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Weigel's "The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism" - Book Review

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George Weigel set out to analyze the Revolution in Eastern Europe of 1989 and the New Russian Revolution of 1991, events which this reviewer prefers to label, "The Great Transformation." The Introduction of the book was intended to be a theoretical underpinning of the analysis by setting various modern revolutions into the context of the Judeo-Christian quest for the Millennium. The problem of all the revolutionary Christian chilliasts and secularist proponents of revolutions prior to this last one is that they prioritized the political solutions to human problems. Only the 1989 revolution prioritized conscience and the life of the spirit and again relativized the political. This leads the author to his main thesis, namely, that it is impossible to provide the reasons for the why and the how of the Great Transformation without the considerable role of the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope, John Paul II (p. 16). However, the book makes a much bolder claim as Weigel unfolds his ideas. Initially Weigel dismisses as accurate the claims that Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan, or the Helsinki Final Accord were responsible for the Great Transformation. All popular analyses continue to favor the primacy of political, socio-economic and diplomatic causation in a quasi-Marxist manner, according to Weigel, and there are failures in interpretation by both the Left and the Right. He then proposes not only the need to add the spiritual dimensions which are generally omitted from such analyses but appears to argue that the Great Transformation took place because the Roman Catholic Church resisted Communism. John Paul II, the 'Polish Pope,' was unafraid to show the moral bankruptcy of both the 'Yalta imperial system' (Weigel's term for Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe) and of Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism. Weigel then proceeded to give his account of how courage was summoned to deal with fears in order to confront Communist lies.

Chapter 4 provides a brief analysis of Catholic-Communist relations from 1917, which contain Weigel's criticism of the Vatican's Ostpolitik prior to 1978. The election in that year of Archbishop Karol Wojtila to the papacy makes a crucial difference in the perceptions that Communism is unbeatable and sets into motions a series of events in Poland which kindled 'the Last Revolution.' Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the events prior and during the revolutionary days in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The last chapter is a more generalized discussion of the relationship of the Christian conscience (the word Christian in Weigel's vocabulary is almost exclusively synonymous with Catholic) and the democratic experiment in which he claims that democracy is made possible by the Christian relativization of political claims on account of the absolute claims of the Lord of History. The conflict between the
Church and Communism was inevitable because the two have "radically different construals of the moral order" (p. 207).

There is much good about this handsomely printed book. There is a lot of good information and helpful interpretations in this book. One of the strongest points is the author's lucid, elegant, forceful, and witty eloquence. In style and approach Weigel resembles most closely William F. Buckley, with whom he shares a conservative bent of mind. This reviewer agrees with Weigel's contention that it is impossible to understand the Great Transformation without its spiritual ingredient and that John Paul II played a considerable role in the undoing of the Communist system in Eastern Europe. Unlike Weigel he sees it much more as a confluence of many factors that caused an essentially unexpected collapse or implosion of the Communist system and the possible demise of Marxism–Leninism as an ideology capable of inspiring action.

The weaknesses of the book are considerable.

First, there is the problem with the title, which is partially misleading. The reader is likely to expect that the author will deal with all of Eastern Europe and the USSR but will actually find only the narrow concentration on Poland and Czechoslovakia with the erroneous extrapolation that the events in Poland were paradigmatic of the rest of Eastern Europe. The author's hypothesis is far more tenable when applied to Poland and rather shaky when applied to Czechoslovakia. The treatment of Czechoslovakia is inadequate because the Roman Catholic Church did not have a parallel role in Czech and Slovak history with the Polish. Since Weigel turned a blind eye to other domestic factors except the Catholic component he is bound to be wrong in a country where the Catholic Church, although the church of the majority of the population, did not play a decisive role prior to the Communist take-over. Those who know the situation in Czechoslovakia will readily acknowledge that there is almost a complete ignorance by Catholics and Protestants in their own lands of each other's history. Weigel embraced the local Catholics' ignorance of non-Catholics and presented the uninformed reader with a fractured story that is ultimately misleading. In addition, when sharply critical of the Communist practice of licensing of clergy in Czechoslovakia and using it as a tool of manipulation, he does not acknowledge that this was not an innovation. Rather, it was the result of the failure to abolish the establishment of the historic churches which neither the Catholics nor Protestants protested in the pre or post-Communist era, but the rejecting the separation of church and state and preferring to depend rather on government support. Czechoslovakia was the sole Communist country which did not introduce separation of church and state even as merely a constitutional principle on paper in defiance of the illusory pattern of such separation in other Communist countries.

The second major problem is to view the Roman Catholic Church's role as determinative in the collapse of Communism and to do so in a rather triumphalist, self-serving way. Non-
Catholics barely ever get to be mentioned much less included into the consideration as a factor with which to reckon. Of importance for this analysis are only Communist totalitarianism and Catholic moral and spiritual opposition to it. Other spiritual dimensions of Eastern Europe life are simply overlooked. There is, for instance, no place in Weigel's analysis to acknowledge that other churches and theologies also denied by their very existence the absolute claims of Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism (even though some have alleged that they were compromised in collaboration with the Communist government). One would never guess on the basis of this book that anyone else resisted totalitarianism but Catholics—and an occasional secular dissident, like Václav Havel. Nor was there place in this book for any acknowledgement of the considerable influence of reformist or humanist Marxists in bringing down the totalitarian monolithism in countries like Hungary and Yugoslavia, nor the role of the Protestant Churches in the former G.D.R., nor the spiritual space in Orthodox churches in the former Soviet Union which lured many young people to the churches. The role of the Hussite movement in Czechoslovakia was completely left out though many Catholics in that country are cognizant that Hussitism and anti-Hapsburgism influenced not only anticlericalism in the Czech lands but had an impact on many of the Catholic clergy. And finally, the considerable role of nationalism, especially when combined with religious identification, which was especially a considerable element in the Polish case, was not sufficiently included into the equation.

Not only does Weigel fail to acknowledge a certain delay in the Roman Catholic advocacy of dialogue found in the Vatican II constitution of "Pacem in Terris" and of religious freedom found in "Gaudium et Spes," but he also fails to raise the question often on the mind of non-Catholics in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union whether the Catholic Church will remain true to those principles after the Great Transformation. He does mention that for some elder priests and bishops there is the temptation to want to simply continue with the practice of the pre-Communist era. But that is a long way from coming to grips with the nearly self-evident fact that the Roman Catholic Church was rarely perceived as an agent for democracy externally and internally both prior to the ascendance of Communism and during the Communist period when the Church lived under a siege mentality. Therefore, the Catholic Church is unlikely to emerge with many creative proponents of democracy and religious freedom for all rather than just for Roman Catholics. In fairness Weigel should have admitted that it was not Communists alone who denied human rights and democracy in Eastern Europe but that repressions were rampant for decades, if not centuries and that the Roman Catholic Church was not exempt from the temptation to deny such rights to others.

Weigel underestimated the difficulties for democracy caused by the turmoil of ethno-religious rivalries that have burst into the open since the Great Transformation. Everyone knows that democracy as a human practice does not fare well in wartime. A number of
territories in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union are already embroiled in war. It is hard to argue that the Catholic Church per se is playing a role that is clearly pro-democracy, pro-dialogue, and pro-human rights for all in such conflicts. Weigel would have done well to restrain some of his unbounded enthusiasm for the Catholic Church as being the carrier of "the revolution of the spirit in which conscience confronted the fear and acquiescence that kept 'the society' in the grip of 'the power'" (p.131). There is no objective place for the imperialistic monopolization of the Roman Catholic Church's decisive role of ushering in the liberation of the human spirit; even many Catholics will readily concede this.

In conclusion, for those interested in analyzing the Great Transformation it will be important to read this book to complement other approaches. But those who will read only Weigel's book may be seriously impaired in understanding the far more complex trends and series of events that lead to the fateful unravelling of Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR than presented here. Half-truths continue to be a dangerous path to error.

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