

## **Br'er Ravi in Reverse**

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For the past several Sundays (I write in May 2017) I have tuned in on the radio to listen to the Gospel Groupies' Guru, Ravi Zacharias, on my way to church. Ravi has been far more refreshing than the Rev./Br'er B. Ware to whom we listen upon arriving at our Baptist bastion. The latter lad more resembles the sound of an alley cat being pistol-whipped with a dead carp than the conventional tinkling cymbal about which St. Paul euphemistically wrote in I Corinthians 13. But recently Br'er Ravi himself seems in reverse.

I refer specifically and exclusively to his most recent program. I have felt vague impressions from the previous two programs that things were becoming a bit routine and rote for Ravi; but the most recent broadcast was not vague at all. Vacuous even comes to mind. He closed his address with three illustrations only two of which I can remember and none of which carried any coherent segues. In the first of the three Ravi invoked the memory of Augustus Toplady who wrote the hymn "Rock of Ages." Suddenly he was in the third of three in which he invoked the book/movie entitled *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. I suppose if I thought about it long enough I could find a tangent connecting these two topics, but it might take me longer than my customary tangents.

Granted for a moment that there was a connection and that I just missed it, what was unmistakable was that Ravi's rambling recitation of the River Kwai story was a diagramming nightmare. I could not follow where he was going or where he had been, as he attempted to make a point that went way over my head and possibly even way over Hegel's even higher head. It was after this tongue-twisted illustration-turned-obfuscation that the previous vague impressions suddenly became clear. In short, it seems as if Ravi has come to love the sound of his own voice and has begun to string words together that roll off his tongue more like spittle than simple sanity. I sort of get the feeling that I am listening to a James Joyce meandering stream-of-consciousness monologue than to a sermon by Rabbi Jesus on the Mount.

What has disappointed me most is not what I am hearing Ravi say but what I am not hearing him say. What I hear him say are generalities about current society and impending doom, *a la* a 1950s and 1960s Russophobic Br'er Billy Graham, but basically doom for America and none for Russia, China, India, Australia or Zimbabwe. And he often includes "we" in his non-specific confession of sins, leading me to think whatever he is confessing is primarily for himself but throwing the rest of us in for cover and for lagniappe. But I must say that if I am to have my sins confessed, I prefer that someone with a PhD in generalities do so than for me

to have to recite them with specifics and in living color. That I do like about this senior apologist.

What I am not hearing Ravi talk about are stories of individuals who are beating a path to Jesus and eternal life through the implementation of the apologetics in which he was trained. It has always been my impression since studying apologetics in college and seminary days that the ultimate goal of apologetics is the rescuing of the perishing. I am now wondering if I got it all wrong. In the past three weeks I have listened carefully for Ravi to tell a story about how his methodology worked in the saving of a soul. It may be that he has regaled listeners with such conversion stories in the past three hundred Sundays, but none in the past three. In fact, I do not recall even a single story about anyone identifying with Jesus through anyone's means. His sermons are more like titillating travelogues as he recounts his visits with upper management Middle Eastern mucky mucks and even a trip to the Bolshoi in Moscow, trips that provide all the thrill of a chase but none of the danger. No question that Ravi has been around the block and all of this terrestrial ball. But the main reason I have tuned in is to hear about people who have turned from darkness to light and have joined a local company of saints. I have been coming up dry.

It so happens that it was Ravi's recent plunge into Russian history that has raised the hair on my neck and these comparatively mild musings. In the course of

his ramblings about Russia and all them [my Southern pronoun, not his] godless Commies, Ravi made a startling statement about Uncle Joe Stalin, my favorite Commie of all time. Said Ravi, "Stalin went to seminary but he dropped out" or words 93.7% close to that effect. Naturally he provided no scholarly citation for such a statement, as the genius of sermonizing is to stay immune to documentation. My immediate impression was that Ravi's Bolshevik *bona fides* might be a little threadbare. The fact is that Stalin did not drop out of seminary. He was kicked out. Why? For reading Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* which happens to be among the top ten books I have ever read, Hugo's Gospel-laced *Les Miserables* being my number one novel of all time. When I heard Ravi's revision of Stalin's story, all of his claims suddenly became suspect, as this Hugo debacle is a very simple matter to know about.

To this unhistorical pronouncement Ravi added something I have never encountered before in all my studies of Russian history. He said, "Lenin hired Stalin to get rid of the church in Russia." Again, no citation for this remarkable statement, freedom from scholarly apparati being a salvific privilege of preachers. Maybe Ravi was right, I do not know without a citation. But I seriously doubt that was any kind of an element in the Lenin/Stalin relationship. Nevertheless, even if partially and remotely true, Uncle Joe surely did a miserable job of it. St. Basil's Cathedral is still standing; and a couple of Stalin's successors, to wit, Mikhail

Gorbachev and Vladimir Putin, are both professing Christians and churchgoers.<sup>1</sup> All of this is to say nothing of Lenin's statement to a friend that "I am always quoting that poem about the cross by Zhukovsky . . . ," the rest of which fascinating quotation I leave for other Russophobes to discover on their own. Nor does it take into account Stalin's statement to British diplomat Clark Kerr that he believed in God; nor did Ravi think to include Stalin's remark to his Commie comrades back circa 1922, "May the God of history help me."

What might have helped Ravi a bit in re: Russian Christianity was an exchange that took place many years ago at a Campus Crusade for Christ event at the University of Minnesota. The speaker for the evening was Dr. Theofanis Stavrou. Dr. Stavrou was --and, depending on the meaning of "is," still might be-- a fine Christian; and he taught Russian history at the U of M. I went to hear his lecture in company with a fellow Christian apologist. I refer to Jeff Siemon, an All-American football player from Stanford and also a Minnesota Vikings middle linebacker for a rough decade. In addition Jeff held an M.A. in apologetics from the Simon Greenleaf School of Law founded by a premier apologist and multi-doctored John Warwick Montgomery who, not so incidentally, had been Ravi's apologetics professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In short, Jeff and John knew how to hit hard. Accordingly, when it came time for Q&A, I threw a hard question at Dr. Stavrou.

The question startled the sainted Stavrou, as if he were carrying a football and had run into Jeff. He paused several seconds before replying, but then he replied with what I thought was at the very least a close answer, if not an altogether correct one. My question was: "What did Stalin do to the Russian Orthodox Church of his day that Isaiah the prophet would not have done?" After the professor paused pregnantly, he replied, "Nothing."

For those who have no context for Dr. Stavrou's otherwise mystifying reply, it is simply necessary to understand that the Russian Orthodox Church of Stalin's day was incredibly corrupt, superstitious, and anti-scientific. Dostoyevsky tells us in *The Brothers Karamazov* that it was even a popular belief among Russian peasantry that the bodies of dead saints did not smell. The fact is that even the bodies of living alleged saints like Rasputin stunk to higher than heaven. Incidentally, Stalin was also a reader of Dostoyevsky, once invoking this Christian author in a conversation about military rape with a Yugoslavian diplomat, Milovan Djilas. To Djilas Uncle Joe said in words reminiscent of Jesus, "Have you not read Dostoyevsky? Do you not know what a complex thing is a man's soul?" My guess is --and it's only a guess--that Ravi could use a course in remedial Russian literature.

I have begun to wonder if apologetics, as conventionally applied, have gone the way of the covered wagon. It is not so much Christians who need to defend

their faith as it is pagans who need to defend theirs. What answers do they have to ultimate questions? What is their answer to the question, "Why is it more difficult to believe in the resurrection and immortality than it is to believe that we are even alive in the first place?" I've never seen a good answer to this question and I don't expect to.

Proving the existence of a loving living eternal Creator is a simple no-brainer requiring no Ravis. I invoke, for example, the testimony of the ex-Commie Whittaker Chambers. In his book *Witness* Chambers tells how he moved from darkness to light. The prompt was not an apologist but the tiny ear lobe of his baby daughter. He states that one day while feeding her in her high chair, he chanced to gaze upon the contours of her ear and said to himself, "That did not just happen." He said that his transition from atheism to theism began in that very moment. Perhaps the use of big guns by Gospel gurus is a bit of overkill when just a little lobe will do.

And so will a simple question or two. Years ago I lived in the same town with a Communist who was not only a millionaire but who had been a bodyguard of Leon Trotsky in Mexico. I used to tease him for falling down on the job when Stalin's ostensible hit man picked Trotsky's brains --but not for historical information-- down Mexico way. One day I took him, Jake Cooper, out to lunch for the express purpose of inviting him to become a Christian. Remarkably, he did

not kill me, as I am still alive to write about it. Jake thanked me for the invitation, adding to his appreciation that I was the first person in all of his 67 years in a town of fourteen churches to extend that invitation. But he replied that in good conscience he could not become a Christian. I asked him why not. He said because he could not believe in the resurrection for which there was no evidence. I replied, "So what happens to you, when you die?" He replied, "Your lights go out and that's it." I said, "You are a good Marxist and demand evidence for a verdict. What is your evidence for that assertion?" Honest Jake replied, "You've got me. I don't have any." I suggested that he get some, though I needn't have. He got the point.

I wish I could say that Jake had become a Christian right then and there. I can't. Not long thereafter we moved from that town to one in North Carolina. I later heard that Jake died one day while out in his fishing boat. I'd like to believe that maybe this question was on his mind as he shipped out into eternity. Whatever the case, it is the pagans who need to wrestle with the ultimate questions; and for my money right now, I am betting on baby ear lobes and penetrating questions as my apologetic rather than Ravi in reverse.

Do I hear an amen? Is it possible that Commies Stalin and Chambers saved more than Ravi?

Endnote

**{My editorial advice is to omit entirely this Endnote}**

<sup>1</sup>For Putin as a Christian and churchgoer, see [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2014/11/russia\\_orthodox\\_church\\_will\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_eradicate\\_all\\_boundaries\\_between.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/11/russia_orthodox_church_will_vladimir_putin_eradicate_all_boundaries_between.html). For Gorbachev see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1582213/Mikhail-Gorbachev-admits-he-is-a-Christian.html>.