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Fortieth Anniversary of Publishing OPREE (REE)

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EDITORIAL

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF PUBLISHING OPREE (REE)

The number forty in the Hebrew Scriptures symbolize a long time period. This volume number XL is our fortieth anniversary, which is actually a goodly number of years. Forty years ago in February 1981 the first issue of *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* appeared. The Executive Committee of the now defunct “Christians Associated for Relationship in Eastern Europe” of which I was a member and occasional president supported my initiative to start printing information as one of our tasks is to educate church leaders and scholars with reliable information about the religious situation under communism. Previously a fair number of American church leaders and travelers were misled not only by communist government officials who dealt with religious affairs of their respective countries but even by some local church officials who were not free to disclose the real situation in their churches. Misleading information was passed on asserting that those countries legalized and practiced real and unhindered religious freedom. When more accurate and realistic information was obtained it was necessary sometimes to protect the identity of persons who provided such specific information as they were under close surveillance by the secret police.

Our technical abilities were very modest. Manuscripts were typed and then mimeographed i.e. multiplied on Gestetner-Multilith. The first issue in February 1981 contained only one article. Gradually the number of articles increased as we were able to use photocopiers and then later word processors. The binding and number of pages per issue was limited due to the capabilities of the stapler in the offices where the periodical was produced. The early issues were produced at Rosemont College’s general office but bore the imprint of the Ecumenical Press at Temple University in Philadelphia. As of Vol. II, No. 5 (August 1982) OPREE was produced at Lafayette College, in Easton, PA. Beginning with Vol. V, No. 5 (October 1985), the publication was printed and mailed from Princeton Theological Seminary in NJ. And finally, from February 1999 to 2007 the editing and production was moved to the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN. The last five volumes were printed and mailed by Evangel Press in Indiana.

Beginning with Vol. XIII we renamed the periodical *Religion in Eastern Europe* (REE) as the manuscripts suitable for publication arrived in such numbers that we were able to produce it regularly. We also solicited the cooperation of colleagues as associate editors, book review editors, and about twenty advisory editors, who changed from time to time but contributed to the dependability and quality of our work. Colleagues, students, and family members helped copy-edit, design the cover page, type, and mail copies. We thank all them for helping to produce and grow the publication but especially Princeton Theological Seminary and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary for their indirect financial and personnel help in producing REE/OPREE.

When the communist regimes in Eastern Europe imploded around the year 1990 I thought that it might be time to terminate publication because our first and primary goal was to shed light on the position of religion under conditions of communist repression which now seemed to have come to an end. However, coterminous with the implosion of communism, ethnoreligious conflicts arose in some of the formerly communist countries which convinced me that we should continue examining both the past as well as contemporary events. The scholarly aspect of articles was strengthened with the cooperation of scholars and religious leaders from Eastern Europe who were now able to send us their own manuscripts openly rather than surreptitiously as we often had to obtain them secretly in the past.

At first I was the sole editor with several associate editors until 1995 when I was appointed Provost and Academic Dean at Rosemont College. My friend and colleague Walter Sawatsky who had been associate editor at the time was willing to accept the position of editor and produced REE out of his office at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. When my term in administration ended in 2001 I was able to re-join Walter and we became co-editors until 2012. At the end of 2012 we seemed to have reached a dead end as the costs of printing and mailing had increased to the point that subscriptions could no longer cover the expenses. Walter and I agonized over the decision but decided it was no longer feasible to print the periodical and to send *gratis* a fairly large number of the printed copies to theological schools and other religious institutions in East Europe which were not able to subscribe. Following the drastic mailing price increases in 2007 we began sending CD copies to those schools on an annual basis, so there would be adequate library access. By then, too there had been a dramatic shift to English as required language in the majority of those schools, at least for reading comprehension, and we

became aware the publication was far more widely checked by students and scholars than we had expected.

Having retired as seminary professor in June 2012, Walter Sawatsky decided to end his editorial position with the final issue of 2012. Prior to ceasing to publish a paper edition we succeed to obtain the cooperation of colleagues at George Fox University in Oregon to produce an electronic record of the most recent issues. This in turn became the long range solution to the survival of the publication.

At first almost all of the authors lived outside of the area we called Eastern Europe, predominantly from America and Western Europe, a number of whom were refugees or emigrants from Eastern Europe. For the sake of brevity we used the term “Eastern Europe,” not in a geographical but in ideological and political terms to include communist ruled countries in Europe and the Soviet Union, but not those in Asia or other continents. Jokingly I referred to our concept of Eastern Europe as stretching from Tirana to Vladivostok. From time to time colleagues from central Europe reminded me that Prague is west of Vienna, hence not *eastern* but central Europe, however, the short hand term “Eastern Europe” became helpful as being practical though not entirely accurate.

The journal has gone through many phases, including the announcement of the cessation of publication in 2012, but has shown resilience, driven not by the ambitions of the editorial staff but by the continuing dramatic ups and downs of formerly communist societies. When we began publishing we did not anticipate the collapse of the communist anti-religious system in Central and East Europe and Eurasia. In the last printed issue of 2012 I announced that in case some individuals continue to submit manuscripts to me I will endeavor to continue to electronically publish them occasionally with the help of George Fox University. We reverted to our original name, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* and planned to come out sporadically but probably rarely. Being of the older generation I did not yet grasp the advantages and capabilities of electronic publication, but I was soon helped by Alex Rolfe, the Librarian at George Fox University who volunteered to scan all of the previous issues of OPREE/REE and then place the entire production on a platform Digital Commons which enables access to the publication to anyone anywhere. With his help it was possible to continue to publish OPREE, which as previously was produced by volunteer editorial labor, entirely free of charge both in the production and distribution.

Instead of collapsing, OPREE exploded in readership, now not only restricted to Europe and North America but available anywhere in the world. It still amazes me how many downloads per week, month, or year take place. Alex Rolfe, our web editor informs me that OPREE is being downloaded not only in the likely countries but in Greenland, Papua New Guinea, Maldives, Samoa, the very tip of South America, etc. He writes, “where ever humankind goes, they take OPREE with them. :) Since OPREE has been on Digital Commons it has been downloaded in 189 countries! 2,090 educational institutions have used it. Those are spread pretty evenly, but Oxford comes in 10th at 67 downloads.”

It seemed wise to think about future leadership so that OPREE does not cease after I become unable to edit it. This led to the selection as co-editors of two younger colleagues, both professors, Beth Admiraal of King’s College in Pennsylvania and Ines Murzaku of Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Prof. Murzaku later felt that her other professional obligations prevent her from continuing as co-editor. As of the current issue we are adding as the second co-editor, H. David Baer, professor at Texas Lutheran University, who has extensive experience, especially in Hungary. We also decided to create a more comprehensive Advisory Editorial Board aiming (but not yet fully succeeding) to find at least one advisory editor from each of the successor states of former communist countries in the hope that this will add to the reliability and breadth of coverage of the journal. While at first we tended to cover predominantly Christian denominations and institutions, we were reasonably successful in adding coverage of Islamic developments of the area but less successful in Jewish.

It is our aspiration to continue improving and one case of such improvement is the addition of a peer review process for those authors who request it. We also decided not to limit our scope to developments during the communist and post-communist period but to accept manuscripts dealing with earlier historical periods. To commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of communism coinciding with the fortieth volume I requested all members of our Advisory Editorial Board, along with us editors to write either an editorial, or an essay, or a personal reflection or a scholarly article on some aspect of the changes that ensued with the Great Transformation in Eastern Europe. While it may be too optimistic to expect that all of them will be able to respond we are counting on a fair response that will be published as they arrive throughout the year. In addition we will continue to publish manuscripts that are being

submitted to us. We are looking forward to a year of quality articles aiming at a dependable analysis and interpretation of the object of our intensive study.

Paul Mojzes, editor-in-chief