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DEMOCRACY AND THE CRISIS OF THE SOCIALIST PROJECT

Toward a Post-Revolutionary Theology of Liberation

By Miroslav Volf

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Fresh winds are blowing over Eastern Europe these days but the political and economic landscape over which they are blowing has a muggy look. Socialist societies (those in the Marxist-Leninist tradition) today are in a deep crisis. What Zdenko Roter, sociologist at the University of Ljubljana, wrote about the crisis of the socialist project in Yugoslavia applies equally to other socialist societies. The crisis, he maintained, "cannot be considered a temporary" one. It is a "long wave crisis, deep and structural, It encompasses all sectors of societal and individual existence, from the economy, culture, and education to politics, morality, and religion. Individual and social life as a whole is disturbed. Relationships, standards, and values, previously considered unquestionable and permanent, have been destroyed."

Despite the historic changes taking place within socialist societies, with few exceptions it is still more accurate to describe them as totalitarian than as democratic. There is a consensus among indigenous social analysts that the totalitarian nature of these societies lies at the root of their economic and political crisis and that a consistent democratization is the only way to overcome the crisis. Even more significantly, democratization is also the only way to make these societies into what they have claimed (not very persuasively) to be from the beginning: humane societies.

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1 I would like to thank Judith Gundry Volf for her critical interaction during the writing of this response. It was composed on the side during my research stay in Tübingen as a Humboldt fellow. This article is published in OPREE by permission of the author.

2 My comments here are based upon the course of events in Eastern Europe up to October 1989.

The opportunity to give a critical response to John Neuhaus’ article "Democracy--A Christian Imperative" will serve as an occasion to call for a theology of liberation for socialist societies and suggest its basic features. First, I want to make some comments on the terms "totalitarianism" and "democracy." Second, I will discuss in what sense democracy is a Christian imperative. Third, I will indicate that the undemocratic nature of socialist societies is the main cause of the deep crisis they are experiencing. Finally, I intend to suggest that the theology of martyrdom which permeates the robust Christianity in these societies needs to be supplemented by a theology of liberation.

I

Any useful notions of democracy and totalitarianism are bound to be intellectual constructs which do not fully reflect the complexities of political realities. We need to keep that fact in mind as we reflect on "totalitarianism" and "democracy." Otherwise actual democracies end up looking more democratic, on the one hand, and most totalitarian governments more totalitarian, on the other hand, than they actually are.

It would be too cynical to claim that democracy is a "useful fiction"; nevertheless, certainly no existing democracy functions according to the democratic blueprint suggested by Neuhaus. As Neuhaus argued in his book The Naked Public Square, all politics tends to operate according to the non-democratic assumption that "government" and "society" are interchangeable terms. Democratic governments too are prone to violate the autonomy of religious, cultural, and economic life. Even when pleading for democracy, one cannot afford to have illusions about the extent to which any of the existing democracies is truly democratic, including the so-called "sweet land of liberty."

Neuhaus would probably not be the last to agree on this issue. In many respects his is "a tempered notion of democracy." His notion of totalitarianism, however, strikes me much too untempered. In a sense, it is, of course, hard to paint totalitarianism darker that it actually is. Did it not produce in this century alone "rivers of blood and mountains of corpses?" Yet there is totalitarianism and there is totalitarianism. I wold venture to say, for instance, that a much greater gulf separates the totalitarianism of East Germany--to name

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4Unfootnoted quotations in my text stem from this article.


6Ibid., 64.
a country that is not the most democratic in the socialist camp—from the totalitarianism of Albania and the democracy of South Korea from the totalitarianism of East Germany.

If totalitarianism is characterized by a "thoroughgoing monism" and by the "absolute, all-comprehending control" of society by the state, then relatively few societies today are totalitarian. Certainly most Eastern European societies are not. Take, for example, the place of religion in socialist societies. For political and ideological reasons, the governments of socialist societies have shown less sympathy for religion than for any other major aspect of social life. Legislation on the separation of church and state and on the privacy of religion was generally interpreted not only to bar the political activity of religious communities but also to prohibit any influence of religion on society.

Nevertheless, what are the realities? For one, by virtue of its very existence as a community of believers, the church has had public social influence. Furthermore, most socialist governments—with the exception of countries like Albania and North Korea—have recognized and accepted some social role of religion even beyond the social consequences of its sheer public existence. And we should not forget the folk-type religious practices at the margins of institutionalized religion that are very much alive in many socialist societies and exert even greater influence on society than does institutionalized religion. Short of exterminating religious communities, legislation on the privacy of religion can be consistently applied only if it implies no more than barring religious communities from publicly discussing social and political concerns and in this way influencing government policies. The actual place of religion in socialist societies illustrates that even in many totalitarian societies whose governments do not wish to distinguish between state and society, "there is a great deal that is public but not in the ordinary sense of the term political."8

Very few governments today consistently implement Mussolini's totalitarian formula, "everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." But totalitarianism still reigns in most nations of the world. That can only mean that a "thoroughgoing monism is, so to speak, the ideal model of totalitarianism which existing totalitarian societies are more or less willing to approximate. Hence we can speak of democratic governments with residues of totalitarianism (in Neuhaus' terms: those that are "less than fully democratic") and of totalitarian governments with elements of democracy. What differentiates a totalitarian state from a democratic state is that in a totalitarian state


8So Neuhaus of democratic societies, Neuhaus, op. cit., 28.
the government has the legal and actual power to establish a thoroughgoing monism in the spheres of politics, economy, and ideology, if it is for any reason forced to do so.

II

To assert that democracy is a Christian imperative is not to say anything earthshaking. In a time when every totalitarian government presents itself as democratic, hardly any Christian would want to call herself undemocratic. The real question is not whether but what kind of democracy is a Christian imperative.

The kind of democracy Neuhaus so aptly portrayed in his article is indeed a Christian imperative (limited government, its temporary character, the division of powers within it, the distinction between state and society, pluralism, rule of the law, institutionalization of freedom rights, a significant amount of non-governmental control of property). In particular I think that Neuhaus is right in not conceiving of democracy as a form of government in which all people rule or as the absence of the rule of human beings over other human beings. Democracy is a form of rule which an elected minority exercises over the majority—but a form of rule whose limits are clearly specified and that is controlled by the ruled majority. Negation of the rule of the minority over the majority always amounts to an ideological concealment of the actual relationships of power.

Neuhaus reasons for opting for such a democracy are also persuasive. Human beings are created in the image of God in order to have a personal relationship with God. Freedom is a necessary implication of their divinely conferred personhood. It follows, as Kant put it, that one must always relate to persons as beings who must "contain in themselves the end" of their action.9 Every bypassing of the conscious acceptance by an individual of goals one expects that individual to realize is an illicit treating of that person as a mere means.

Divinely conferred personhood requires that human rights be understood as "prior rights." These rights are both inalienable and inconferable. They belong to every person by virtue of being a person. A human being has these rights over against anybody, above all against such an assertive institution as the modern state. The understanding of human rights as prior rights is the most important pillar of a democratic edifice. All other essential characteristics of a democratic society can be viewed as ways to institutionalize the respect for human rights—ways that can to some degree differ from culture to culture.

Neuhaus' description of human rights and of their political implications is correct—so far it goes. But it does not go far enough. He seems to recognize only freedom rights. True,

he does not polemicize against social and economic rights as such, but only against pitting these rights against personal, civil, and political rights. He is entirely correct in this polemic. But he is wrong in remaining silent about any other rights except personal, civic, and political rights.

Neuhaus is opting for a libertarian concept of market economy which is built around the principle of individual freedom. It sets forth individual liberty as the basic rule of the economic game without making any demands on people to accept economic responsibility for theirs. An explicit concern for the satisfaction of the basic needs of all human beings within the market game is at odds with the basic tenets of a libertarian concept of a market economy. Unlike libertarian philosophy, Christian faith does make demands on people to accept economic responsibility for others. And these demands are not only demands on their generosity. They are demands on them to practice justice. In both the Old and the New Testaments, the concept of justice includes concern for the underprivileged (cf. Matt. 6:1; Ps. 112:9).

We should not push aside the biblical language of justice as imprecise because it allegedly muddles the distinction between justice and mercy. Instead, we should ask to what extent this terminology requires us to broaden our concept of justice and human rights. In his book Until Justice & Peace Embrace, Nicholas Wolterstorff has persuasively argued that the biblical language of justice together with biblical anthropology imply that we "have a claim on our fellow human beings to social arrangements that ensure that we will be adequately sustained in existence."10

Important as it is, from a Christian perspective respect for individual liberty will not suffice as the basic rule of the market game. Respect for the "right of sustenance" of all individuals must be added as a rule that is even more basic than respect for individual liberty. After all, people have to live in order to be free (though they might sometimes need to be free in order to live). In my reading of the Biblical texts, the Christian imperative to embrace all, "especially those in deepest need, such as the poor, the oppressed, the despised and the marginal" implies recognition of sustenance rights.

Though a market economy is to be preferred to "command economy," I am not quite persuaded that the creation of an "underclass" is "primarily the result of cultural and social policy developments not related to the [free market] economic system." In any case, the "underclass" has a right to conditions in which they can effectively take care of themselves

Wolterstorff adds, "No doubt this right, like others, can be forfeited; perhaps it is forfeited if a person refuses to work when decent work is available. And no doubt, as with other rights, there are social situations in which the right is abrogated--as, for example, when there are no arrangements that other parties can make to ensure our sustenance."
or, if they are unable to do so, to be effectively cared for. Without recognition and institutionalization of this right democratic societies might end up doing what Neuhaus tells us we should never do: sacrificing these human beings to a "utilitarian calculation of greater benefit to 'the people' or to 'humanity in general,'" or simply sacrificing them to the egoistic desires of free individuals.

Related to my view that some substantive rights (the right to sustenance) need to be recognized is my view that (in a very particular sense) democratic societies should be conceived of as "terminal enterprises." Neuhaus does not like to think of democratic societies in this way. Nevertheless, perhaps he will agree with me provided that a clear distinction is sustained between state and society. I have no hesitations about his claim that "the chief goal of democratic 'governance' is to sustain the process of democratic governance." But that does not mean that the 'only' goal of democratic government is to sustain the process of democratic governance, and even less that democratic 'societies' could not be seen as terminal enterprises.

If Christians are supposed to bring their "values to bear in public discourse," as Neuhaus pleaded in his book The Naked Public Square, these values will necessarily contain the substantive goals toward which a democratic society should be moving. According to my understanding of Christian political ethics, the civil community should strive to image the transcendent new creation (notwithstanding the fact that this imaging will always remain only partial). Through democratic processes these Christian goals 'could' become the goals of democratic society as a whole.

These goals do not involve only the respect for the rights of freedom and sustenance. Such respect is a requirement of justice. But the concept of God's new creation (which should inform a Christian political vision) points beyond the way of justice to the way of love. All responsible Christian behavior has to satisfy the requirements of justice and, inspired by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, embark on the way of love. A society of free people that do not "serve one another" through love will be a society of people who have turned their freedom "into an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal. 5:13). The practice of justice alone is not sufficient to create a humane society. Without love there is no 'shalom.'

It can, however, never be the task of a democratic government to impose any of the goals implicit in the concept of new creation either on the majority or a minority of the population against their own will. Such an imposition would violate the freedom of some people and

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11 Neuhaus, op. cit., 125.

hence be in contradiction to these goals. Human freedom must be respected as an end in itself because it is an essential dimension of human personhood, which is an end in itself. This means that a Christian vision of substantive features of a democratic society may be politically institutionalized 'lex charitatis' only if this institutionalization is legitimized through genuinely democratic processes. These processes are not to be confused with a pseudo-democratic civil war of interests in which the majority—whether moral or immoral—wins by the use of civilized brute force, but must be grounded in public preferences that are based on persuasive public moral discourse.

III

In Eastern Europe the theory and practice "of totalitarianism is being dismantled," and in some countries (like Hungary) it seems actually to have been dismantled. This is a result less of ethical insight into the evils of socialist totalitarianism and more of its disastrous economic performance. A new era of 'glasnost' has brought to light, for instance, that 70 years after the revolution 48 million Soviet citizens live below the poverty level measured by Soviet standards. Or to take an example from Yugoslavia, at the present time some 5,000 Zagreb households have had to have their electricity disconnected because they could not pay their electricity bills any more. The "command economy" is to blame that socialist countries of the Second World are rapidly sinking to the economic level of the Third World. Neuhaus is right that these economies "have been consistently disastrous for all but the new class of the ruling elite."

Since I come from Yugoslavia, I will indicate here briefly some of the theoretical efforts to dismantle totalitarianism that are going on in my country. Leading sociologists, economists, and political scientists in Yugoslavia (especially of the younger generation) seem to agree that the deep crisis of Yugoslavian society will not recede as long as the main pillars of the socialist system (in the Marxist-Leninist tradition) are in place: the collectivistic understanding of human rights, the command economy, and the monopolistic position of the Communist Party. As they look into the future, the task for many of them "is not in finding a [new] model of socialism, because socialism as an ideology of the future is finished, and it exists only as a rationalization of the interests of the party in power."13 Instead, they seem to be seeking ways to replace socialism with a more democratic and economically efficient society. Repairing the system will not do; the 'system' has to go—even if for ideological reasons it might have to retain its old name.

13V. Gligorov, "Na usluzi ideologije" [At the Service of Ideology], Danas, January 10, 1989, 12.
What objections do Yugoslav social analysts raise against the three pillars of the socialist system? First, Marx polemic against the purely formal nature of freedom in capitalistic societies has been used by socialist states as justification for suppressing the personal, civil, and political rights of the people. Socialist societies have a typical collectivistic understanding of human rights according to which the rights are granted to individuals by the state in exchange for prescribed social behavior. It is, however, increasingly becoming clear in socialist societies that "formal freedoms" are not a "bourgeois invention" but a necessary precondition of the respect for human dignity. A collectivistic understanding of human rights makes it acceptable for the socialist state to decide the destinies of the people in the name of revolutionary ideals. In general, any political discourse in which the government's "giving" figures prominently, especially if that "giving" refers also to human rights, is the discourse of the power of the state and not of the power of the people.14

Democracy is impossible where rights are not conceived of as something inalienable which an individual has over against the state.

Second, socialism as a system of "command economy" (or even of a more democratic but no more efficient "agreement economy") in which the means of production are in the hands of the state has completely failed as an economic system. Joze Menzinger, professor of economy at the University of Ljubljana, maintains that "the only possible socialism is some type of social-democratic socialism, i.e. a society in which private ownership of the means of production is allowed, and greater equality...is achieved indirectly, through taxation." He continues, claiming that socialism cannot be made more efficient without replacing its "command economy" with a consistent market economy, in other words, without turning it into some form of a capitalist system.15 The economic failures of the decades-long socialist experiments indicate that "when a market economy is open to the participation of all," it works to the greater benefit of all than the command economy is ever able to do--the limitations of a market economy notwithstanding.

Third, the central pillar in the political structure of socialist societies is the constitutionally sanctioned permanent and unconditional monopoly on power of the Communist Party and the government it forms. This position of the Communist Party is legitimated either by recourse to its historic merits or by the ideological belief that the Communist Party is the authentic interpreter and implementer of the monolithic will of the people since Marxism-Leninism gives it privileged insight into the true interests of the

14Cf. I. Prpic, "Drustvo i drzava" [Society and State], Nase teme 32(1988), 1161.

15So recently J. Menzinger, "Reforma je iluzija" [Reforms are an Illusion], Danas, September 12, 1989, 23.
workers. Most communist governments are still not willing to risk the possibility of losing power by allowing for regular, contested, and decisive popular elections.

Such an understanding of the role of the Party is generally perceived as the main (though not the only) cause of the all-encompassing crisis of socialist societies and the main obstacle for its overcoming. One has to keep in mind that all these socialist reforms (which regularly consist in attempts to incorporate into socialism the elements of the capitalistic economic system) are initiated and controlled by an uncontested government. Analyzing the multiple unsuccessful reforms in various socialist societies Dusan Bilandzic, an influential political scientist in Yugoslavia, writes,

Until now, the architects of these reforms never started with a political democracy, a multi-party system, but borrowed from capitalism the market mechanism, or more precisely some of its elements, and combined it with ideas about autonomous self-managing firms. It was hoped that in this way the economic development would be sped up. But because the market mechanism very soon calls forth and encourages other social changes, tendencies develop which openly call into question other monopoly of the party-state power. The party-state then starts hindering the development of the market and the processes of democratization in general. Finally, the party-state bureaucracy panics and makes a counter-attack, halting all the reforms.16

The pressure of economic crisis in socialist societies does no more than to initiate a 'cycle' of liberalization (which should increase the efficiency of the socialist system) and repression (which is required in order to preserve its existence). True reform of the system would require breaking out of this circle. And breaking out of the circle would require the Communist Party to risk losing power by allowing for democratic elections. If it did that, the most important pillar of the political structure of socialist societies—the self-proclaimed avantgarde role of the Communist Party—would in all likelihood crumble.

The threat of losing power and the unwillingness to give up the cherished ideology which serves to reinforce that power are the main reasons why all attempts to reform socialism have so far failed.

But something new is happening in Eastern Europe and it brings hope that the cycle of liberalization and repression can and will be broken. If the political and economic transformations that Hungary, for instance, is undertaking (dissolution of the Communist Party into a Socialist-Democratic Party which espouses a multi-party system and a market economy) succeed, we will have witnessed a historic event of a peaceful revolution.

IV

16D. Bilandzic, "Drzavni socijalizam (2)" [State Socialism (2)], Danas, September 12, 1989, 17.
If the political structure of socialist societies is the main cause of the oppression and growing immiseration in these societies, then the preferential option for the poor makes it a Christian responsibility to work toward a democratic transformation of these societies. There is then a need for 'a theology of liberation' for socialist societies.

In the wake of post-revolutionary enthusiasm, some attempts were made in Eastern Europe to develop a "theology of socialism" (in Yugoslavia, for instance, by the Roman Catholic bishop Grmic). These attempts found very little resonance with the believing communities there. With few exceptions, believers preferred to think of themselves as Christians in socialism, rather than as Christians for socialism. At least in Protestant circles, Christians generally tried to come to terms theologically with their own situation not through a theology of socialism but a theology of martyrdom. This theology rarely reached the level of academic theological reflection. It was perpetuated through such powerful expressions of Christian communal self-consciousness as sermons and hymns.

The main tenet of the theology of martyrdom (which resembles very closely the early Church theology of martyrdom) was forged in the early years of the Communist rule. It consisted in the imperative for uncompromising Christian living in the face of what seemed an all-out attack on the churches with the goal to "liberate" people from religious superstitions and convert them to atheism. Hence, believers cherished the experience of the comforting and invigorating presence of God, especially as they--often secretly--gathered to worship. Having been subjected to discrimination and persecution in schools and at jobs, they grasped onto the biblical statements that Christians were called by God to suffer persecution willingly "since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" (1 Pt. 2:21; cf. Phil. 1:29; Acts 5:41 etc.).

Though this theology reserved a place of honor for the belief in the power of God to "shut the lions' mouths" (Dan. 6:22), it also shared the soteriological individualism and false dualism characteristic of some stands of Protestantism: salvation is only for the soul; the body is doomed to suffer in this world. Persecuted believers could also hardly help believing that the world is fully in the hands of the evil one (cf. 1 John 5:19) and that there is no hope that the kingdoms of this world would even in a small way be willing to image the justice and peace of the kingdom of God (cf. Rev. 11:15). Such impulses form earlier Christian tradition combined with the government's enforcement of its interpretation of the privacy of religion as its disappearance from the public scene shaped the theology of the relation between the church and the world in socialist societies.

Such a theology of the world explains why the need for structural reforms in society at large tended to be far from the minds of Protestant Christians in socialist societies. Even when they showed more optimism about the world in which they lived, they tended to stress the need for personal renewal of human beings and remain silent at least about the need for
structural transformation of society. So one can repeatedly find the comment that the crisis of the socialist project is "not in the first place a crisis of material, economic, or political nature, but is at its roots a moral crisis a crisis of spirituality and human responsibility."\textsuperscript{17}

Christians should, of course, be the last ones to play down the socio-economic relevance of personal (spiritual and moral) transformation. After all, turning away "from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:10) belongs to the core of what it means to be a Christian! Salvation is at its heart a personal matter because the human predicament is at its heart a personal matter. With no trace of facetiousness it can be said that a radical personal transformation would indeed have such great political relevance that we would have to worry little about changing structures if we could assume morally perfect people. But this is precisely what Christians cannot do, their belief in the power of the Gospel notwithstanding. In his seminal work The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness Reinhold Niebuhr rightly insisted that it is precisely the ineradicable human inclination to injustice--especially of those in positions of power--that makes democratic structures necessary. Far from being a form of government for gods (Rousseau), democracy is a form of government for people who can be expected to remain social sinners in spite of all the necessary moral appeals. Without structural changes Christian moral appeals will not be much more effective in overcoming the crisis of socialist societies than are the regular attempts of Communist leaders to solve their problems by filling political posts with less corrupt and more competent personnel. In a limited but very significant sense, socialist societies do not need better people; their people are no worse than people in other societies. What they need is better structures.

We live in an historic situation in which some socialist societies show unprecedented openness for structural change. This provides a unique occasion for Christians in these societies to supplement the dominant theology of martyrdom with a particular theology of liberation.\textsuperscript{18} This suggestion is not meant to denigrate the theology of martyrdom. Any theology faithful to biblical tradition that was forged in the fires of persecution deserves our greatest respect. My point is not to suppress the theology of martyrdom but only to place it within a framework of a broader concept of uncompromising Christian living which includes responsibility for socio-economic realities.

What are the main features of a theology of liberation for socialist societies? The best way to answer this question is by indicating the similarities and differences between this

\textsuperscript{17}P. Kuzmic, "Ja nisam apologeta religije" [I am not an Apologist of Religion], \textit{Ten}. 1989, 3.

theology of liberation and the well-known Latin American theology of liberation. The post-revolutionary theology of liberation would be similar to a pre-revolutionary theology of liberation in the following ways: (1) It would start with a theologically grounded preferential option for the oppressed and the poor. This option can be formulated as a double commitment to respect the right to freedom and the right to sustenance of all members of a given society (cf. above II). (2) Its second step would be a social and cultural analysis of the causes of oppression and immiseration which seeks to discover to what extent these are related to the socio-economic structure and prevailing cultures in socialist societies (cf. above III). (3) Finally, it would contain an imperative to strive in an appropriate way for appropriate socio-economic structural change.

But a post-revolutionary theology of liberation: (1) Though it will want to receive important impulses form Marx' thinking (especially on alienation in work), on the whole a post-revolutionary theology of liberation will not look for solutions to socio-economic problems along the lines suggested by Marx. In particular, it will contend that the failure of the socialist experiments proves that the dictatorship of the proletariat and the state ownership of the means of production present problems rather than solutions. (2) Having learned something about revolutions from first hand experience, a post-revolutionary theology of liberation will tend to think that violent political revolutions are not the best way of implementing socio-economic change. A peaceful but persistent witness to the need for a particular structural change is a better way. Within the framework of the principle of separation of church and state, this witness will include dialogue and cooperation with all forces in socialist societies-whether in the government apparatus or not-which strive for peaceful reform of the system. (3) A theology of liberation for socialist societies will not seek to elevate liberation from oppression to the methodological principle for the whole of theological reflection. It will not conceive of itself as a new way of doing theology as a whole, but will remain content to be a socially and economically informed theological (not merely ethical) reflection on particular socio-economic realities.

Even more than Latin American liberation theology, a theology of liberation for socialist societies must insist that socio-economic liberation should not be confused with the realization of God's new creation. The structural changes designed for people with unsuppressible inclinations toward injustice not only because of their egoistic tendencies but also because of their limited knowledge about what really serves the cause of justice. Political and economic liberations will always remain a far cry from final salvation. At the same time, a post-revolutionary theology of liberation will also refuse to divorce socio-
economic liberation from God's new creation. For all their imperfections, societies in which rights to freedom and sustenance would be truly respected and in which the *lex charitatis* would be institutionalized in a democratic way would "approximate, always in a small part, the freedom, peace, and justice for which we hope."