

7-2020

### Reflections after Thirty Years

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#### Recommended Citation

Payton, James R. (2020) "Reflections after Thirty Years," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 5 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss5/2>

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## REFLECTIONS AFTER THIRTY YEARS

By James R. Payton, Jr.

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For nearly thirty years, until my retirement, I had the privilege of studying, teaching, and writing about Eastern European history. Unlike some of my colleagues in the field, I am not of Eastern European heritage. Unlike many others, my doctoral training did not focus on Eastern Europe during the twentieth century. I came to the field in a different way, one that has shaped both my assessment of how Eastern European history has been studied and how to view what has transpired since the collapse of Communist domination.

While I grew up during the Cold War and recall “nuclear attack drills” in primary school, with the regular threat of nuclear holocaust as a possibility throughout the whole course of my academic training, I was never particularly interested in either the Soviet Union or the Communist Bloc in Eastern Europe. As a historian, my area of interest was centuries earlier, from late antiquity through what we in the West call the “middle ages” and into the Reformation era. Specifically, I was intrigued by how religion had influenced the way people came to view themselves, their neighbors, and their own history. Teaching in a small history department necessitated developing and teaching courses outside the precise limits of my doctoral training (in late medieval and early modern Western European history). My interests had already turned (as a Protestant) toward studying and teaching about Eastern Orthodoxy, and my historical predilections toward Byzantine history. With institutional blessing, I expanded those interests into Eastern Europe, and I developed facility in its lengthy history—teaching a first-year overview of the region (from the migrations of

the Slavic peoples, beginning in the sixth century, to the present) and upper-level courses on the Byzantine world, Ukraine, and the Balkans, including Kosovo. This all began in the mid-1980s, with the momentous changes set loose by *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* under Mikhail Gorbachev and the dramatic collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe that followed only a few years later.

As I think back on three decades of teaching and writing about Eastern European history, two things stand out clearly to me. The first is just how little we in the West knew about Eastern Europe before it fell under the dominance of the Soviet Union after World War II. For historians teaching courses on “Western Civilization,” scores of possible textbooks were available, with periodic revisions and updates. But even in the mid-1980s, anyone (like myself) attempting to offer such an introductory survey for Eastern European history had almost nothing to work with. To be sure, with the advent of the Cold War, many universities had developed centers focused on the region, and hundreds of books and articles had been published presenting Eastern European history. Almost without exception, though, those books focused on Eastern Europe since World War II (although a few intrepidly looked back to the beginning of the twentieth century). When I started looking for possible textbooks on Eastern European history for my courses, after nearly four decades of intensive study of Eastern Europe at these centers or in university programs on the region, the available books on Eastern European history focused almost exclusively on the region during the time it was dominated by the Soviet Union.

But almost all the peoples of the region had been “there” in the long centuries since late antiquity. The stories of their migrations into the region (or, from the perspective of the “settled” Byzantine Empire, their invasions) and how they then interacted with each other and with the settled powers in Byzantium and subsequently in Rome during the “middle ages,” were fascinating; those peoples’ interactions with earlier inhabitants (such as the forebears of the Albanians and the Romanians) and with those who later burst into the region (such as the Huns, the Avars, and—in a lasting presence—the Magyars) offered much to consider. Furthermore, several of these peoples developed into significant, influential, powerful nations that wielded considerable influence on European civilization, both in the east and west. How all this developed, how they related with each other, and how they endured during their eventual subjugations under powerful empires (Austrian, Russian, Ottoman) offered insights into how they continued to view themselves, their neighbors, and their respective places in history.

All this transpired long before the advent of the twentieth century—and unquestionably apart from the repressive domination of Communism in the aftermath of World War II. As I learned all this, it struck me how skewed and incomplete our supposed “understanding” of Eastern Europe’s history was from just studying it during the period of its Communist domination. That made no more sense than claiming to know the history of the Netherlands (the homeland of my wife) by studying it only during its domination by the Nazis in World War II.

I had hoped that, with the release of Communism’s strangle-hold on Eastern Europe, the significant imbalance in the treatment of the actual histories of the peoples of the region might be corrected. My expectation was that historical interest would expand its focus to consider the deeper, centuries-long experiences of those peoples<sup>1</sup>—if nothing else, out of fascination with what it was within them that afforded the residual strength to cast off the USSR’s yoke, with almost no violence.<sup>2</sup> However, this was not to be: while much attention was given to the peaceful dissolution of the state of Czechoslovakia and the waves of violence that eventually erupted in the former Yugoslavia (in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia), historical scholarship soon found another camp to follow in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. One after another, institutes or university programs which had focused on Eastern Europe closed, and the “market” for books on Eastern European history shrank.

The second thing that has struck me as I think back on three decades of studying and teaching Eastern European history is how thoroughly western scholarship on the region followed the patterns of modernity as they had developed in the West. Specifically in those patterns, church and state are separated in some significant sense, and religion is treated as a private affair (while recognizing that groups of similarly-minded individuals nonetheless continue to form religious communities of one sort or another). These predilections have worked well enough to study Western Civilization since the time of the Enlightenment. Trained with these embedded assumptions in the academy in the West, scholars who turned their sights on Eastern Europe too readily brought these predispositions with them into their approaches to and assessments of the region’s history. This melded well enough with their treatments of the Cold War period when the

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<sup>1</sup> I expressed these hopes in James R. Payton, Jr., “Revisioning the Historiography of Eastern Europe,” *Fides & Historia* 31 (1999):77-89.

<sup>2</sup> The only nation where violence played a significant role in the 1989 collapse of Communism was Romania, but it was the *Securitate*, the security police of the Communist regime, who initiated that violence, not those surging toward the end of Communist domination. When the Romanian army’s forces joined with the protesters and began returning fire, the feared *Securitate* soon scattered and fled.

region endured repression under a Communist ideology in which religion was disdained as the opiate of the masses. But these attitudes could not account for the centuries-long histories of the respective peoples of Eastern Europe from what we in the West call the “middle ages” until and, for the most part, throughout the course of their subjugations under the Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires.

As I studied all I could find about the lengthy histories of those peoples, I recognized that religion—whether Roman Catholicism (with lesser influence from Protestantism), Orthodoxy, or Islam—had wielded profound influence on those peoples and the ways they viewed themselves, their neighbors, and their places in history.<sup>3</sup> My scholarly predilections, as noted above, predisposed me to look for such material as I explored all I could find about their earlier histories --it was not hard to find it, and in abundance.<sup>4</sup> As the stories of how the nations of Eastern Europe rose up to cast off the Communist domination which had stifled them since World War II, and as I noted the varied roles religious communities and affiliation had played in that remarkable virtually bloodless revolution—from the ongoing Roman Catholic influence over Poland, the 1989 prayer meetings in the Lutheran churches in East Germany, the continued presence of Orthodoxy in several countries, and the openness shown by many professed religious people in Eastern European countries toward others who did not share the same specific religious confession—I saw reason for hope for a viable religious renaissance in the region as the professedly atheistic powers prohibiting this evaporated. Might religion again help to shape how peoples and nations came to view themselves, their neighbors, and their respective places in history—now, in reaction to and freedom from repression experienced under Communism? Might peoples and nations reclaim their religious heritage and revitalize it in ways that would reflect, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, how to live out faithfully the deepest callings in their religion, to honor God by honoring and caring for others—not only those who shared their particular religious commitments, but also those who were “other” in religion or ethnic heritage (or both)?

All this awareness shaped my hopes for what might transpire in the wake of the remarkable changes enacted in the wake of 1989. Those hopes reverberated with what was expressed in a different field for the future of Eastern Europe in the aftermath of Communism’s collapse. I recall

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<sup>3</sup> One result of my investigations in this fascinating area is James R. Payton, Jr., “Ottoman Millet, Religious Nationalism, and Civil Society: Focus on Kosovo,” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 26/1 (2006):11-23.

<sup>4</sup> I have laid out the evidence for this more fully in James R. Payton, Jr., “Religion and the Historiography of Eastern Europe,” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 21/2 (2001):1-16.

reading scholars much more gifted in things economic than I, hoping that the liberated nations of Eastern Europe might develop a “third way,” between capitalism and Communism. Much as that was talked about, however, the story of the past three decades reveals that no such economic third way has been discovered. I had hoped—as did many others—that the nations of Eastern Europe, with their rich heritage of deep religious commitments which had shaped their cultures in the times of their national zeniths, and had sustained their hopes in the nadirs of imperial and then Communist repression, might develop a “third way” in this area, too.

This hoped-for “third way” would build on the deep religio-cultural history of their respective nations to enable religious commitment to play a significant role in how the nation would go forward. This would entail navigating between the Scylla of the typically rigid and exclusivist religious commitments in their national pasts and the Charybdis of modern Europe’s expulsion of religion to the private realm. Recognizing the ongoing depth of religious commitment manifested in various ways in Eastern European nations even during the cold night of Communist domination, and given the readiness during that cold night to respect alternative religious commitments in a sort of necessary ecumenical (at times, even interfaith) openness, there seemed to be grounds for such audacious hope.

In the wake of Communism’s collapse, many people from within Eastern Europe itself and from across the rest of Europe and North America sought to assist and promote the search for and development of such a distinctive vision for how to navigate an uncertain but hopeful religious future within Eastern Europe. Regrettably, some from outside the region reflected the widespread ignorance about its history in their endeavors, flooding Eastern Europe with would-be evangelists under slogans about “bringing Christ” to Russia or Hungary (two which I ruefully recall)—utterly unaware that Christ had already been in Russia and Hungary for more than a millennium. Such initiatives startled and, with the unintended but nonetheless arrogant ignorance on which they were built, offended wide swaths of Eastern Europeans. Others, respectful of the deep religious history of the peoples of the region, sought to work with and encourage Eastern European faithful. Some offered contributions toward a religiously-rooted way forward, urging the religiously committed in the respective nations to develop relevant ways of living out their commitments in the complexities of life in the post-Communist present.<sup>5</sup> Scholarly conferences urging responsible

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<sup>5</sup> I used opportunities afforded me to offer such counsel: in 1999, I offered a paper, “Toward an Orthodox Worldview for the Third Millennium,” at the conference “Conceptualizing the Normal and Abnormal in Medicine,

appropriations of past religious heritage to the contemporary world took place, both in formerly Communist countries<sup>6</sup> and in the West.<sup>7</sup> Books were published offering analyses of how important such endeavors would be<sup>8</sup> and how they might be pursued.<sup>9</sup> Intense discussion and reflection pointed toward hopeful possibilities for a renewed appropriation within Eastern Europe of religious commitment among the peoples and nations of the region.

But as the news cycle informed us with distressing regularity by the early 1990s already, religion found usefulness too often as excuse for conflict. Marshal Josip Tito had resolutely refused to allow Yugoslavia to address the long-standing suspicions and resentments among the constituent peoples of his South Slav state, resentments centuries deep already but exacerbated during World War II with the atrocities committed by Ustaše at Jasenovac and other concentration camps, on the one hand, and on the other by Partisans with the wholesale slaughter later on of those Ustaše (and others) fleeing before them. Tito's attempt to squelch these in forgetfulness and thus promote the "brotherhood and unity" (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) slogan of his state proved ephemeral, ending only a few years after his 1980 death. As nationalist divisiveness wrenched Yugoslavia into competing states, religious distinctiveness was appropriated as excuse for the horrific violence into which Yugoslavia descended.<sup>10</sup> For those familiar with Balkan history, the subsequent hostilities in Kosovo could not be a surprise, even if a disappointment: the Battle of Kosovo-Polje of 1389 had taken on mythical significance for Orthodox Serbs, with Kosovar

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Science, and Society," held May 1999 in Yalta, Crimea, Ukraine (proceedings published in Russian [pp. 95-105]); subsequently I published a related scholarly article: James R. Payton, Jr., "An Orthodox Worldview for Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Teološki Časopis* [Journal of the Protestant Theological Faculty, Novi Sad, Serbia] 9 (2009):183-192.

<sup>6</sup> In 1999 I presented the keynote address, "Toward an Orthodox Approach to Higher Education in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Russia," at a conference held in St. Petersburg, Russia, "Higher Education in XXI Century Russian Culture: A Christian Perspective," with the conference proceedings published as *Высшее Образование в Контексте Русской Культуры XXI Века: Христианская*, ed. Natalia Pecherskaya (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy, 2000), pp. 57-66 [Russian version, pp. 46-57].

<sup>7</sup> In 2001, I presented the paper, "Toward a Russian Orthodox Worldview for Post-Soviet Society," at an international conference held at the University of Leeds, England; selected papers appeared in the conference proceedings, *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken, *Eastern Christian Studies* 3 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2003); my paper is on pp. 299-318.

<sup>8</sup> Among several that could be noted, see Bruce R. Berglund and Brian Porter-Szücs, ed., *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe* (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2010); and Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Especially insightful in this regard is Ines Angeli Murzaku, ed., *Quo Vadis Eastern Europe? Religion, State and Society After Communism* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2009); I was privileged to contribute to this volume: see James R. Payton, Jr., "Religion, Nationalism, and National Identities," pp. 49-60

<sup>10</sup> For a careful assessment of this, see Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious warfare in the Balkans* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

Muslims as the present embodiment of the long-resented Ottoman domination. With ethnoreligious tensions running high, the explosion in Kosovo became a question of “when,” not “if.” In due course, these Slav (mostly Orthodox)/Albanian (mostly Muslim) hostilities bled over into (North) Macedonia. Those who had hoped for a better religious future in Eastern Europe after Communism’s collapse saw their brightest hopes dashed.

Three decades after the collapse of Communism, it seems painfully clear that the nations of Eastern Europe have been no more successful in finding a third way between an exclusivist religious orientation (a predominant religion working closely with the state and barely allowing freedom to other religious communities) and the dismissal of religion to a private realm than they were in developing a third way between capitalism and Communism. Over these thirty years, many factors within the respective countries unquestionably offered challenges to respectful and open relationships between religions and states, on the one hand, and amongst the religious communities themselves, on the other. Too often (as in the former Yugoslavia), ancient and long-standing resentments managed to coopt religious commitments to warrant hostility toward formerly neighboring states or toward minorities within a state. Sometimes religious fervor waned toward indifference in the scramble to secure personal economic stability (as in “East” Germany). In other places (Poland and Hungary), state valorization of religious commitment has led to resentment of immigrants and refugees of other ethnoreligious heritages. These patterns have captured national and international attention and attracted pained comment from those who had hoped for better results for religion’s role in post-Communist Eastern Europe.

But these disappointments are not the whole story. It is important to remember that what is reported widely too often is shaped by the old journalist adage, “If it bleeds, it leads.” That is, conflict “sells”: it attracts the attention of intended audiences. Alternative stories of peaceful inter-religious cooperation or of state-inspired endeavors to find ways to dissipate ethnoreligious conflict and achieve peaceful coexistence (and even collaboration) have taken place—even if they are not as widely reported as the ever-enticing stories of bloodshed and ethnoreligious conflict’s atrocities. In that regard, the endeavors of Boris Trajkovski, president of (North) Macedonia to bring a peaceful end to the conflict that wracked his country in the early 2000s has yet to find wide coverage. But his government sponsored a dialogical conference in 2002 which helped bring an



end to civil war in the country<sup>11</sup>—and even established a “Council for Inter-Religious Collaboration,” which assured that the Christian and Muslim communities would consult on questions and issues of religious practice, state proposals, and national needs.<sup>12</sup> Even after President Trajkovski’s untimely death in an airplane crash in February 2004, the government of (North) Macedonia continued to sponsor international conferences focused on recognizing the value of inter-religious cooperation for peace in the contemporary world.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond such large-scale (if under-reported) endeavors lie the ways religious people committed to their faiths find ways to honor their neighbors; a commandment required in all the Abrahamic religions. How individuals, clergy, and religious communities in various places seek out ways to respect and cooperate with others of alternative (or no) religious commitments will remain largely unknown because unreported. From conversations and personal interactions with adherents of the religions which have taken root in Eastern Europe over the centuries, many of those who have studied and taught about Eastern Europe know of such heartening stories of genuine respect, cooperation, and care—not only for those who share the religious commitment, but also for the “others.”

For those of us who had greater hopes for religion to play a positive role in Eastern Europe after the collapse of Communism, the past thirty years have brought more disappointment than joy. But perhaps it is not too late to hope that religion may yet find a way to have a positive impact on how people view themselves, their neighbors, and their own history in Eastern Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> The conference, “Confidence Building between the Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue,” took place in Skopje, (North) Macedonia in May 2002.

<sup>12</sup> With periodic strains, this council functioned well for almost fifteen years, facilitating communication among the religious communities in the nation and managing to avoid another outbreak of hostilities.

<sup>13</sup> The (North) Macedonian government sponsored the “World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations,” which met in Ohrid, (North) Macedonia in October 2007; it also sponsored “The Second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue,” which took place in May 2010 (again in Ohrid).