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REE AND CAREE: A RETROSPECTIVE
by James R. Payton, Jr.

James R. Payton, Jr., is Professor of History at Redeemer University College. He has published several articles and book reviews in REE and authored Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition (IVP, 2007). He served as Executive Secretary (1998-2006) and President (2006-2011) of Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe.

As a member of the “baby boomer” generation, I grew up during the Cold War. Its tensions, with the threat of nuclear annihilation, were simply part of the world as we knew it. When the Communist bloc imploded in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, like many others, I could hardly believe what had transpired.

A generation has passed since then, though university students have no memory of the dangers in which their parents and grandparents lived. The world has changed dramatically in the last quarter-century. With that change has come a decline in interest in things Eastern European: where once the peoples of the West had a ravenous appetite for material about the region, by the present day that interest has turned to Far Eastern and Middle Eastern informational cuisine.

For thirty-two years, Religion in Eastern Europe [REE] has offered excellent treatment of a region of Europe which had virtually always been ignored in Western European and North American scholarship. Furthermore, REE kept before a skeptical western scholarly world the significance of religion as a motive force in society and culture. In all this, REE proved useful to the peoples of Eastern Europe in many ways—not least by showing that people outside the Communist world cared about them and their culture, history, and religious commitments. For readers elsewhere, REE fostered understanding of and offered relevant information about a region of the world with which too few had much acquaintance. Given the intensity of interest in understanding as much as possible about the region, by then firmly ensconced within the Communist bloc, REE could count on receiving regular and sophisticated contributions, both from Eastern European and from western scholarship.

Those days have passed, though. For a decade or so, the tensions in the various countries of the region served to spawn thoughtful examinations of things Eastern European. Furthermore, the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia—in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo—assured continuing interest in and scholarly treatments about facets of Eastern Europe’s religious scene, social situations, and commitments. However, in the years since the end of those conflicts at the turn of the millennium, decreasing numbers of solid scholarly articles, whether from within Eastern Europe or from the West, have been submitted to the journal. REE’s editors, Paul Mojzes and Walter Sawatsky, have diligently sought out submissions, by personal invitation and through contacts at a variety of academic conferences. But decreasing numbers of scholars are producing studies rooted in the region: the well has dried up, it appears.

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1Prior to the end of World War II, no university in North America or Western Europe offered training in Eastern European studies. With the coming of the Cold War, there was a flurry of establishment of programs or centers focused on Eastern Europe. The obvious rationale was the need to learn more about this region of the world, by then ruthlessly incorporated within the Communist bloc and so a potential danger for the West.

2As REE began, the scholarly world was still bound up with the modernist assumption that religion might be a private or personal matter, but not one that shaped the public square. REE’s explicit focus on the role played by religion in Eastern Europe, even during the Communist period (when the official ideology was atheistic) offered an insightful and stimulating challenge to this assumption.
Eastern Europe has not disappeared, of course; neither has the significance of religion as a profound influence on society and culture throughout the region. But with fewer scholars focusing on and writing about religion in Eastern Europe, REE’s future has become dim. This has led to the recognition, on the part of the hard-working editors, that REE is no longer viable.

REE has had a good run: thirty-two years of publication is a substantial accomplishment. And it is almost always true that all things, even good ones, come to an end. But when they do, it is appropriate to grieve, and many will grieve the loss of REE. Finding solid treatments of things Eastern European will become immeasurably harder: where REE’s readers could count, for thirty-two years, on receiving the journal on a regular basis and finding such articles, they will no longer have this resource to rely on. The scholarly world will be diminished by the loss of REE.

A further loss comes with the demise of “Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe” [CAREE], a United Nations-related non-governmental organization, which pursued peace, justice and reconciliation in and for Eastern Europe. CAREE carried on these endeavors from the chilliest depths of the Cold War, through the remarkable transitions in 1989 and 1991, and in the years since then—more than fifty years, in total. Along the way, CAREE sponsored numerous meetings, conferences, and interchanges between Eastern Europe and the West. In recent years, it supported and participated in interfaith meetings in Southeastern Europe, in the hope of toning down the tensions which had broken out in countries of the former Yugoslavia.

These endeavors were what led me to find out about CAREE and, in due course, become an involved member. Trained as a historian in Western European history, by the late 1980s I was also teaching courses on the Byzantine world and on the History of Eastern Orthodoxy. My interest in Eastern Europe developed in the wake of 1989, and student interest in further courses on the region eventually led to a general course on the history of Eastern Europe (from pre-history to the present), on Ukraine, on the Balkans, and an honors seminar on Kosovo. Along the way in developing these courses, I found out about CAREE for the first time. Paul Mojzes’ 1994 book, Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans, served as stimulus in further understanding what was transpiring in the former Yugoslavia; the dustjacket identified Paul as the president of CAREE. I wrote him to find out more about the organization and almost immediately became a member. Enthused by the opportunity to be part of an organization regularly involved in trying to bring peace, justice, and reconciliation within Eastern Europe, I jumped at the opportunity to serve as CAREE’s executive secretary when the previous occupant of the position retired. Several years of service in this position ended with my being asked to assume CAREE’s presidency. Whether as a member or as a leader within CAREE, though, I was always proud of what the organization in Eastern Europe had done and continued to do.

Along the way, though, CAREE’s membership had declined. Many who had been vigorously involved in CAREE over the preceding half-century had, predictably, moved into retirement years or passed from the earthly scene. The focus of much news coverage largely abandoned Eastern Europe once the 1999 conflict in Kosovo came to an end; even the determination of nations in the region to become members of the European Union could not keep western media and news sources from turning instead to what became dubbed as the war against terrorism. The old journalistic maxim, “if it bleeds, it leads,” assured that Eastern Europe no longer found much attention.

The scholarly world has taken the same path. In the aftermath of the collapse of Communism throughout Eastern Europe, I was excited to be teaching about a region of the world so steeped in history, in which nations were being established or reborn. The tensions and conflicts that came to the surface in the aftermath of 1989 (and in the former Yugoslavia, through much of
the 1990s) underscored the deep sense of historical entitlement among many peoples in the region. The eventual resolution of those conflicting claims—some still contested, to be sure—led to a modicum of stability and peace that allowed nation-building to proceed.

This was exciting stuff. As an academic, I counted myself privileged to be able to watch these nations being (re-)born—and I expected that my field of history, and the scholarly world more broadly, would eagerly observe and study this unusual phenomenon going on in our day. But I have found that the academic world is considerably less interested in such a focus than in following out whatever is “hot” in the news. In the wake of the collapse of the Communist bloc, the numerous institutes devoted to studying Russia and Eastern Europe set up in the wake of World War II have been shut down. It appears that western academe’s interest had more to do with itself (and the dangers it faces) than with disinterested pursuit of understanding, useful to us and those we study.

Among the casualties of this regrettable failure is the loss of CAREE. The organization can be proud of all it accomplished in more than a half-century of service in and for the peoples and nations of Eastern Europe. For those of us who desire to continue to offer such service, CAREE will be grievously missed.