The End: A Retrospective from the Beginning

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Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol32/iss4/1
THE END: A RETROSPECTIVE FROM THE BEGINNING
by Paul Moizes, founder and co-editor

In the beginning, it was not possible to foresee where this journal would go, or how and when it might end. Now that we have reached the end, or at least the end of a phase, one can more clearly see how it began and evolved.

*Religion in Eastern Europe (REE)* was conceived in a series of regular meetings of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe (CAREE): An Ecumenical Organization for Justice and Peace. This organization was an outgrowth of the U.S. Committee for the Prague Christian Peace Conference which renamed itself to CAREE after the ill-fated Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The organization gathered a small group of church leaders and academics who were eager to build bridges during the Cold War, seeking reconciliation and peace. Members of the group sought to gather reliable information about church life in Communist dominated Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (hereafter Eastern Europe) and to extend the hand of Christian fellowship to Christians living in those societies. We also wanted to impart dependable information about the religious dilemmas in Eastern Europe so that American Christian leaders who had contact with Eastern European Christians would not fall prey to the propaganda emanating from the Communist governments or from the anti-Communist propaganda that was so prevalent in the US during those years. It was quite easy—almost inevitable—that one would get a distorted picture of the religious situation in Communist countries either by falling under the spell of the anti-Communist tirades here or the deliberate distortions about the alleged religious freedoms enjoyed by Christians and other religious people behind the Iron Curtain. To further this aim, we hosted, and facilitated the hosting, of visits by church leaders from the former USSR and Eastern Europe. This was often an arduous task because of the US State Department's reluctance to issue them visas.

Thus emerged the idea that we should disseminate a more balanced understanding of developments in Eastern European societies. We hoped this information would benefit American and other Western church leaders as well as academics encountering church or government officials from Eastern Europe. I volunteered to take on this project due to my experience gained through editorial work at the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. When I produced the first issue of the new journal in February of 1981, it wasn't at all clear whether or not there was going to be a second one. As a sign of hope, I marked it as Volume I, Number 1. Not knowing when another issue might be produced, I titled the publication *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (OPREE). The first and only article in Vol. I No. 1 was Prof. Max Stackhouse's "The Religious Situation in the German Democratic Republic." It was typed on 8.5x11 paper, photocopied, and stapled. The cover design was created by a student at Rosemont College; some of the typing was done by one of my students at Villanova University who impressed me by submitting a paper produced on a computer, then not widely in use. Up to Vol. II, No. 3, it was published under the auspices of the Ecumenical Press of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* at Temple University in Philadelphia, but most of the work was done at my home institution, Rosemont College. A few of the issues were word processed at York College of Pennsylvania with the assistance of Prof. Gary Bittner. Some issues contained one paper, others two or three. Subscriptions were purchased mostly by libraries of theological schools and universities. In addition, we received small donations from a few main line churches, which still had a small budget for worthy causes; later, those funds dried up.

Beginning with Vol. II, No. 5 (August 1982), I was able to get the support of two colleagues...
at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania; Profs. Stephen Lammers and Richard Sharpless became associate editors and the printing and mailing of OPREE was moved to that institution. We produced six to seven issues annually. The papers were written by an ever wider circle of scholars and church leaders, mostly from the USA and Western Europe, though some were produced by Eastern European émigrés and others by Western experts on Eastern European religion. On rare occasions during my trips to Eastern Europe, I was surreptitiously given manuscripts which I smuggled out of those countries and printed, either under a pseudonym when requested by the author or under his/her real name if s/he felt secure enough. At other times, I received papers by Eastern European church officials who formally endorsed their governments’ line on the role of churches in their societies.

The next stage involved moving the publication to Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. By this time we had evolved organizationally and improved the format. Prof. Charles West became my associate editor, and we introduced book reviews. Dr. Lawrence Klippenstein of the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada became the first book review editor. Prof. Jacqueline Murphy, my colleague from the English department at Rosemont College, became Assistant Editor in 1989 to help with word smiting since I am not a native English speaker. We created an advisory editorial board of 18-20 prominent scholars in the field; some of them are still members of this board. The diverse make-up of the advisory board was ecumenical and soon also interreligious, as were the authors of the papers who represented a wide range of theological and ideological perspectives. A new cover page with computer-assisted design was created, which has fundamentally remained the same. We started using fonts which resembled those of books and journals. The number of articles per issue increased to five or six.

By middle and late 1980s, there was a considerable thaw in the rigidity of some of the Eastern bloc nations. Yugoslavia, the country of my birth, pioneered these developments, having departed from the bloc already in 1948; by the 1960s, Yugoslavia displayed an openness that astonished westerners and was the envy of many easterners. Without undertaking a statistical count, the number of articles increased from Yugoslavia, followed by Hungary, G.D.R., and Czechoslovakia. The U.S.S.R., of course, was also the focus of many analyses. We tried not to bypass any of the socialist countries.

The implosion of the communist system in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s was both celebrated and analyzed on OPREE’s pages. There was such an outpouring of scholarly papers, now also emanating from scholars and religious leaders of the former socialist countries, we decided there was no need to worry about the frequency of papers and I dropped the “occasional papers” part of the title, retaining only Religion in Eastern Europe. We implemented this change with Vol. XIII, No.1 (February 1993). We continued the sequential numbering from OPREE, rather than start anew.

With the collapse of communism, CAREE faced the question of its future need. Membership gradually dwindled as interest seemed to wane once the “enemy” disappeared. Travel to Eastern Europe was now unimpeded and CAREE’s contacts with Eastern European church leaders were no longer required to obtain a visa to attend a conference or visit a church. On the one hand, there was euphoria over the lifting of constraints and religious persecution. It was presumed that genuine religious liberty would become the normal state of affairs in Eastern Europe. This promise suggested that CAREE had served its purpose and possibly could dissolve. CAREE’s continued existence was deliberated at some of our meetings.

On the other hand, there was troublesome evidence of new unrest and conflict as interethnic strife became very pronounced in multiethnic, multireligious states. Religious
communities that had maintained a modicum of cooperation under communist duress now resorted to their ancient rivalries and intolerance, often with the open support and legitimation of the newly formed post-communist governments. As some of these conflicts escalated to the verge of war, and in the case of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union into actual wars, CAREE members decided to extend the organization’s activities for as long as possible.

The subscriptions of REE covered our costs as long as the publication costs were subsidized by Princeton Theological Seminary. However, this did not last. With the change of the seminary’s administration, the subsidy ended in 2006 and we faced our first serious crisis as to whether we could continue publishing. Yet we felt a new sense of mission because we were able to add gratis mailings of REE to practically all Eastern European theological schools, many of them brand new. Our commitment propelled us to continue.

In 1997 Prof. Walter Sawatsky of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana replaced Charles West as the new Associate Editor. When I was appointed academic dean and provost at Rosemont College in 1998, I realized that I would no longer have the time and energy to lead REE and Walter Sawatsky consented to become the editor, a position he held until I returned to teaching full time in 2003. During that time, I functioned as the consulting editor for REE. In 2003 we became co-editors again, a fruitful collaboration through this last issue.

Others helped as well. In 1994 Prof. Gerald Shenk of Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Virginia became the Book Review Editor. He was followed in that position by Prof. H. David Baer of Texas Lutheran University in 2003, while in 2006 Prof. Ines Murzaku of Seton Hall University in New Jersey joined as the co-editor of book reviews. Upon David Baer’s resignation, Ines Murzaku carried on this task alone, but in 2010 she was joined by our first European-based book review editor, Dr. Davorin Peterlin of the Evangelical Theological School in Osijek, Croatia. Regretfully, only a few months after this arrangement was initiated, Dr. Peterlin died of a stroke. After this tragedy, Prof. Mark Jantzen of Bethel College in Kansas became the new book review co-editor.

Two professors of George Fox University in Oregon, Dr. Sharon Linzey and then Dr. Gaitlin Corning, became associate editors in charge of creating and maintaining a website where all the issues of REE were electronically deposited. We continued to print new issues in hard copy as well. When printing and mailing the journal out of Princeton Theological Seminary no longer became feasible in 2006, co-editor Walter Sawatsky took on the entire production, printing and mailing done through Evangel Press at very reasonable rates. About 300-500 copies of each issue were produced and mailed. As the postal rates abroad became prohibitively expensive, we first sought less expensive methods of international transportation, but eventually were forced to discontinue sending approximately 180 gratis copies to theological schools in Eastern Europe and replaced them with an annual mailing of a CD containing all four issues of a volume.

In all the locations where OPREE and REE were produced, a very large number of volunteers, students, and church people helped with the typing, photocopying, stapling, subscription servicing, packing, labeling, and other assorted tasks. They deserve our gratitude. Volunteer subscription managers available through AMBS after 1997, especially Helene Hoover, devoted much time to database and mailing duties. We also wish to thank all of our subscribers, both individual and institutional, as well as members of CAREE and denominational offices which at one time or another supported us with donations or subscriptions, thus enabling us to publish throughout some of the most dramatic changes in world history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

We wish to acknowledge this tremendous outpouring of voluntary service, labors of love
really, by all the named and unnamed individuals who made OPREE and REE possible. On top of that, we are grateful for the scholarly research and writing of the hundreds of contributors who sent us their manuscripts without being paid any honoraria. We did not ask them to pay for publishing their articles, as some periodicals are doing. Looking at it now in retrospect, OPREE and then REE represented a truly amazing feat. Even more impressive was the quality and variety of our authors. Some papers were short, others quite long (including a couple masters’ theses which were published in several installments). Among the authors were some of the most prominent church leaders from the east and the west, establishment leaders and dissidents, emeriti and graduate students, bishops, clergy, laypeople, professors and journalists, Catholics, Orthodox, all types of Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Marxist and non-Marxist atheists, conservatives, liberals, moderates, and radicals. In short, a truly ecumenical, interreligious, and interideological group made this endeavor not only possible, but remarkable.

In the last several years, however, we noticed a reduction in the number of manuscripts submitted. The editors went to some conferences and solicited papers but the number of papers submitted, which had significantly increased after the Great Transformation, was now dwindling. First the interest in CAREE’s activities dropped off and then, on the surface independent of that but structurally connected, we noticed that people were shifting their interest away from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to other centers of turbulence and crisis. Combined with our persistent inability to find sources of financial support, we had to admit, however reluctantly, that REE has run its course. Therefore, the two co-editors, Walter Sawatsky and I, regrettfully concluded, after consulting with a circle of CAREE friends, that it is time to terminate REE with the November issue (Vol. XXXII, No. 4).

It is an end of sorts. The reason for the tentativeness of this conclusion is that I decided to attempt to close the circle by returning to OPREE (Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe). OPREE will be an exclusively electronic publication and will consist of one or more papers in each issue. At this point no formal subscriptions are envisioned. What remains to be seen is whether one can issue such an online publication without any expenses. I welcome all suggestions and assistance in the hope that we can continue to facilitate the availability of scholarship in this area. Should any of our readers wish to take on the continuation of OPREE, I would regard it as the dawn of a new day.