth pastors in an independent Ukraine. I was in full-time youth ministry for 15 years in the States. I and my family moved to Kiev in the summer of 2002. One year later, I became the director of the new National Center for Youth Ministry at Kiev Theological Seminary (KTS). I currently have 18 youth ministry students studying in a four-year Bachelor's of Theology Degree in Youth Ministry.

My personal spiritual development has gone through major changes since we moved to Kiev three years ago. My walk with God was based on the English language in the States. I could get feeding from my personal devotions, Christian radio, sermons, books from the Christian bookstore, and fellowship with other believers who spoke the same language. Most of that was taken away from me when we moved to Ukraine. And God chose to use trials for my own spiritual formation

during the past few years. I am still learning on how to develop spiritual disciplines in this context. We plan on staying here long term. My context is not every person living in Ukraine, but those Christians who desire to be trained to be a youth pastor. Thus, I have decided to limit this paper to a study of my context – youth ministry seminary students.

I have noticed that my perception of spiritual formation is not the same as the students I am teaching. There are many similarities because we have similar doctrinal beliefs, but there are also some subtle differences. These differences can get lost if I make the assumption that we are all formed spiritually in the same way. Since Russian is such a difficult language, I am still learning to speak with my students on a heart level. This compounds the problem of understanding the heart beliefs of my students. I have had 7 of my students in class and in my home regularly for the past two years, and we are just now beginning to form relationships at a heart level. To learn more from them, I took the time questioning each of my students on their beliefs about spiritual formation.

My Christian heritage is much different from the Christian heritage of the students studying for ministry at a Ukrainian seminary. Mark Yaconelli said, “Many of us grew up within a Christian culture that preached a personal relationship with Jesus, yet focused on beliefs (doctrinal correctness and defending one's faith), morality (sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll) and emotionality (praise music and charismatic speakers) with little or no space given for actually experiencing the reality of our relationship with Christ” (2004:par. 10). This describes my spiritual formation, but

most of my seminary students did not grow up in the church. And their church culture is much different than the American evangelical culture.

Pastor and author Keith Beasley-Topliffe wrote, "Every generation must discover for itself that experience of God and a living relationship with God are more important in our lives than knowledge about God" (2003). I specifically questioned this current generation of new ministers to see if I could see what their thoughts are about spiritual formation. Their thoughts have been affected by a traditional Ukrainian Baptist Church experience and an emerging youth culture which seems counter to the church culture. Some of the students have also been influenced by the prevailing religion of the country, Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Another influence may have also been the former atheism under the USSR and the new materialism which is currently prevalent.

## INTERVIEWS

The following answers to interview questions will help us understand the thoughts and feelings of current Ukrainian seminary students in regards to spiritual formation.

### How Do You Hear The Voice Of God?

Two-thirds of the students answered this question by saying, "The Word of God." Although 50% of the students also said that a feeling or inner voice can be trusted at times. Sasha answered, "Through the Word of God, and sometimes through

the inside voice like my conscience” (S. Stasook, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Another student said, “Through the Word of God, truth is in my mind. Prayer and circumstances also help me make a decision in the light of the Word” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005). The Scriptures was the focus point in all of the answers.

#### Are You Open To Another Person Being Your Spiritual Director?

Eighty-three percent of the students answered this question, “Yes.” Relationships are very important in Ukrainian culture. Although another issue in Ukraine is trust. It takes a long time to develop trust in a culture where privacy is uncommon. Maxeem answered this question, “Not really, especially when this person is using his authority over me. I am open only when I feel sincerity” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 3, 2005).

#### What Do You Feel About The Authority Of The Word Of God?

It should be no surprise that the Word of God is seen as the ultimate authority in a conservative theological seminary. All of the students were in 100% agreement on this point. Tolik said, “This is the only authority for me. Humbleness before the truth of Scripture is my main purpose in life” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005). Sergey shared with emotion, “The Word of God is like a letter from your old friend, you waited for it impatiently, and now you read it with passion” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

### In Your Opinion, What Does It Mean To Be Self-Aware?

There seemed to be some general confusion about this question. Maxeem said, “I don’t know exactly. It doesn’t have any meaning for me” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Two-thirds of the students felt being “self-aware” relates with having a general knowledge of who you are. None of the students had heard of the “double knowledge” which relates to having knowledge about ourselves and God. One student said, “Self-awareness is openly looking onto a big and deep picture” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

### Do You Think It Is Just As Important To Know Yourself As It Is To Know God?

It appeared by the answers that one-third of the students believe that it is just as important to know yourself than God, but the other two-thirds believed that the knowledge of God is more important. Here is how some of the students answered this question: “I think you need to know yourself; your strong and weak sides. It will help you to develop and better understand yourself” (D. Danilchenko, personal communication, April 3, 2005). “It is important to know God and see yourself in regards to your relationship with God and your attitude towards Him” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005). One of the students gave scriptural justification, “Genesis 1 says that we are created in the image of God, Romans 8:6

says that we are Christ-like. First of all we need to know our Creator, than we can know ourselves” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

#### How Does My Spirituality Affect My Normal Daily Activities?

Most of the students felt that their relationship with God directly affects their daily activities. Sasha said, “It influences my actions and words, what I say and what I do” (S. Stasook, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Another student said, “My spiritual life helps me to stand against temptations and sin in my daily life and gives me a meaningful life in Christ” (S. Kulbich, personal communication, April 3, 2005). But one student disagreed. He felt as though spirituality and morality must be separated. He commented, “Spirituality means that Holy Spirit is in me and normal daily activities are more about moral norms. Spirituality has nothing in common with morality. I don’t like it when people confuse it, because than you can say that an intelligent person with morality is more spiritual then a simple worker” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 3, 2005).

#### What Is My Level Of Spirituality?

The student had a little trouble evaluating themselves. Dima said, “If you consider the scale of spirituality as knowing the Bible and its principles, I am probably at 40% or 75°F on a thermometer” (D. Danilchenko, personal communication, April 3, 2005). At times, students looked at themselves from God’s point of view and at other times from their own point of view. Tolik said, “I am in

Christ and this says everything” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005). But Sergey said, “I am 5 years old in Christ. My spiritual level is not high. Paul said if you are thinking you are standing firm, be careful not to fall” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

### How Do You View The Problem Of Sin In Your Life?

Most of the students were honest as they answered that dealing with sin is a regular struggle in their lives. One student feels that by doing more in ministry, he can help alleviate this problem. He said, “Sin is a big problem. Sin is more powerful than me and it is useless to fight with it. So I don’t spend my strength into fighting, and I decided to do ministry and other needed things instead of fighting” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Sasha said, “We are sinful people and we live in a sinful world and this is inevitable. But God gave us hope in Christ” (S. Stasook, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Sergey said, “Sin makes people always be aware and ready. To always be in prayer and put on spiritual clothes” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005). One other student had a different attitude, “I don’t have this problem. Jesus took the sins of my past, present, and future onto Himself” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005).

### How Do You Grow Closer To God?

One student mentioned spiritual disciplines. Sasha answered, “Through the Word of God, prayer, personal time with God, fellowship with Christians and

ministry” (S. Kulbich, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Two-thirds of the students said that we grow closer to God through ministry. Tolik commented, “Renewing my mind; ministry, fellowship and trust” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 4, 2005).

### How Do You Perceive Your Own Spirituality?

One student answered, “I don’t really like it. It is a whole system created by parents, school, friends, church, and pastors. As far as I understand - a lot of things in this system are not correct. My personal spirituality is very dependent on things around me. The most important decision about my spirituality is that I have decided to be more influenced by God” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Sasha said, “If to take it as a level of spiritual growth, I understand that this helps me to become a more mature Christian and be strong to stand against the realities of this world. My personal spirituality stretches my personal perspective and my worldview through the eyes of the Bible and God” (S. Kulbich, personal communication, April 3, 2005). Each of the students answered this question personally. Sergey said, “I perceive my spirituality well. Sometimes I am not happy with what I have, but I believe that God loves me and he corrects me” (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

## FACTORS OF SPIRITUAL SHAPING

Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University said that there are several factors in shaping spirituality for each person. “One factor of major importance is the basic beliefs of the individual or community” (1999:8).

McGrath also mentioned three other factors including: personal issues, denominational considerations, and attitudes to the world, culture and history. As I study the spiritual formation of my context which is Kiev Theological Seminary (KTS) students, I must also consider these four general areas of spiritual shaping.

#### Basic Beliefs (Theology) of KTS Students

I interviewed second-year youth ministry students at the seminary. All of them had been in the Ukrainian Baptist church for at least 4 years. They have now been studying at Kiev Theological Seminary underneath predominantly American teachers. These teachers are graduates of seminaries in the states such as Dallas Theological Seminary, Talbot Theological Seminary, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The theology of the students is still in its formation stages. It has been influenced by an Armenian denomination and a somewhat Calvinistic seminary. The doctrinal statement of the seminary would be similar to other evangelical statements of faith. It states,

We believe in the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word, [underlining added] and the Old and New Testaments. We believe in the Creation of man by the direct act of God; the incarnation and virgin birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, He being fully God and fully man. We believe in His vicarious atonement for the sins of mankind by shedding His blood and dying on the cross of Calvary. We believe in His bodily resurrection from the tomb, His power to save men from sin, and the new birth through the regeneration by the Holy Spirit. We believe in the gift of eternal

life by the grace of God, our Lord's bodily return for His own. (Kiev Theological Seminary 2005: par. 1)

The first line of the doctrinal statement is seen as the focus of spiritual formation through the interview of the students as well.

### Personal Issues of KTS Students

McGrath said, “Individual Christians have different backgrounds, personalities, locations on sociological maps, in addition to having slightly different ‘takes’ on the major themes of the Christian faith” (1999:8). The KTS students come from many different backgrounds. A few students grew up in a Christian home environment. One student spent some time in an orphanage, and learned to live on his own at the age of 16. Some students grew up in Western Ukraine where the language was predominantly Ukrainian. Some students grew up in an atheistic environment, others in a Russian Orthodox tradition, and others in a Baptist home. Some grew up in a major city and others in a village. Several students have only lived in apartments while others have lived in a village home without running water or central heat. A variety of backgrounds mixed with a variety of personalities contribute to a variety of different outlooks on their own spiritual state and the nature of God. This makes it very difficult to map a culture’s spirituality.

### Denominational Considerations of KTS Students

Kiev Theological Seminary has been called the flagship school of the Ukrainian Baptist Union. The Baptist Union has been a significant evangelical

presence in Ukraine. This group of 900 churches in 1990 has grown to 2,236 churches with near 400,000 in attendance nationwide (Johnstone 2001:644). The denomination was started in the middle 1800s founded by German Mennonites who had a great missionary zeal. “This group brought with them a Bible-based gospel ministry, and invited Russian peasants to their simple meetings. Their focus on prayer, preaching, singing, and communion spoke directly to the hearts of the Russian people who had been used to the strict liturgical style of the Russian Orthodox Church” (Harris 1999:5). Mark Harris, a missionary to Russia, has studied the evangelistic theology and methodology of this denomination. He accurately evaluates certain Baptist distinctives in Ukraine which include: the need for public repentance in a church building, the need to be separate from the world rather than integrate, the use of strong pressure to call people to repentance, a lack of personal follow-up to evangelism, and the struggle to reach out to the new generation of youth (1999:13-15). These denominational considerations point to an understanding of spirituality which is limited to the church building and in the context of the church rules. Also due to past cultural issues, the churches are fearful to reach out to the new culture. The students of the seminary do not have the same beliefs as the general denomination, but they are affected by them. Most of the churches they minister in have these general beliefs.

#### Attitudes to the World, Culture and History of KTS Students

Recently I conducted a youth leaders’ seminar in Western Ukraine. One of the youth

leaders came up to me afterwards to say, “Our churches don’t believe that we should not do ministry outside the walls of the church. We believe that the youth must come into the church to hear the gospel” (S. Shevchuk, personal communication, April 16, 2005). I believe this attitude shows a prevailing view of the denomination which is being challenged by newer progressive churches. The seminary students have also expressed frustration of dealing with attitudes like this in some of their churches. McGrath addresses these attitudes by discussing the 5 different types of spirituality which are developed by Methodist writer Geoffrey Wainwright in his essay entitled *Types of Spirituality*. Wainwright is actually quoting a major study done in 1951 by the Harvard theologian H.Richard Niebuhr (Mcgrath 1999:19). Out of the five main types of spirituality, I believe that the traditional Ukrainian Baptist church sees Christ against culture, but in contrast, the new Ukrainian Baptist church plants see Christ and culture in paradox. I will go into greater details concerning these two models of spirituality.

Christ against culture. McGrath says that it was the more radical wings of Christianity following the Reformation which chose to reject the world. “Anabaptist writers stressed the need to form alternative Christian communities, often in rural areas. Anabaptist writers refused to have anything to do with secular power and authority, rejecting the use of force” (McGrath 1999:20). As discussed earlier, the Ukrainian Baptist churches were started from these same German Anabaptists in the 1800s. Much of that tradition has been passed down to the present day churches.

McGrath defined this type of spirituality by saying, “the world is seen as a hostile environment for Christian belief and practice. The values of the Kingdom of God stand in contrast to those of the world” (20). Many of these thoughts have come about because of historical experiences. This defines the values of the greater part of the Ukrainian Baptist Church, but a new generation is growing up.

Christ and culture in paradox. I believe that this approach is accepted by the majority of the KTS seminary students. This is actually the fourth model, according to both McGrath and Wainwright, and is considered to be more in the middle of all the types of spirituality. If the type Christ against culture is on the right and the type Christ of culture is on the left, then this type is in the center. Although this approach could have tendencies to be closer to the Christ against culture style. “This approach does not regard the world or human culture as fundamentally evil; nevertheless, it argues that the Christian must expect to struggle in the attempt to lead an authentic Christian life” (McGrath 1999:23). Through my discussions with my seminary student over the past two years, I have seen this approach to spirituality in greater measure. These students have had more experience of trying to reach young people who are not part of the church culture. They have seen the need to reach into the secular world, but do not want to reject their historical roots. They have found that this paradox seems to satisfy both worlds. Their spirituality can accept the idea that they must “live in a degree of tension with the world” (23). They are “living in one kingdom, yet trying to obey the authority of another” (23).

## CONCLUSION

This exercise of evaluating the spiritual formation of my context has been invaluable. It has been difficult for me to separate my own assumptions about spirituality as I interviewed my students. I would tend to say in my mind, “That’s right,” or “You are wrong about that” when comments were made. It was hard to accept the fact that God could form someone else in a different way than he formed me. I can also see my American culture is getting in the way of seeing other ways of looking at the world.

In conclusion, I have been able to determine three action points for me from this study.

### I Must Teach My Students To Respect Other Forms Of Spirituality

It is easy to condemn someone else’s form of spirituality without considering the theological history of their context. When given freedom of speech, the younger generation often challenges the ways of the past. Each generation must be reminded that there is more than one way of looking at Christian spirituality. This should drive us towards compassion for each other.

### I Must Teach My Students The Nature of Depression To Spiritual Formation

Sometimes we learn more from what people don't say than from what they do. I was very surprised that none of my students mentioned depression or loneliness as an element of spiritual growth when questioned about it. This could be because of their young age. I believe that I must better prepare them for this time in their spiritual walk if they have not experienced it yet. John of the Cross, a monk who lived from 1542-1591, called this spiritual depression...

...the dark of the night soul. The 'dark night' is when those persons lose all the pleasure that they once experienced in their devotional life. This happens when God wants to purify them and move them on to greater heights. After a soul has been converted by God, that soul is nurtured and caressed by the Spirit....They will begin praying with great urgency and perseverance; they will engage in all kinds of religious activities because of the joy they experience in them. But there will come a time when God will bid them to grow deeper. He will remove the previous consolation from the soul in order to teach it virtue and prevent it from developing vice. (Foster 1993:33-34)

#### I Must Take Time To Learn From My Students

One of my students said, "The Word of God is like a letter from your old friend, you waited for it impatiently, and now you read it with passion" (S. Revut, personal communication, April 5, 2005). When he said this, he became the spiritual director and I became the student.

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