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WHY SHOULD AMERICAN CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT EASTERN EUROPEANS?

by William L. White

Dr. William Luther White has been a member of CAREE since 1970, and he served as secretary of the group from 1976 until 1982. He is a Trustee of Citizen Exchange Council, New York City, an agency specializing in Soviet-American educational travel. Most recently he led a group of twenty-three in a visit to the USSR during the summer of 1983--his fourth such trip. He is a professor of religion and university Chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University, where he has sometimes offered courses in Marxist-Christian dialogue. Dr. White notes that this particular article is "rather elementary" in nature. But at a time of much controversy and questioning about the Soviets and other socialists, it may be worthwhile to go "back to basics" in our rationale for being involved with, and for caring about, those people who are often so different from us.

Eastern Europeans live under political and social systems which are quite alien to the ones that we in the West have come to cherish. The customs and languages of Eastern Europe often seem remote and peculiar to us. Have we anything in common with these people? Is there any reason why we should even care about them?

"God so loved the world"

Actually, we remember, our Christian mandate is to demonstrate concern for all humankind. The Scriptures do not say that God loved "the world" except for the Socialist countries! The Bible does not suggest that the good news is for "every creature under heaven" except Communists! No--whatever others may believe about these things--we Christians affirm that God is the creator of the whole world, and that Christ is the savior of all. Ours is a universal faith. It assumes no boundaries, no limitations, no restrictions regarding those to whom it may apply. (See John 3:16; Col. 1:23; Mark 16:15; I Tim. 4:10.)

"The household of faith"

Contrary to what some Americans suppose, many people in Eastern Europe are faithful members of the Church. Millions there are members of "the household of faith" just as we are here. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal. 6:10). As events in Poland burst into newspaper headlines recently, the American public became aware that more than 90% of the Polish people think of themselves as Christians. The institutional strength of the Church varies from land to land in Eastern Europe, but we should not be ignorant of the continuing presence of Christian witness there.

There are perhaps 50 million Christians in the USSR today. These figures include 40 million Russian Orthodox adherents, 6 million Protestants, and 3½ million Roman Catholics. Soviet Christians share in worship in some 13,500 congregations. Several hundred Soviet students are enrolled in Orthodox seminaries in Moscow, Leningrad, and Odessa.

It is not true that the 260 million citizens of the USSR are completely atheistic. In addition to the Christians, there are some 45 million followers of Islam living in the Soviet republics of Central Asia. Religion has been officially discouraged by the government for half a century, but devout belief has not disappeared. Occasionally the Christians have been subjected to brutal treatment, reminiscent of the early Christians under a hostile Roman Empire. More common today, however, is the practice of discrimination against known Christians--especially in educational, housing, and job opportunities. Emotional and economic costs for being a Christian may be heavy. Let us not abandon these "brothers and sisters in Christ," who urgently need our understanding, our moral support, and our prayers. As we share our differing perspectives on the Christian faith, we have much to learn from their experience, and surely they can benefit from our experience as well.

God works in history

An East German pastor once wrote to the great theologian Karl Barth concerning how he should relate to the atheists in his community. Barth replied, "You must meet their unbelief with a joyous unbelief in their

attempted atheism. You as Christians must confidently claim that your atheists belong to God as much as you do."¹

We cannot know, of course, in what directions God may nudge history in the decades and centuries to come. But history has often been touched by divine surprises. Who would have predicted that Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, would become a Christian convert? Who could have guessed that the prison camps of the Gulag Archipelago would drive Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the Christian faith? What does it mean that an increasing number of Soviet young adults are expressing interest in religion today? Will the deep mysticism of traditional Russian literature one day re-assert itself in this contemporary culture? In various ways, God continues the divine creative work. No lands or people are beyond God's redemptive possibilities. It is true now, as in days of yore, that "God has not left himself without a witness." (Acts 14:17) By remaining in close communication with persons of diverse cultures, we may be able to recognize and appreciate whatever positive, spiritual, humane impulses find expression in their nations.

Our imperfect witness

Living the Christian life is complicated, and few of us would claim to be perfect models. Unfortunately, there have been times and places in history when the Church has been especially self-centered, corrupt, or irrelevant. Sometimes the Church has earned the hostility and contempt of the poor and the oppressed. In such places, much time and effort will be required before people are convinced that the Church merits their respect. Milan Machovec, the Marxist philosopher of Prague, has noted: "Critics hardly ever blamed Christians for being disciples of Jesus, but rather reproached them with not being truly his disciples."² The world hoped for the Kingdom of God--says Machovec--and what they got was the Church! Yes, there has been a discrepancy between Christian ideal and Christian practice. When we recognize this fact (which non-Christians see so very clearly!), we will tend to be less self-righteous and more open to conversations with other imperfect Christians living in their own imperfect societies.

Ambassadors for Christ

East-West relations today are characterized by tension, conflict, hostility, suspicion, and fear. What does it mean in such a context to remember that God has given us "the ministry of reconciliation," and that we are called the "ambassadors for Christ"? (II Cor. 5:19-20) In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord called the "peacemakers" blessed, and urged his disciples to display compassion even toward "enemies." (Matt. 5:9) In the spirit of the Prince of Peace, all Christians need to reach out to one another across every "dividing wall of hostility." (Eph. 2:14) We American Christians need to take every initiative we reasonably can to support these things that make for genuine and enduring peace.

The fate of the planet may be at stake. Certainly the welfare of the earth depends upon some kind of reconciliation, in which the threat of nuclear annihilation is reduced and world resources are increasingly redirected toward meeting aching human needs.

We should care about East Europeans for many reasons. Whether or not they are kindred in the faith (as many are), they are fellow children of God, who stand in need of God's care and grace. It is to the advantage of everyone on earth that East and West work toward greater understanding and harmony, so that peace and prosperity may eventually prevail.

NOTES

¹ Karl Barth and Johannes Hammel, How to Serve God in a Marxist Land (New York: Association Press, 1959), p. 58.

² Milan Machovec, A Marxist Looks at Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 194.

ERRATA

Our apologies to Paul Stefanik and Peter R. Prifti. Paul Stefanik was the author of the letter to the editor in Volume III, No. 7 and not Peter R. Prifti.

p. 31, par. 4, lines 6-7 should read:

". . . Silesian Church is a much smaller church than the Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran)." The reference in the article to "its own theological family in Bratislaus" and to "relations with the . . ."