

11-2007

# The Role of Faith in the Midst of Transformed Societies

Charles West

*Princeton Theological Seminary*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

West, Charles (2007) "The Role of Faith in the Midst of Transformed Societies," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol27/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

## THE ROLE OF FAITH IN THE MIDST OF TRANSFORMED SOCIETIES

**Charles West**

*Dean Emeritus and long time Professor of Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles West considered the relationship between Marxism and Christianity many times. Already seeking dialogue between East and West when responding to Jozef Hromadka's initiative for the Christian Peace Conference (1958), he withdrew like others after 1968 and was instrumental in the formation of Christians Associated for Relations With Eastern Europe, and was long an associate editor of REE.*

Unlike other speakers this morning, I've not been deeply immersed in the life of a particular culture of Eastern Europe. Rather I belong to history. Years ago I wrote a dissertation on "Communism and the Theologians," after spending two years sharing the life and witness of the church in Communist East Germany. It was an experience that molded my theology and gave new direction to my life. Ever since, I have been learning from those brothers and sisters in the faith - and from other Christians throughout eastern Europe - what it means to live in the hope given us by God in Christ, free from fear, free from hatred, and free from longing for old securities and cultures. So I have been involved in Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe from the very beginning, even before it was an organization. My experience has bridged the change from a world dominated by the encounter of Christian faith with Communist power and ideology to a world where the powers are many and the ideologies far more confused. That history is why I am here.

I have just three points to make, but let me preface them with a reminder: what a different world we live in today than was the case in the decades that ended just twenty years ago! In those days the confrontation was clear. There were two major world systems. You were either part of one or part of the other. Even people who called themselves non-aligned in the third world could not escape living in the tension between them. Communist ideology and Communist power determined one part of that world, including Europe "behind the Iron Curtain." The other part was determined by the fact that it was *not* Communist, which could mean a number of things. It was not always democratic, but it usually meant a more open society, more conflict and interaction of ideas. It could be anywhere from socialist to capitalist, or in between, only united by the fact that its members were not under Soviet or Chinese control. The world was divided into two parts.

Back then all of the churches in Eastern Europe, different as they were, were forced to come together, although they wouldn't normally have done so, because they were living in,

and had to cope with, a society controlled by Marxist-Leninist ideology and Soviet power. Our vocation as Christians who were outside that society was to help them deepen their community in Christ and to support them however we could in bearing witness, and in coping with the life they lived in that society. Two worlds; to be a Christian in one was first of all to answer the question: How do you confront Communist control and Communist ideology, and how do you maintain the identity and the witness of the church over against it? To be a Christian in the other – ours in the west – was to show how one could witness to God's judgment and grace in a society tempted to self-righteousness in its politics and its religion.

So simple it seemed back then! Then it all faded away. Now we're in an utterly changed situation. In Eastern Europe, and to a certain extent in the West also, we live in a fragmented world. There are relative powers in that world, but they are not facing each other as ideological systems in a nuclear confrontation. The European Union is a growing and important power, but it has many tensions within it, and it is not the only power on the European scene. The U.S. is another power. I will not comment on the clumsy way that power is exercised, but just remind you that it's there. There is a power of corporate finance and technology, sometimes furthered by the U.S. government, but also by Europeans and others; corporate power and corporate technology coming into that world and using its weight to remold economies and influence politics..

And there has arisen the power of nationalism. By nationalism I mean ethnic identity identified with political power. To some countries that seems almost natural. Hungary is a culture and a state, and yet there are Hungarian irredentists outside of Hungary. I was shocked to hear this morning from Angela Ilic that the Hungarian Reformed Church voted to recommend that the government confer Hungarian citizenship on Hungarians living in other countries. It is one small example of how Christian churches can be captured by the power of nationalism – and there are examples in other parts of the world, including America as well - as they can also by the power of worldly wealth and political authorities.

Ideologies have faded into the background in favor of something that is harder to get a hold of, because it's not there in a body of literature that guides the people in power. It's something more amorphous. What does it mean to be a Serb? What does it mean to be a Hungarian? What does it mean to be an American, as far as that goes? These are questions which are in flux. The question then is: What can be the form of Christian faith now in this situation? Can we as Americans serve as reconcilers? Let me just make three points.

*First*, as Christians, and I must speak as a Christian for the Christian church in this situation, we have always worked through and in ecumenical groups and outreach. The important thing is not that we are Americans. The important thing is that we are Christians who are also Americans. This American character of our Christianity is both an occasion for repentance, and perhaps an occasion to share certain gifts and experiences we've had. But it is a problematic thing. Yes, Americans are not popular in Serbia these days. But if you come as a Christian, and *then* as an American, you can begin to talk within that context, in a way which asks them to help us struggle with our problems as Christians in America, as we try to help them struggle with theirs. If we don't work through the Christian fellowships, Christian organizations, and a Christian church in one way or another, then we are stripped of our peculiar and particular witness. This has become more difficult in the last few years. The National Council of Churches in USA used to have a Europe Committee, and at a high point we in CAREE were brought into that Europe Committee that previously had been primarily composed of church officials. The question then was: how can we as American churches relate to what is going on in Eastern Europe? Now that Committee has been reduced to a forum that has no policy-making power, Organizationally it has been sidelined. The NCC has its own agenda, and it does not include much about relationships with Eastern Europe. Ecumenical organizations have been weakened as agents of community relations. I was glad to hear that the World Council of Churches will have a conference in Romania next year. Good for them; we should be a part of it. The Conference of European Churches is another channel through which we can work. Consider also the conference held in Macedonia, co-sponsored by CAREE and by the Institute for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue and by the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* - it was conducted in an ecumenical context - *that's* how we have to work.

My second point concerns the confusion in social and economic policy into which that part of the world has fallen with the breakdown of Communism. The command economy of the Communist state has been abandoned, and a rough anarchic market economy has taken its place. What then is the role of Christian ethics in helping these countries to find a just and productive economy, which will preserve the securities and equality of socialism while encouraging a free market to flourish? We haven't solved that problem in the U.S. We need help from them maybe, from their experience. We need to share how we balance concern for public welfare with concern for the growth of an economy, the private and the public sectors.

Countries in Eastern Europe have been left without guidance on that subject and are having to struggle with it. We have struggled with it for over a century. This common struggle is an agenda for our common witness.

A third agenda is the role of the Gospel and the Church in reconciling and giving full value to the religious cultures, and in some cases the secular cultures (e.g. the Czech Republic these days), while at the same time transcending these cultures and transforming them. The church of Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel is trans-national. It places cultures in a context. It relativizes them as well as legitimating them. How does that happen? How does one become first a Christian, a member of the body of Christ which includes all of us from every culture, and then a Russian, a Hungarian, or an American? How we be strengthened in our faith and witness by Christians in other churches and cultures? These are problems with which we are constantly struggling. They are especially in ferment among our fellow Christians in Eastern Europe. The question of what is Christian witness in the confusion of religious and secular cultures – that is the third frontier on which I think we have to work.

With that I will come to a conclusion. There are many frontiers on which we now have to work – not just the one frontier of the churches in the Communist world, but quite different frontiers with quite different histories and quite different futures.

#### *DISCUSSION*

Q: You've watched probably as long a span of the East-West divide and the Communist Cold War confrontation as anyone in the room. So do you see the substitution of the enemy we love to hate shifting straight into the world of Islam? And all those lessons you picked up over the years – what's the transfer of this knowledge? What do we need to be telling our country, this society, this culture, about lessons we know about fear and suspicion and mistrust, even of communicating with the Arab world?

A: Let me point out the difference between dealing with Communists and dealing with Muslims. Communism was a clear ideology; it arose in Europe, it arose as a protest against the whole religious culture of Europe. We knew where we were when we were dealing with Marxists. We could go back to the writings of Marx and Lenin, and from there we knew where the confrontations lay. We also knew where the temptations and the motivations lay. We don't understand Islam that well. Islam is not, in the same way, an ideology. It's a different cultural phenomenon, a different historical phenomenon. We don't understand those people in the same way that we did the Communists. Maybe Bosnia is an exception, but in

the rest of the world it's different. Nevertheless, there are some things we can learn at least.

We can learn that God has placed many of us as Christians in a Muslim society, and that there we have a relationship given us by God. Now to be sure, when we Christians say God, we mean the Triune God whom we know in Jesus Christ and who works in us and in the world by the Holy Spirit. It is this God who has placed us among the Muslims and who cares for them as well. Our task then, is to relate to these people, *as people*, to try to understand them *as people* with their Muslim understanding. Maybe this personal interaction is a way forward. You can say more about that in Macedonia, Paul...

John Pawlikowsky: On the matter of 'the nation', a lot of my contact is with Poland. What we continue to face in Poland in terms of the Church is the influence of neo-conservative, American Christianity, but particularly Catholicism, on the Polish church as it attempts to re-identify itself after Communism. People like George Weigel, Michael Novak and others have had significant influence, and there is a real contact with the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids. The real code word – the negative code word – is the 'liberals'. There is this attack on liberalism. Liberalism is also seen to have infiltrated what you might call the Second Vatican Council reform of Catholicism, and is therefore rejected. But that's one of the major issues right now that, particularly some of us who come out of the Second Vatican Council reform mentality, have in trying to relate to church people in Poland who are much more apt to listen to the Novaks and Weigals, the Acton Institute and so on.

The second point on this is that there is this really deep and growing perception of certain east Europeans against Catholicism. It is certainly there in Serbian Orthodoxy as well. Some cardinals and bishops were issuing pastoral letters urging their people to prevent the building of mosques. This is an internal struggle right now in Roman Catholicism over the Islamic question. I took part in a conference at Cambridge University this summer on Religion and Contemporary European Identity, and there were a couple of papers essentially saying, "we've got to be careful because it won't be long before St. Peter is like Hagia Sophia" Now we can laugh at that, but that's an indication of a growing ideology. I don't know how we break through that, but some constructive efforts at Christian-Islamic dialogue in this country could help people over there move away from this confrontational posture that is growing in many of the churches regarding Islam.

Charles West: Let me restate your question: How in our various cultures – our own and those

in Eastern Europe that we know about – do we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, witness to it, over against the attempts to institutionalize it in ways that emphasize the opposition to the other? How can we be a gospel, a church *for* the Muslims, not just *against* them? That’s the question: How can we be good Catholic Christians in Croatia for and not against the Serbian Orthodox, and vice versa? What does it mean to be for others, including Muslims, in the name of Christ? In the name of Christ, to be sure – not to surrender our faith. But to create relationships that make them feel included. That’s a problem, as you outlined it Paul, for all countries.