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By **Dane Gordon**

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This past winter the American University in Bulgaria invited me to present a set of lectures on philosophy of religion. My own school, Rochester Institute of Technology, allowed me the time and gave me two assignments: one, the lectures; the other, to visit philosophy departments in neighboring countries and talk about two conferences, the first to be held at the American University in Bulgaria AUG in April, 1997, the second at RIT in Rochester, NY the following September. The theme of both is Civil Society in Southeast Europe: Ethical and Philosophical Perspectives.

Seven years since the fall of Communism the political and social life of these countries is far from secure. The West can provide commercial, financial, and military assistance; it can help reconstruct shattered homes, but unless attention is given to the ethical and philosophical context, what is done now will have to be done again. My role was therefore to be a kind of philosophic evangelist, to carry the message that these conferences are important. Our hope (that is of the three sponsoring institutions: AUG, RIT and St. Kliment Ohridski University in Sofia) is that they will draw attention not only to the details of postcommunist life, but to its direction and its purpose.

It turned out that being at AUG as a philosopher, yet dealing with religious issues, allowed me a freedom to talk about religion I might otherwise not have had. Students are interested in religion but generally suspicious of theology. Rightly or wrongly, philosophers are perceived as more open-minded than ministers. They do not try to convert people, they do not promote the faith. Rather, they are critical of the faith, that is, of the premises on which faith is based. Students can therefore be more relaxed, more open about their questions. Perhaps it is like the way young people will sometimes confide in friends more easily than in parents.

Teaching philosophy of religion in a country such as the United States where it costs little to be a Christian or a follower of any religious faith is one thing. Teaching it in a country where for four decades religion has been derided and demeaned is another. In a recent article in Religion in Eastern Europe I wrote that to sustain one's faith in such circumstances requires a special kind of commitment, a special grit.

My students at AUG grew up in an anti-religious atmosphere, but like students everywhere they were questioning what they had learned as children. "What is so wrong about religion?" they asked. "Why is it dangerous?" "Is it the opium of the people?" The critical character of philosophy encouraged them to discuss what was on their minds. (They all spoke English.) Their questions were not confined to the classroom. At a student concert, with the music at several decibels beyond what I found comfortable, a student in a leather mini-skirt shouted philosophical and theological questions in my right ear while a hard rock CD pounded on my left. Not only students but also faculty and staff who attended my lectures followed them later with questions and shared experiences they hoped I might be able to understand and interpret.

It is tempting to regard this as evidence of a great yearning for religion throughout the former Communist countries. It may be and it may not. I invited a Serbian student to accompany me on my travels to Belgrade. While on the train we got onto the subject of faith. I do not remember how, but I remember his comment. With no trace of sarcasm he explained that, yes, he had faith. Unlike David Hume he had faith in cause and effect. He had faith in the regular movement of the stars and planets. But personal religious faith was something he did not understand; he did not miss; it did not enter into his life. In that respect he was like David Hume.

When we were in Belgrade I gave a lecture on freedom and political responsibility, not just an academic

issue for my listeners. I spoke to the political science faculty and to the Serbian Philosophical Association, and spent several hours with members of the Belgrade Circle, an association of intellectuals who have taken a critical view of the concept of "Greater Serbia" and the nationalism which supports it. "Freedom" in Belgrade, like "Faith" at AUG, is an intense issue. I was jolted when someone asked me directly, "What is your definition of freedom?" I gave an answer, since then revised. But put on the spot at that moment, the answer I reached for came from my religious rather than my philosophical background. I immediately thought of, though did not refer to as such, a passage in the Anglican Prayer Book, "in whose service is greatest freedom." More generally, freedom, I argued, must include responsibility to others.

My journeys became a series of stereotypes challenged. The Serbian student who traveled with me invited me to his home for dinner. The Serbs have an ominous reputation in the United States--vengeful, cruel, sadistic. I met, instead, a loving family, parents immensely proud of their son at AUG, his sister proud of her brother, her brother affectionate with his sister. It reinforced the most obvious truth that we do not begin to understand when we declare that these people are this and those people are that, whether they be Serbs, Croats, Bulgarians, Bosnians, Rumanians, whatever. From my religious background I believe we are all children of God, but the philosopher in me warns that we wear many disguises which we may have to deal with bluntly before they distort our views of one another and destroy our relationships.

I was advised not to travel directly from Yugoslavia to Croatia. Zagreb was bombed by the Serbs, not as destructively as Sarajevo or Dubrovnik but enough for it to be a still vivid and painful memory of those who lived through it. A philosophy colleague who teaches in Zagreb told me that when he was taking shelter with his family during the bombardment his six year old son said to him, "I want to learn to read." His father explained, yes, he would soon be going to school, he would soon learn to read. But the little boy persisted. "I want to learn now!" His father was puzzled. The little boy explained. "I want to learn to read like you. Then I won't be frightened."

The academics I met in Zagreb did not think of Croatia as a Balkan country. Their comparison was with Austria or Switzerland even Germany. Items for sale in the airport are priced in Deutsche Marks, Italian is spoken quite widely. Croatian academics, at least the philosophers, travel frequently to western Europe and the United States. Bulgaria is not high on their list. The Croatian philosophers I met were not particularly interested in the conference at AUG.

The philosophers in Zagreb are divided between those who support and those who are critical of their government's policies. One philosopher, who aligns himself with the critical group, suggested I might care to meet philosophers "on the other side." He did not wish to speak to any of them directly so he gave me a phone number to call if I wished. I did call. When mentioning this to another philosopher whose critical views have been publicly condemned, I sensed from his cool response that that was not the thing to have done.

Croatia is a Catholic country. I attended two crowded services at St. Stephen's Cathedral. All seats were taken, people standing. I looked around carefully. There were many young people as well as old, many men as well as many women. It indicated a strong commitment, at least in Zagreb, to their Christian faith.

Traveling in Eastern Europe has its adventures. Midnight, at the Belgrade train station, scores of people were trying to find their places on the train to Sofia, every one of them anxious. The conductor told me the tickets for the sleeping berths I had reserved and paid for were not valid. "Why?" "Because I had paid for them in Bulgaria. *Levas* don't count in Yugoslavia, only *dinars*." My student friend, speaking urgently in Serbian, made the ultimate appeal. "He," pointing at me, "is a professor, a philosophy professor." (What could be less threatening, more innocuous, more deserving of respect than a "lover of wisdom?") The crowd waiting to board was large, loud, a bit unruly. The conductor relented. Perhaps he could find a berth but it would cost $20 each. (The dinar is not the only currency that rates in Yugoslavia!) I paid and the conductor escorted us through the crowd. When reason and fairness fail, a $20 bill is remarkably effective in getting done what should be done anyway. It has worked for me in a number of places.

A first class sleeping compartment contains three berths. The top berth was occupied by a man, about thirty-five, dressed in a jump suit. "He's a smuggler," explained my student friend casually when the man left to smoke a cigarette. I was surprised. "How do you know?" "Easy," he replied. "Look at how he's dressed--hardly any luggage . . . Most of the people on this train are smugglers." The favored goods, he told me, are American cigarettes and deodorants. Smugglers buy them in Istanbul and Sofia and sell them at a profit in Belgrade. The cigarettes are

then sold openly on the streets. Women, I think mainly women, stand in the center of the city with trays of cigarettes. A colleague of mine bought a pack. I asked naively, "Isn't it illegal?" "Yes, but everyone does it." "What about the police?" "Every now and then--but too many people are involved."

I have always thought of smuggling as not a good thing. But an older colleague explained that during the embargo "the smugglers kept us going." It is a tangled moral issue. From a United Nations perspective, it was wrong to smuggle. From the perspective of people in the country trying to live along, the smugglers were heroes.

The philosophy faculty at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, was pleased to have a philosopher from the United States visit them. The journey there was a story in itself. After waiting twelve hours in the Sofia Airport for our Aeroflot plane to be repaired (It was finally replaced by a plane flown from Moscow), we arrived at Moscow Airport at 2:00 a.m. I did not know at which hotel I was supposed to be staying, so had no directions for a group of insistent taxi drivers. But remembering stories I had heard about foreigners in the Moscow airport late at night, I did know that I wanted to be out of there. By good fortune I was rescued by two Macedonian acquaintances. They helped me to a hotel with the aid of a Russian friend. I was grateful to get to bed at 3:00 a.m. even in a barebones establishment.

My time in Tbilisi was worth the trouble getting there. Despite deplorable physical conditions, the University corridors smelling of urine ("A communist legacy," my colleague explained), we had fine discussions. One of the professors teaches philosophy of religion. We talked for a long time at an out-door cafe about the nature of God, the validity of proofs, the role of the Holy Spirit. I mentioned some recent books, but books are hard to get. The University library, built about thirty years ago, had recently collapsed and there was no money my colleague know of to rebuild it or repair it. Another professor told me that his salary is the equivalent of about $7.00 a month. "You are teaching for nothing!" I exclaimed. "Yes," he said with a smile, "but it's my profession." He is the head of the Group for Investigation of Contemporary Consciousness in the Department of Philosophy and Sociology. (Teachers earn their living doing other things: running a business, training horses, translating. This they do during the day; they teach in the late afternoon and evening.)

We took long walks through the markets and broad thoroughfares lined with beautiful trees. Coming to Metekhi church near the old city overlooking the Mikvari River, I thought it was deserted. Inside, however, we saw a group of about twenty people clustered around a priest reading a service. "It's a funeral," my colleague explained. At that moment a young woman left the group, laid her head on a stone statue and wept. I thought of a young relative in England whose mother had died. After the funeral, which I had conducted, she came to me privately. "Is that it?" she said. "Is mum gone? Is that all?"

Elsewhere I have argued that while regions of the earth have their local cultures, there is as well a universal culture. I have called it the culture of humanity, for certain human characteristics are found among all people and at all times. One of these characteristics is the pain we feel when we lose someone we love and the hope we hold that it is not "all." A memorable experience of my stay in Athens was visiting the Archeological Museum and seeing the immensely sad sculptures of young men and women who had died to the clear and evident grief of their parents.

Returning from Tbilisi to Sofia was another adventure. Because of an error on my visa made by the Russian Embassy in Sofia, the Georgian passport control at first told me I could not leave the country. I explained that I taught in Bulgaria and lived in the United States. I could not stay in Georgia. Fortunately the two crucial people dealing with me spoke English. For them the rules were clear: I could not leave. However, the Russians had treated the Georgians badly. Troops under the command of General Lebed has shot and killed several Georgian protestors. No wonder the Russians would treat a traveling professor badly! So, on that note of mutual grievance I was allowed to fly to Moscow. "But you will have trouble when you get there."

I did indeed. It was everything I had read in pre-communist Russian literature about Russian bureaucracy. It was bizarre, though at no time threatening.

I flew to Tirana, Albania in a fourteen passenger plane which bounced along at 3000 feet through a hard rain storm. There was too much motion to serve drinks, but our hostess gave us large chocolate croissants which might have been bought in bulk for the airline at the beginning of the year. Tirana Airport, quite small, seemed to be full of soldiers, all friendly however. Albania does not require visas. After being isolated from the world during the paranoic dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, the country is exceedingly anxious to develop its ties with the West. Two

colleagues from AUG and I were there during the election for president. The Albanian Communist Party collapsed in 1992. When James Baker visited the country shortly after that, hundreds of thousand of people gathered to see him, some who were close enough even kissing his car. Trade fairs, international organizations, and automobiles are new experiences. The Wall Street Journal was only a little bit satirical recently when describing the chaotic condition of traffic in Tirana. Dr. Kevorkian could save himself much trouble if he advised his clients to go to Tirana and cross the roads carelessly.

In Albania I learned about Skanderbeg, an early fifteenth century national hero. Although Albania is a predominantly Muslim country, Skanderbeg is honored for having saved Christianity in Europe from the Turks. I had never heard of him in any history I studied. That is because, I concluded, in the United States and Britain European history stops at the eastern borders of Germany with only scattered references to Catherine and Great and Peter the Great.

Academics at the University of Tirana work in deplorable physical conditions, more corridors smelling of urine, bare classrooms and offices. I was struck by the sheer difficulty of teaching philosophy under such circumstances. Books are in very short supply so texts are not assigned. Organizations do exist which provide books for East European universities, but no one whom I met at the university there was aware of that. I spent some time explaining how it would be possible to produce an in-house journal with short articles which students could use for their classes. The young philosophy professor to whom I spoke was taking notes. I felt somewhat of a fraud. Southeast Europe does not lack philosophical journals (Rumania and Yugoslavia, for example), but that group of faculty in that place didn't have them, didn't have the money to buy them and wanted to do something on its own, cheaply. My analogy of Albania is that of a young person, brought up under harsh discipline, suddenly given control of the bank account and the key to the door, not quite sure how to deal with either.

St. Petersburg was a different place. Entertaining Russian friends in our home in Rochester a year ago, I apologized for rather too quickly getting into my favorite metaphysical subjects. "No, no," they protested, "people here (the States) never talk about anything serious." Doubtless not true, but in the apartment of these same friends in St. Petersburg, where I stayed while attending a conference, we had supper (or a second supper) at 9:00 or 10:00 pm and talked about religion, philosophy, art, politics (the elections campaign for mayor of their city was in progress), everything, drinking vodka right along and not noticing, getting to bed at 2:00 a.m., light still in the sky, the St. Petersburg white nights.

The conference (my reason for being in the city) got a bit chaotic. Its tight schedule hit a log jam when papers had to be translated, and it broke down when several of the Russian professors, instead of reading their papers, the custom among philosophers, presented them spontaneously without notes, becoming more and more religious and mystical in ways that left those of us with a western analytic training not a little bewildered. On the other hand, from a religious point of view, it was like trying to understand Tillich or Buber or DeChardin. Yet even with sympathetic interest, some of the papers were extremely hard to follow. It made evident that while for seventy or so years Russia was a rigorously atheistic society, it is in fact unselfconsciously religious, whereas America, which bears on its coins "In God We Trust," may be the most religiously insecure society in history.

My final visit was Poland, becoming more like home through several visits and many Polish friends. In Warsaw I conferred with a colleague at the Polish Academy of Sciences about a joint project, and in Poznan gave a paper at Adam Mickiewicz University. In both cases friends invited me to their homes, both friends having young daughters who, as young daughters the world over, are irrepressible. In each case I felt blessed, in the theological sense of the word to be regarded as a family friend in a home in another country.

As I flew back to Newark I felt that the purpose of my visit had been fulfilled. I had delivered my lectures at AUG and I had stirred up interest in many places about the conferences in Blagoevgrad and Rochester. I was returning with new knowledge and with a new way of asking questions I had long thought about.

I am still sorting through my experiences, but one in particular keeps returning. We were at Rila Monastery in the mountains, not far from Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria. This is an historic Bulgarian Orthodox center of worship. We attended the afternoon service with fine a capella singing. Our guide was a young Orthodox woman who works in the AUG computer center. She explained the liturgy. I asked her, however, so many questions about the service and the Orthodox faith, that finally she said, "You should be a priest." I thought for a moment and answered, "I suppose in a way I am" She was astonished. Then I explained that I am a Presbyterian minister. Her response was

immediate. "Why are you teaching at a college?" It is a question I have asked myself every now and then throughout my professional career.