

10-1991

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Recommended Citation

Popov, S (1991) "Perestroika Without Christ?" *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 11: Iss. 5, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol11/iss5/3>

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PERESTROIKA WITHOUT CHRIST?

AN EASTERN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

by **S. Popov**

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Christianity was introduced into Bulgaria in the third quarter of the ninth century. The decision of the then ruler Boris was motivated by his deep understanding that Bulgaria's future lies in her joining the Christian nations. He understood that his country needed a thorough restructuring with Christ. Christianization, he hoped, would transform the life of the people, the entire existence of the nation.

But things did not go that way. Christianity in Bulgaria remained throughout the centuries largely a formal matter. This was felt intuitively by the people, and the reaction was the "heretical" sect of the Bogomils. Bogomilism was a predominantly negative interpretation of Christianity. At the time of the great rebirth of spiritual life in the West, Bulgaria had long since been under the bondage of the Ottoman Empire. She missed both the Renaissance and the Reformation. Throughout the five hundred year of the period of the Turkish yoke we were condemned to fight to stay alive. When the Bulgarian national revival came (in the 19th century), it found a nation only formally Christian.

This brief historic excursion is just to show why the Christian religion of the Orthodox Church had little to do with real religion: Christian values did not penetrate Bulgaria's life to the same degree as was achieved in the Western part of Europe.

This failed to materialize in spite of the Bulgarian national revival, which took the form largely of the establishment of a Bulgarian national Church. In the 19th century a new factor intervened--the British and American missionary work in Bulgaria since the second quarter of the 19th century. It concentrated to begin with, on providing the Bulgarians with a Bible translated into the spoken language of the people.

The translation of New Testament was finished and printed by 1840. This was the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society and its agent for the Balkans, Benjamin Barker. It was he who found a reliable translators: Neofit Rilski and Konstantin Fontinov for the major part of the Old Testament.

So by 1871, the central feature of Protestantism, the Bible, was available for every Bulgarian. It's circulation was huge; several editions were distributed, as every Bulgarian family wanted to have "the Protestant Bible."

But the hopes of the missionaries for the evangelization of Bulgaria were not fulfilled. It must be emphasized that although the natural hopes of the missions were for a spreading of their respective denomination, their essential purpose was the evangelization understood as the Christianization of the Bulgarian people, the introduction of Christ's teachings so as to make them a part and parcel of the people's life. But neither took place. Why?

Various factors may have been the cause. In the first place there had been the wrong assumption that Bulgarians were already a Christian nation and that by making available a vernacular Bulgarian Bible, this would help them become more so. They were not. They were only formally Christian. The task was not that of a religious revival but of converting people to Christianity, which was even more difficult because people believed that they were already were Christian, since they had the Orthodox Church.

There was also the fact that this effort at evangelization was taking place in the middle of the 19th Century, when belief in science, in lay knowledge was gaining ground, while religion was becoming less fashionable. The young were looking towards the schools, not towards the church.

And then there is the circumstance that the Protestant missions presented the Bulgarian people with the extraordinary gift of a marvelous translation of the Bible, revised and given it its final shape by the great poet Slavejkov. The whole nation was looking for the downfall of the Phanariot Greek bishops, for the establishment of a National Church, and for political liberation. The mood of the younger generation was more or less indifferent to religion and sometimes even hostile. They had become accustomed to identifying religion with the church and the church with Orthodoxy which until recently had been largely identified with Phanariotism and "Greekness."

It should also be stated that making capital out of her position of a National Church, i.e. of a representative of the people's national identity, the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria took a stand against the activity of the Protestant missions, accusing them of tending to alienate the Bulgarians from their own people and the faith of their fathers, a thing that could be easily believed as at the time, in the second half of the 19th century, they regarded their nation as bound together by their Orthodox religion. To become a Protestant and remain a Bulgarian seemed impossible.

And last but not least, there was perhaps on the part of the missions a certain lack of pragmatism in the way they practiced their efforts at evangelization. There was something unreal in the ways they hoped to weave their Christianity into the texture of life of this rather oriental people with whom they were confronted.

In the attempts of restructuring Bulgarian life, both individual and social, as well as Bulgarian society and state after the end of the Turkish yoke, the official religious institution, the Orthodox Church, became less and less efficient as a factor in the life of the individual persons and society as a whole. The other denominations remained of a too limited impact.

And yet, what could have been achieved has been shown by the example of the beginnings of the work on a larger scale by the Y.M.C.A. in Bulgaria. After two decades of existence in the very narrow framework of a purely Protestant institution, between 1925 and 1940 the Y.M.C.A. developed its activity on a multi-denominational basis and with a view to a pragmatic Christian approach to life and its problems. The success was tremendous. The work of the Y.M.C.A. became a sample and model of what could be achieved if Christianity left the walls of the Churches and entered the life of the people. At the end of January 1991, with the effort of the old Y.M.C.A. members and the help of the Y.M.C.A. in Greece this organization has been restored in Bulgaria.

And so today when the Angel of History has again troubled the water, and the porches of Bethesda are opened and waiting for the people of Eastern Europe to step in and be made whole again, are we Bulgarians, ready for that deep going, that thorough restructuring, which is needed? What is worse? Do we feel the want of it? Are we aware of the terrible absence of Christianity (of practical Christianity) in our life?

However pessimistic this may sound, I think the answer is no. But how shall we know the truth that makes free, the ways of genuine restructuring, if we, as usual, indulge in deluding ourselves? We are one of the least Christian nations in Europe, especially now, after the last forty-five years, during which resolute injury was added to the insulting neglect we practiced with respect to Christianity even before the coming of Communist rule.

Now we are not only without the Holy Scriptures in our souls, but also in our libraries. After the September 9, 1944, coup any distribution of the Holy Scripture was banned. Even the import for personal use was prohibited. The simple possession of a Bible made one suspect to the various state security agents, with which the people's regime teemed. The rationale was that almost all copies of the Scriptures in the hands of the population were published by American, British, or foreign Bible societies. So the Bible began to be considered largely an "Anglo-American" matter or at least involving some "Anglo-American" connection. The Lord's ways are strange but the merit of the Americans and the British for

the introduction of the Bible on a large scale into at least the hands if not the souls of the Bulgarian people, was at last being recognized.

Of course there was also the Bulgarian Orthodox Church Synod's translation of the scriptures published in 1925, i.e. fifty odd years after Slavejkov's Bible. But besides being a very pedestrian affair compared with Slavejkov's poetic text, the Synod's bureaucratic Bible (on its painful assembling several committees had sweated more than a half century) had been long out of print. After the 1925 first edition, another had followed, as far as I know, only some twenty years ago, and at that with a very limited total print. For several decades and practically ever since September 9, 1944, the Synod's book-shops never had the scriptures (or any part of them) on their shelves, until today, in spite of all the Helsinki and Vienna agreements. In 1990 a representative of the Bible society was in Bulgaria to discuss a new edition and to present paper for the printing of Bibles. On the other hand, the Protestant churches have also received the Holy Bible as a gift.

The lack of Bibles is really the lesser evil. Only yesterday we had plenty of them, the "Anglo-Americans" had flooded Bulgaria with New and Old Testaments, Bibles, and tracts. But the evangelization of Bulgaria towards which so much has been done never materialized. History may one day explain this failure. But the fact is that we did not open our Bibles, and our souls and minds remained deprived of this historically ascertained true means of spiritual and intellectual elevation.

I shall not digress further into the history of how it came about that my country only adopted Christianity formally, but in reality remained largely without the advantages that the Western world has been able to draw from it. What is the country's present situation?

First of all, as we never as a nation tried to imbue ourselves with the essence of this universal religion and its teachings, we largely remained without the high level of spirituality, brought by Christian enlightenment bestowing spiritual gifts upon its genuine followers. And if we entered the epoch of our national revival with a minimum of ethical capital that the simple people, with their absolutely rudimentary knowledge of what Christianity had during the dark age of the five hundred year yoke, more by intuition than by any teachings of the Church, they were able to build up for themselves one century or so of "free" life, under the bourgeois, and then under the communist regime, has been sufficient to completely waste this moral capital.

No, I do not idealize the Western world. I do not tend to attribute to it the qualities of a perfect or greatly Christian society. Yet, there is in the Western peoples a stock of Christian values, with which they have been imbued in the course of the centuries long developments, and on which they draw when times of major crisis come. The greatest of all such crises and also the supreme manifestation of the above assertion is here before our eyes: the splendid renaissance of Western Europe out of the ashes of World War II, after the moral

and intellectual ruins left by Fascism and Nazism and the nationalistic societies. But this shining rebirth of Western society in Europe did not come about in a vacuum; Europe was able to lean on her heritage of Christian values. This is something which I think is more visible to us, outside and deprived of all these advantages, we, who have, if one can put it like this, missed the bus of Christianity.

All the hidden strength of being imbued with the essence of an individual religion, of the inborn respect for the human personality, of the understanding of its pre-eminence, of the basic view of "man as made in God's image," emerged in the years immediately after the end of World War II. And it is this strength that powered the reconstructing effort in that spirit of unity, forgiveness and mutual understanding, which we witness in the making of the European Community and in the way it still extends and develops. It is Christian ethical values, which permeate this edifice: the truth in the soul, the spirit of kindness to one's fellow human beings, of service to the community, of self-sacrifice and service for the sake of the common good, which is felt as being the essence of true life; this is the ethical background of that incredibly great and successful *perestroika* in the western world, which has produced its present strength. This was a restructuring with Christ, although the name was not there.

What is the problem with which Bulgaria is nowadays faced?

After forty-five years of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, the Communist regimes are crashing everywhere. Gorbachov's unsealing of Soviet society which has shown what the reality behind the window dressing was and the subsequent growing collapse of the entire structure of Communist domination in the USSR, at once, by a domino effect, made an impact on the satellites. It took some time for the concrete effects to be produced, but once the Communist regime had been abandoned in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, a snow-balling action is drawing in the remaining satellites (even Albania) into the rapid abandonment of Communist autocracy and changing to democracy, and this with the obvious benediction of the Soviet Union.

Hence, it seems things are very simple: our former masters in Moscow are emancipating us; there is nothing in the way of our becoming a democratic nation. Everybody in Eastern Europe is turning democratic, and so we shall we. Democracy is here for the taking or so it seems.

I think it is not. Democracy needs a human element fit for practicing it, and this human element is not available in present day Bulgaria. Why? The fact (which was emphasized above) that the Bulgarian society, the Bulgarian people have failed to give themselves that minimum of Christian formation, of the humanizing of man/woman, which prepares the individual for democracy.

Democracy is largely a Christian regime, resting on people with more or less a Christian mentality. It is based on the highest respect for the human personality, for the concept that the human being is endowed with an eminent dignity that the human being is born free and is entitled to freedom. It follows that the human being has the right to govern herself/himself, a thing which in society, in its life as a community, means democracy: people elect those by whom they would like to be governed, they tell them how they want to be governed, and they can remove their elected representatives and appoint others, if they so wish. This simple machinery can however operate successfully only on the basis of Christian values, of Christian respect for the human being, of Christian ethics.

How is democracy to be made a reality by people who do not have the rule "as we would like that men should do to you, do also likewise to them," and all the rest this rule involves, its internal reality?

If democracy was so very vaguely practiced in Bulgaria before the September 9, 1944 coup, because Christianity's principles were so very little part and parcel of the spiritual reality of the people before that dividing point, what practice of democracy can we expect now to be really introduced into Bulgaria? Now after forty-five years of monstrously undemocratic practices, of absolute rejection of Christian education and teachings?

The United Opposition, which had been put to fire and sword in the years that followed the 1946 Peace Treaty, was the last bearer of democratic principles. With its annihilation the dark period of Communist perversion of the souls and minds of people set in. Those who had been educated before the "Revolution" were now "re-educated" by thorough instruction into the principles of Marxism-Leninism, as this variant of totalitarianism autocracy called itself. Through re-education and the material power of the regime, they were turned into obedient stooges. And while the older intelligentsia was being turned into spiritual sycophants of the regime, the regime was carefully training its own new intellectual cadres, if those thus formed by the regime could still be given the name of intellectuals. Because they were *homines unius libri* and all the time the large masses of the people were more and more degraded and were made through disinformation and lack of information in all that is genuinely spiritual to sink into sottishness or a crude materialism.

There were no religious activities to counter-balance this development. Even the decrepit Orthodox Church was persecuted and hampered in its activities. Soon it was turned into a mere tool in the hands of the regime. All the major dignitaries were either made to toe the line, or their places were given to Party agents. The Church was thus turned into a tool of the regime's fight against religion. By its inaction it served the regime's purposes, and the pitiful sight it presented provoked the contempt of the people, an attitude which in Bulgaria can easily lead to the same attitude to religion in general.

The Catholic Church was also persecuted and practically forced to stop its activities. This mistake was corrected only a few months ago, and now it can again exist as a free Church. As to the various Protestant denominations, some of their churches were closed or destroyed, and the people's power itself appointed pastors was denied by the Communist authorities. Now this is changing slowly, step by step.

Of course, *perestroika* in Bulgaria will take place. Of course, we shall join the Western world. Of course, we shall turn democratic. But I am afraid that this will take a long time.

And I am confirmed in this fear by what we are already witnessing happening in Bulgaria. The regime's intelligentsia is hurrying to leave the sinking ship, preparing to mount the bandwagon of *perestroika*, of democracy, of parliamentarianism, of whatever is coming, simply because it is coming; it is going to win and the regime is going to lose. The same ideologists of the regime until yesterday are already explaining the ideology of the "new order." And there are even some who are so impertinent that they pretend to mount the bandwagon of *perestroika*, while keeping their Party card: who knows, maybe *perestroika* will fail.

What is to be done in this situation? Is there no hope? Where is hope?

It is not fashionable, when speaking of social matters, to be pessimistic. We have seen how things took care of themselves under the present regime, in the sense that it is a complete failure. This, too, is a way for things to settle "somehow or other."

Why has the present regime, i.e. socialism, communism, Marxism-Leninism, or whatever they call themselves, failed? I think the basic cause is because they assumed that they already have the basic component for the building of their socialist, communist etc. society, the human being, in other words that they have "socialist man," Aragon's "*l'homme communiste*", a kind of perfect human, brimming over with readiness to build socialism, to lay down his/her life for the cause of the construction of socialist society, to give up everything in order to fulfill the ideals of socialism.

Of course, they had no such thing. They inherited the ordinary human being or even worse. Because, besides being already defective for lack of Christian formation, the human they inherited and with whom they have had to build socialism, had already been made even worse by several decades of wars and by the collapse of bourgeois society. So that, when the communists began building their communist (or socialist) society, relying on that imaginary "*homme communiste*" (who appeared in their imagination as having all the qualities of a perfect Christian!), they were in for a rather big and unpleasant surprise. "*L'homme communiste*" turned out to be somebody, whose main and only care is not to give but to take. Throughout the fabric of socialist society he/she was robbing, stealing, taking and giving bribes, helping himself/herself from the common good, in order to feather his/her own nest.

The socialist, communist, Marxist-Leninist, or whatever one may call it, regime which is now collapsing, started with the presumption that it already had the thing, which in reality, was the first, main and primary task: to build, to create, to educate the Communist human being burning with the desire to build communism. The regime took that for granted, and it failed. It failed not because its theories were wrong. It failed because it took for granted the existence of the human beings capable of properly applying these theories. But there was no "*homme communiste*."

Coming now to our present problem, to the question of the forthcoming democratization of Bulgaria, the introduction of a genuine free and democratic society, the switching to genuine parliamentary democracy, have we that free, democratic, parliamentary human being needed for the realization of a free, democratic and parliamentary country? Are we not, in our turn, preparing to indulge in the same error, as the communists did? Are we not presuming that we already have "the democratic human being," "the Christian human being," with all the necessary qualities, or at least with the minimum required for the practice of democracy, of a free society, or representative government?

Here I am pessimistic. We are not a Christian nation; in other words, we are not sufficiently imbued with that minimum level of Christian concepts and values required for a free society, for democracy, and parliamentarianism to function.

But, if this is so, are we necessarily going to fail completely? Are we doomed to flop in this splendid opportunity which is offering itself to us for a reconstruction of our society on Christian, democratic, "European" foundations?

No. There are prospects for Christian attitudes and values beginning to penetrate Bulgarian society. More than in the past it is a roundabout, indirect, second hand way. The shining success of the Western world, which in the minds of Bulgarians identify in a general way with "Europe", in respect to economy, culture, civilization, is now making people, and especially the young, begin to look more carefully into the basis of "European society." With some surprise they see that Western, European society is . . . Christian! This is without doubt one of the main causes for the resurgent interest in religious matters in Bulgaria today, particularly with thinking youth. "There must be something in it," they say to themselves, "since it does the job." So that it may be said that it is likely that if Christianity brought democracy to the western world, things here may go the other way round. Maybe it will be democracy which will begin to permeate Bulgarians and Bulgarian society with Christian views and values.

To my mind, a most important, although for the time being only potential asset for the coming *perestroika* in Bulgaria, and which eventually could introduce a considerable degree of Christian influence, are all the various existing Christian churches. Within the Orthodox Church, there are certainly genuinely religious people, and in particular such as are eager to

see Christian principles applied to public life. Venturing an unorthodox opinion, I presume that there are each year among the ten or so priests who graduated from the Sofia Orthodox Theological Seminary, (quite a number of a particular sort of Orthodox cleric) those who in the period between roughly 1947-57, when a Fatherland Front permit was required for all specialties except theology, entered the Ecclesiastical Seminary not as much to become priests, but in order to get a higher education, as was the case of many adherents of the extreme left (anarchists). That type of ecclesiastic, now aged between fifty and sixty or so, will certainly have a more "modern", i.e. applied Christianity attitude, than the usual ritually oriented *pop* or priest. They may be expected to turn their attention more to public life and politics, although this is only a conjecture. The Orthodox Church in Bulgaria has been too debilitated by forty years of submission to the Party, and action can be expected only from the lowest ranks of the clergy, as this is already shown here and there. Several months ago a Priests' Union was founded which strives for a review of the elected metropolitans for a new Synod and for a free Church.

If Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox could decide to throw themselves into the battlefield of public life, not to proselytize, but to exert a Christian impact on political life, they might be able to set in motion a considerable Christian influence in political thinking and action in Bulgaria for which there is a crying need.

The Bulgarian people have lived for five centuries under a cruel and powerful domination. In order to survive, they had to become opportunists. When other masters seized them they resorted again to this five hundred-year old practice. They entered the Communist Party *en masse*. They took cover in the Communist-controlled Agrarian Union. People had to live: the masters were changing, and so were they. They bent their necks before the storm, but now, when the storm is actually starting to vanish and they can recover their breath, there will certainly be very favorably inclined for genuine practical Christian influence. Good principles and values can easily find acceptance with them, provided they see their practical utility.

The country is now starting on its way to real democracy. Here is the opportunity for Christian action. The Christian attitude to life is essentially democratic, democracy is essentially Christian, especially if care is taken to avoid a mechanical application of the majority principle and to moderate it by Christian respect for the human being as such and by Christian compassion.

What is needed in Bulgaria at this juncture is a major inflow of Christianity and of political Christianity in particular. The things that are God's are invading more and more the things that are Caesar's. The West has already shown that such an active Christian involvement in political life can usefully take place and be effective. What is needed in Bulgaria is a Christian democratic action, which would enter the fray. This could take the

form of a regular political party without any tinge of clericalism. What is needed is to turn to account the potentials of Christian conceptions and values in order to improve the ethical level of political life. And strange as God's ways are, perhaps through the introduction of real democracy, people will begin to grasp the practical importance and value of Christianity.

Perestroika without Christianity? No, it will not do. Another labelling of our society as democratic, while remaining authoritarian, ought not to be allowed. We need the real thing. The Common European Home, which we strive to join, is a home for free, democratic nations with a considerable Christian conceptual and ethical background. We must imbue ourselves with it, if not for the sake of our minds and souls, at least for the sake of our political, social and, our foreign-political future. There is no way around. We must Christianize in order to restructure.

Solzhenitsyn is absolutely right: PERESTROIKA NEEDS CHRIST, OR IT WON'T HAPPEN.

Edited by Stella Alexander