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RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM: FROM EUPHORIA TO ANXIETY

Paul Mojzes, founder and editor

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Prelude to the Great Transformation

In the decades prior to the implosion of the communist system, change could be discerned here and there in Eastern Europe. The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of the most pertinent developments that spurred the transition from communism to post-communism, employing some fairly broad brushstrokes to make my case.

As early as 1956 the Hungarians attempted a reform or revolt. Presumably a different segment of Hungarian society had aspirations for change, but the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries were not prepared to allow them to be independent. The revolt was crushed by the Red Army, and many years of bitter repression and persecution ensued. However, by the 1980s the János Kádár regime began showing signs of flexibility in what some called “The Hungarian Way” of greater intellectual and economic openness to the outside world; others coined the term “goulash communism” to indicate greater attention to the standard of living. The reformist wing of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party prevailed over the more rigid traditionalists, which provided more “elbow room” even in church-state relations. They led the way toward the transition to more liberty and by December 1989 the Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party disbanded, opening the path to multi-party democracy.

In Poland, the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtila in 1978 as Pope John Paul II brought seismic changes to that country. Beginning in 1980, the ascent of the “Solidarity” labor union—implicitly supported by the influential Roman Catholic Church—caused a sharp reaction not only within the Polish communist government, but an even more serious concern by the Soviet leadership. This resulted in a dramatic imposition of martial law by Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski in 1981 and 1982, but ultimately it led to rapid liberalization after the second visit of John Paul II to Poland and the martyrdom of the priest Jerzy Pospiełuszko in 1984. The Catholic Church’s open sympathy for “Solidarity,” supporting its legalization, brought about increased political and religious liberties, which enabled the transformation of Poland from communism to a pluralistic democracy.

The election of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party was of momentous importance not only for the Great Transformation but for the implosion of communism in the entire Soviet orbit. His charismatic personality was a sharp departure from his predecessors’ gerontocracy, and his reformist ideas, among which *glasnost* [transparency or openness] and *perestroika* [restructuring—more than reform but less than revolution] were the attention-getters, but did not at first initiate changes in the other countries of the bloc. However, Gorbachev assured that the changes throughout Eastern Europe would not be prevented by the Soviet Army as he promised not to interfere in their individual developments. At first religion in the USSR was relatively unaffected; however, when the time came to observe the millennial celebration of the Baptism of Rus’ in 1988, which may have been suppressed by his predecessors, Gorbachev not only gave permission but—together with his wife—was seated next to Patriarch Pimen during the festivities with Soviet TV broadcasting their friendly conversation to the country and the world. The path was clear for major changes in church-state relations to occur in the mother nation of communism, and this comparatively religiously-tolerant atmosphere eventually led to the breakup of the USSR.

In the only majority Protestant country of the Eastern Bloc, the German Democratic Republic, or better known in the West as “East Germany”, the delicate church-state relations had been ambiguously named “*Kirche im Sozialismus*.” had its own very nuanced church-state relations with little evidence that the leaders of the ruling Socialist Unity Party were inclined toward further liberalization. But those in church and society who longed for change found their inspiration in Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and *perestroika*, cleverly proclaiming an altered slogan, “*Von*

der Sowjetunion zu lernen, heisst denken lernen.”¹ Clearly that was not all that propelled the changes. When in 1988, Hungary permitted East German visitors to cross into Austria as they fled to West Germany, a series of events ultimately led not only to massive flights but to demonstrations in Berlin, Leipzig, and elsewhere—with the active support of the churches. Such dramatic pushback against the Socialist Unity party forced the regime to collapse. The most dramatic symbol of the fall of communism and of the end of the Cold War was the dismantling of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. In a massive understatement, the East Germans called this *Die Wende* [turning] or the Gentle Revolution. Many Americans prefer to give credit to Ronald Regan’s appeal, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” but that is a simplistic explanation. The Protestant churches played an important though subtle role in this Great Transformation. Not long afterward Germany was reunited and religious liberty attained, though the leveling turned out to be much more difficult than anticipated.

The Czechoslovak Republic was another early bird seeking to achieve “socialism with a human face” by means of the Prague Spring experience of 1968. The names of Alexander Dubček, the prime minister, and Ludvik Svoboda, president, became well known throughout the world; however, the noble aspirations of the majority of the population were crushed by Soviet tanks and the militaries of the Warsaw pact. The Czechs and Slovaks found themselves deep in a Stalinist winter in which almost all the reforms and freedoms of 1968 were reversed. Unlike the Hungarians in 1956, they did not fight back but sullenly put up a passive resistance to the bitter persecutions; this ensued for the next two decades, sustained by a vast secret police apparatus. Gorbachev’s reforms also became a prelude to what the Czechoslovaks called their “Velvet” or “Gentle Revolution” of November 1989. Though the resignation of the communist leadership took place with surprising speed and relatively little violence, that peaceable path was prepared by religious and secular dissidents organized in the informal civic association, “Charter 77.” Members of Charter 77, of whom the playwright Václav Havel was the most famous, and similar intellectual and civic groups were not merely against the violence of the communist system: but rejected its moral malady. Havel was subsequently elected the first non-communist president of Czechoslovakia. Regretfully, several years later the country split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, albeit peacefully.

¹ To learn from the Soviet Union means to learn to think.

Concurrent with Havel's election, the events in Romania were hurling toward a violent end with the execution of its dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife in the uprising; the dreaded *Securitate* disbanded after it massacred many anti-Ceausescu demonstrators. The revolution began "innocently" with an ethnic Hungarian Reformed pastor, László Tökés, preaching in the provincial city of Timisoara against the repression of his church members by not so subtle attempts to Romanianize them. Religious life in Romania, like in Poland was robust, but tightly controlled by the government; Romanian nationalism caused favoritism for the Orthodox Church. Despite severe control and general subservience of much of the churches' leadership, there were some dissidents and Hungarians of Hungary provided fairly open and vigorous support to their fellow ethnics in Romania. When *Securitate* roughed up Tökés, he was aggressively defended first by his congregants, and then the wider population of Timisoara followed suit. His proponents guarded him as the crowd grew around him. When the crowd became large enough, they decided to march to center city; the secret police ultimately massacred many. It was like lighting a dynamo stick, resulting in the largest number of casualties in the East European revolt during the Christmas of 1989. With the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, his personality cult came to an abrupt end and Romania went on the path of recovery and membership in the European Union.

Throughout most of the communist period, Bulgaria was a reliable vassal to the Soviet Union, and equally reliable in suppressing civil and religious liberties. Bulgaria held the majority Bulgarian Orthodox Church on a short leash, providing just enough support for nationalistic reasons to keep the majority Orthodox priesthood in obedience to the state. Even in these policies, Bulgarian communists emulated their Soviet model. Only the Muslims of Bulgaria showed signs of resistance after repeated attempts to homogenize them into Bulgarian ethnoreligiosity. In November 1989, the long-serving head of the Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov, was pressured by others in the leadership to resign. Within a month of his resignation, communist rule effectively ended. Religious communities, particularly minorities, claimed for themselves religious liberties and greater human rights for the Bulgarian population.

That only left the ultra-rigid and most repressive Communist regime in Europe, that of Albania, standing into 1990. Albania was the poorest, least developed European country, with a majority Muslim population; however, its Communist leader, Enver Hoxha, had declared all religions illegal. He clung to the allegations that religion was irremediably evil, thereby making Albania, by its own claim, the first atheist nation in the world. The destruction of religion, religious

leaders, and objects was almost total. Only in May 1990 did the communist government remove the longstanding prohibition to worship privately, and then in June 1990 did the first public worship take place. The announcement that religious freedom and the rule of all would be respected had to wait until November 8, 1990, when issued by Ramiz Alia of the Albanian Party of Labor. It was only then that the constitutional prohibition of religion of 1976 was removed.

The above covers all traditional members of the Soviet Bloc. The Bloc was not nearly as uniform as often perceived because Stalinist Albania broke away from subservience to the Soviet Union when Khrushchev denounced Stalinism, and Ceausescu decided to challenge the diktat from Moscow when he felt that it was at the expense of own vision for communist development of the country. Yugoslavia is missing from the above narrative for the simple reason that, though socialist of the communist variety, Yugoslavia broke away from the Bloc in 1948. Its leader, Josip Broz-Tito, decided the Soviet friendship was more like Soviet mastery and the famous Stalin-Tito rift resulted in Yugoslavia's exit from the Soviet orbit. At first that made little difference in the slavish emulation of the Soviet model, including the repression of religion. Gradually, however, the rift needed to be justified by theoretical reflections on Marxism-Leninism, thereby increasingly challenging not only the Soviet theoretical model but even more so the Soviet practice. No man is an island, and no country exists alone on planet earth, so Yugoslavia needed friends elsewhere and found it among primarily in the non-aligned nations of the Third World and in masterful tight-rope walking between West and East. Tito's genius was his pragmatism and willingness to innovate in order to provide more room to maneuver in the world and provide greater satisfaction for his multi-ethnic and multi-religious citizenry. By the 1960s, Yugoslav Marxists ventured into some bold adaptation of Marxism along with openness to the West. While some old habits of repression of civil and religious liberties lingered on, by the 1970s Yugoslavia was well on the way of being the freest and most elastic Communist regimes in the world. Tito died in 1980 and the country behaved for a while as if the slogan, "With Tito in life and with Tito in death" were real. True reality caught up with Yugoslavs by the end of the turbulent decade with ethnoreligious tensions weakening the federation. By January 1990 the League of Communists of Yugoslavia dissolved and soon thereafter numerous primarily ethnic parties held elections that led by 1991 to incremental secessions and ultimately war. Instead of becoming the first ex-communist country to join the European Union, the country exploded in fratricidal and genocidal mutual destruction, which set it decades, if not centuries, back. Yugoslavia was replaced by seven successor states: Slovenia,

Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo, characterized by unresolved problems and tensions. Each of the states had different church-state and religious liberty issues.

Post-Communism

Thus, some thirty years ago, Communism imploded with surprisingly low levels of violence—which regrettably was not entirely avoided, but arrived sporadically, reaching in the 1990s even genocidal dimensions. The news of the domino-like collapse of communist regimes, from the German Democratic Republic and the fall of the Berlin wall, to the most repressive of the regimes in Albania, was astonishing to watch and exhilarating to participate in. It is fair to describe it as a feeling as euphoria. Large segments of the populations of the formerly communist countries rejoiced and celebrated; those who had close associations with the previous system had reason to fear their loss of positions and prestige. When the archives and files of the secret police were opened to scrutiny in most but not all countries, the degree of entanglement of even some highly positioned clergy came to the light and led to recriminations. Persons outside the affected area, especially in the West, also shared in the euphoria; some even expressed gleeful declarations of victory in the Cold War, giving undue credit to Ronald Reagan or Pope John Paul II, or the “Solidarity” labor union in Poland or even declared it as “victory of Christianity over communism.” In Russia, the person who wisely led the implosion, Mikhail Gorbachev, sank in popularity to very low percentages as most Russians blamed him for the loss of their empire.

What was clear was that communism in Eastern Europe collapsed. With surprising speed, thousands if not millions of former communists claimed either very tenuous engagement or claimed having been coerced to cooperate with a system which they allegedly did not support in their hearts. Soon it became hard to find people who openly stated their former Marxist convictions. Two puzzling questions emerged: what to call the change, and what will be the direction of the change. As mentioned above, the change was usually called a Revolution, usually with a qualifier such as Velvet, Gentle, Silk, *Wende* [turning], or *Perestroika* [restructuring]. I used the term Great Transformation in the subtitle of my book, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, which I began writing prior to these historic events. I fancied myself to be the first to systematically publicize how the repression of religious liberty was carried out across decades in all of the countries of Eastern Europe. Notably however, as I was writing, one after the other of the regimes fell, and many of my professional insights gathered at great effort, suddenly became

unveiled when the files of the *Stasis* or other security agencies and archives were made public. With such massive departures from the structures of the communist system, new legislation and governmental structures were being introduced in the various states. It became clear to me that the book might only have historical importance if I concluded with the end of the communist laws and practices. Therefore, I needed to write about the beginning of the new or altered legislation and structures and ultimately it was necessary to add a sub-title, *Before and After the Great Transformation*. It was not yet clear in which direction that “After” would go. Would it be democracy? Some form of autocracy? A social democracy? Or something altogether new? The word Post-Communism was uniformly accepted just because of its open-endedness and vagueness.

But what kind of church-state or religion-government arrangement would be adopted? In the late 1980s Prof. Zdenko Roter, a sociologist from Ljubljana, Slovenia--at that time still a liberal or humanistic Marxist—and I worked on creating a classification of the major types of relationships of state with religious institutions. We came up with the following four models:

Type A – Ecclesiastical Absolutism – exclusive power is vested in a single religious institution supported by the state. This model was widely used during the Middle Ages and is rare in the contemporary world.

Type B – Religious Toleration – the state is separated from religions and is benign to all religions, however, giving preference to the stronger churches but discriminating toward non-religious citizens. This model is in wide use in most modern states.

Type C – Secularistic Absolutism – the state hinders all religious expressions and favors a single secularist worldview. This model was used by communist governments.

Type D – Pluralistic Liberty – full exercise of freedom of religious or non-religious convictions with a variety of truth claims, none supported or proscribed by the state. While still rare in practice it is a model toward which a liberal democratic society might strive.

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, most of the Eastern European societies belonged to Type B, with some vestiges of a Type A society still in practice in tsarist Russia. The Marxist-Leninist theory aimed to impose the Type C model, most successfully implemented in Albania and the Soviet Union with suppressed vestiges of Type B mode combined with Type C in the other communist countries. During the communist period, religious communities were persecuted--albeit unevenly--both within the Bloc and within a country. The previous rivalries between religious groups appeared to diminish due to the restrictions imposed upon them that caused

common suffering. It seemed that if these restrictions were to be lifted, the religious communities in each country would eagerly strive to cooperate and share in full freedom of a Type D model. The American pluralistic experience appeared to be worthy of emulating or even improving upon if the communist control and restrictions were to be lifted. But this wasn't to be.

When the Great Transformation from communism to post-communism took place thirty or so years ago, I inquired about which model they would aspire to during my conversations with various religious leaders in the region. Hardly any opted for Type D. They confirmed the observation of many, including my own, that the “revolution” to post-communism was unlike previous revolutions, all of which looked to the future in anticipation of improvement. But the Central and East European and Eurasian “revolution” did not look so much to the future instead looked sideways and backward for inspiration. The sideways look was toward the West—more so toward western consumerism and freedom to travel than to its notions of liberty and human rights. Catholic religious leaders looked to adopt the privileges enjoyed by Catholics in neighboring Western countries. Orthodox leaders looked toward the privileged position of the Orthodox Church in Greece. Both Catholics and Orthodox also looked to the past, to a period when they were the established or a “state church” with privileges for their historic contribution to the nation. Protestants hoped for financial and theological assistance from Protestant churches in the USA and Western Europe. This they obtained, at times in exuberant measure, by uninformed zealots who considered Eastern Europe an atheist hell hole just waiting to be “saved” by the various evangelists and missionaries, mostly from the US and Scandinavia. Their financial resources and contemporary methods often overwhelmed the traditionalist Orthodox and Catholics who were as yet unable to compete in the free market of ideas. Russian Orthodox leaders pleaded with the National Council of Churches in the USA to prevent the avalanche of evangelicals, not realizing that there is no leverage or legal means to do so.

Instead of the hoped for harmony under the benign protection of equal freedom for all, difficult adjustments took place throughout the region in the economy (rapacious dismemberment of collective ownership with resulting unemployment and loss of social protection for the aged), in social stratification (with a minority of oligarchs and conversely many descending into deep poverty), and in conflict between various religions, some of which became privileged, whereas atheists became disadvantaged. Frequently, power positions had been reversed and those who were

previously oppressed seemed not to remember what it meant to be disadvantaged but were now using their newly achieved social and political prominence to rub it in.

The positive development was that new legislation was passed in nearly all countries, at first fairly evenhandedly awarding of liberties, but then gradually introducing restrictions toward minority groups. Some countries immediately provided exclusive constitutional privileges to the majority church. Then, under some pressure mostly from the outside, they yielded to a more “generous” arrangement by discriminating between specifically named religions and then some gradations to formally acknowledged religious institutions and to those religiously inspired civic groups that were not granted the same legal status as the other religious institutions. For instance, in the Russian Federation the government in practice emphasized the special status for Russian Orthodoxy, while Judaism, Islam, Buddhism who were historically present in Russia were also granted full legal recognition but enjoy lesser rights. Meanwhile, the government restricted the rights of others, including Roman Catholicism, while the Jehovah’s Witnesses were outlawed. In Northern Macedonia, the Constitution at first specified the unique position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, but subsequently, under western pressure, changed the constitutional provision to specify five “historic” religions: Macedonian Orthodoxy, Islam, Roman Catholicism, Evangelical Methodism, and Judaism. And so forth.

It is no longer unusual that, as in the past, certain countries are considered both unofficially, but even officially as being, for instance, Catholic countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Croatia, and Slovenia or Orthodox such as Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Moldavia, Georgia, and Armenia. Most of the former southern republics of the Soviet Union, such as Azerbaijan, Turkestan, Kirghizstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are considered Islamic. The degree of religiosity varies greatly in that, for instance, Poland and Croatia are considered very Catholic, whereas Slovenia and the Czech Republic, despite a majority Catholic population, are rather secular. Albania was and remains an anomaly in that it made a radical about-face from being the most repressive atheist country to perhaps the most tolerant country, in which there is relatively little hostility between the majority Muslim, and the smaller Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches.

In most Eastern European countries, the symbiotic relationship between ethnicity or nation and religion continues, deserves the coinage “ethnoreligiosity”. Ethnoreligiosity is among the greatest culprits for tensions among and within Eastern European countries. Three of the former

communist countries actually fell apart: Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. The most “civilized” partition was that of the Czechs and Slovaks, who had the good sense, as the most strident Yugoslavs noted condescendingly, to “count the chairs and decided who gets what.” Much to the surprise of many at first there was no bloodshed when the Soviet Union broke up. Sure, there had been a bloody attempt at secession in Chechnya, but it was eventually subdued. But then Russian troops invaded parts of Georgia allegedly protecting the rights of Abkhazia and South Ossetians to secede from Georgia. Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a bloody war over Nagorno Karabakh. And lastly, President Putin decided that Crimea did not belong to Ukraine and annexed it; then he provided military and other assistance to the rebels in eastern Ukraine (Donbas) aiming to break away from Ukraine. That war is still ongoing with thousands of casualties. The bloodiest was the disintegration and partition of the Yugoslavian federation in the 1990s and early decade of the 21st century, which resulted in seven fairly unstable and conflict-ridden states: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Northern Macedonia.

A more important political re-alignment took place when most of Soviet satellite states chose to join the European Union and NATO to avoid potential Russian attempts to draw them back into its sphere of influence. The three Baltic states that used to be Soviet republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, sought such safety, as did Poland, the Czech and the Slovak Republics, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Croatia, while the other remaining Balkan states are either candidates or aspirants for admission, with Albania and Montenegro already members of NATO. Membership in EU and NATO often specify adherence to certain human rights and democratic civil liberties, among which are freedom of religion and conscience that provide certain protection even to minority religions, giving some hope in the long run that most of the countries of the region might achieve the lofty status of the Type D model of Pluralistic Liberty.

The reason why euphoria gave way to anxiety are manifold. Many of the social protections that were available under communism, such as right to employment, retirement pensions, comprehensive health insurance, and educational opportunities have become much more fragile. Capitalism as an economic system often came in its most rapacious form with cut-throat competition, enormous corruption, and favoritism. Multiparty system elections did not necessarily produce democracy and occasionally led to such great proliferation of political parties that people had difficulty recognizing even their names, much less their platform. Wild swings from left-leaning to right-leaning parties and back took place in elections, as the confused electorate reacted

impulsively to different stimuli, usually prompted by fear or anger. As is often the case in extreme conflicts between freedom and security, usually the latter was chosen. Before too long, deep-seated local affinities toward authoritarianism and even fascism came to the surface. There are few who would not regard the rule of Vladimir Putin as being authoritarian. The close mutual support between President Putin and Patriarch Kirill resulted in one of the many Eastern European political religions, which has been described by an ecumenical officer in an Orthodox Church in America--with many years of close contacts with and love for the Russian Orthodox Church--as “clero-fascist.” Attacks on Jews and Muslims, especially from the former southern Soviet republics are noticeable.

Nationalism, sometimes reaching hysterical levels, is on the rise throughout Eastern Europe. Dangerous rhetoric of hate is spewed even by high ranking religious officials domestically and during their travels abroad. The war in Ukraine did not only affect tensions between a resurgent Russia (which tries to revive its imperial reach) and the West (which tries to hem it in by expansion of NATO) but caused a profound schism between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow. In Poland and Hungary, politicians, like Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orban respectively, took a sharp turn to the right and autocracy with the support of many of the leading religious figures in their country with their strong anti-immigrant positions and with pronounced antisemitism and Islamophobia. Migrations by refugees from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere from Asia and Africa, who take the southeastern route to western Europe, often provoke very unfriendly responses and erection of barb wire barriers along borders. Another response is local hysteria—most notably among populations that themselves used to flee oppression and received a welcome in the West; they are not emulating the kindness they had themselves encountered.

The atmosphere can sometimes be described not merely as anxious but as paranoid, which almost always results in attacks against vulnerable minorities such as Roma (Gypsies), Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, neo-Protestants, or whoever is disliked locally (e.g. Serbs in Croatia, Croatians in Serbia, Bosniaks in the Republika Srpska, and between Serbs and Kosovars). A number of the articles published in OPREE provide a more detailed report and analysis of these threatening processes on a local scale.

From the above one might easily become thoroughly pessimistic, but viewed from a religious perspective it is important, regardless of pessimism or optimism, to have hope. These are human problems for which there are human solutions. Those who believe in God have the added

reliance on a God who inclines the universe toward good. Intra-Christian ecumenism, best evidenced in the European Ecumenical Assembly, such as those held in Basel (1980), Graz (1997), and Sibiu (2007), which despite some disharmony ultimately trend toward the long-range solution of conflicts and increased cooperation. The next Assembly of the World Council of Churches will take place in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2021 might spur more constructive cooperation.

Regionally, there is widespread identification of Islam as “jihadism,” causing exaggerated fear among the population and an opportunity for political and religious leaders to manipulate this anxiety. Local and world interreligious dialogues have helped not only the de-escalation of armed conflicts but the creation of interreligious councils like those in Bosnia and Macedonia in the 1990s and 2000s, which promoted cooperation and peacemaking. As much as some Western activists sometimes contribute to interreligious conflict by means of their narrow denominational self-righteousness enthusiasm, so do others help Eastern Europeans to cope more effectively with their challenges with their skills for organizing dialogues and conflict management. The editorial staff of *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* is dedicated not only to the understanding and analysis of religious situations, but the promotion of dialogue, understanding, and peaceful cooperation among all people who make up the religious mosaic of Eastern Europe. Therefore, we intend to publish in this fortieth volume of OPREE reflections by our editors and by readers who wish to register their observations. We hope that this will contribute to a better understanding of the complex processes of one of the most profound changes of our time.