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REFLECTIONS FROM ROLLING RIDGE IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA--CHRISTENDOM OR DIASPORA?

by Paul Peachey

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During October, 1993, a small team of scholars, sponsored by the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (CRVP), independently based at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., met in a series of locally co-sponsored symposia in five cities in central Europe. In Warsaw and Lublin (Poland), the topic was the church and public life. In Budapest (Hungary) and Prague and Brno (Czech Republic), the venue and themes were secular. All dealt with the post-Soviet turmoil and possibilities. These events were part of a continuing dialogue, begun precariously already during the former Soviet era.

The Iron Curtain, and the Cold War that sustained it, dichotomized Europe artificially into East and West, imposing two crude stereotypes on realities that are far more complex. A band of unwilling satellite countries buffered the Soviet empire proper on its western frontier--Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, indeed a second tier as well, initially consisting of the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. The last was sufficiently removed geographically to opt out of the Soviet bloc, though retaining a communist regime on its own.

These countries, though characterized by enormous internal and historical differences, possessed a certain central European identity and consciousness, distinct from what lay to the east and the west. Historically they were pressured by forces from both directions. To some extent the Iron Curtain coincided with the boundaries between Eastern and Western Christendom, but only inexactly. In the three countries in focus here, Hungary (former) Czechoslovakia, and Poland, the western church prevailed (primarily Roman Catholic, though the first two included sizable Protestant minorities as well).

For Central Europe, a Third Way?

Could, or should, a central European grouping emerge as a third way between east and west in the post-Soviet era? Beyond the historical legacy, two contemporary impulses suggested that option. First is the lingering uneasiness about western support to counter pressures from the east, a uneasiness strongest in the Czech lands, that began with the Munich 'sell-out' in 1938, and was reinforced in subsequent upheavals in all three countries during the Soviet era, when people had hoped for assistance from the West. Secondly, given the welfare state features of the previous regimes, there is some anxiety

about too rapid a plunge into the insecurities inherent in market economies. Conceivably a middle way might be devised.

Regional interdependencies are normal in any case and will find new expression the years ahead. But that such interdependencies will sustain an independent alternative for these countries is improbable. The drive for full participation in both the European and global systems is far too strong and the genuine resources for central European autonomy far too weak to sustain a third grouping. Yet meanwhile the complexity of problems and forces in all these countries is truly daunting.

The Human Prospect

The symposia here described focused on the spiritual dimensions of the new situation, spiritual understood in both secular and religious terms. Both elements were part of the mix in all five symposia, though as indicated, in Hungary and the Czech Republic, the former note was dominant, in Poland, the latter. In all instances, however, religion referred to the legacy of Christendom, which had been the cultural matrix of all these lands. Secularization, quite apart from the Marxist interlude, is the most pronounced in Hungary. In Czech lands, where the memory of the fifteenth century Hussite reforms persists and where some compulsory re-Catholicizing occurred, Catholic consciousness is less certain. In Poland, despite a liberal, pluralist past, reaching back to the Reformation era, the Catholic Church has long been the guarantor of the nation under alien political rule. There Catholic identity is strongest.

The Church and *Solidarnosc*

Solidarity, the movement of Polish workers during the 1980s, led by Lech Walesa, supported by the Church, and invigorated by several visits from the Polish Pope, John Paul II, was well publicized here in the USA. Historians will long debate the importance of these catalysts in bringing an end to the Soviet epoch generally. Whatever the facts, these developments enhanced tendencies, already present, to conflate the Catholic and Polish identities. Yet as *Solidarnosc* went rapidly from protest to political participation and responsibility, fragmentation was inevitable. In an early fall election, Catholics lost and reformed communists staged a partial come-back.

Thus the stage was set for the Warsaw symposium, sponsored on the Polish side by the nationally dispersed Club of Polish Catholic Intellectuals (KIK). For this occasion the American team grew to a dozen persons, a number of them nationally known figures. The experiences of the churches in public life, USA and Poland, were compared. Though views of the American participants ranged somewhat across the political spectrum, all were committed to the principles of the separation of church and state, religious liberty, and the values of Vatican II. This last point was of signal importance throughout. Only since the "Great Transformation" (1989) has a larger engagement with the thought of Vatican II

become possible in all these lands.

In the end, however, the attraction of a strong political presence for the church persisted, possibly the formation of a Christian democratic party, such as appeared in several western countries after World War II. At this stage, however, and especially for an outside observer, prediction of the outcome would be presumptuous. A Polish sociologist and priest, asked near the end of the final meeting in Lublin, what the most urgent problem or consideration is today, answered in a single word: "chaos!"--unpredictability in all sectors of life in society. Christianity, sedimented in the culture, the art and the architecture of Europe, remains a powerful undercurrent in eastern Europe. A participant in Budapest characterized herself as an "atheistic Catholic," in her country hardly an isolated case. The Christian legacy in the culture has a life of its own, shaping the life of believers and unbelievers alike. In that sense, Christianity survives as memory in architectural and artistic monuments, and in some instances as source for hopes for the restoration of Christian dominance in public life.

This participant in these symposia, invited as a "free church" exponent, argued that whatever the validity of "Christendom" in the past, that is, of a publicly-dominant, institutional Christianity, emerging pluralism of societies today, rules out its revival today. Indeed, the theological foundation of that vision has always been dubious. That, in the words of Handel's great oratorio, the "kingdoms of this world" will become "the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ" is an eschatological, not a historical prediction. Already in post-exilic Judaism, the vision of the mission of the people of Covenant dispersed among the nations was taking shape, and became increasingly explicit in the New Testament era. Salt, light, leaven, hence dispersion (Gr. *diaspora*) are the pertinent images.

Biblical people are called to witness, not to rule, to follow Christ, not to impose rules on people not professing the faith, and that task is more than enough to engage us in our churches. For Poles and Americans alike, the memory of Christendom can easily become a liability. Jaroslav Pelikan, a Harvard historian, wrote recently: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."