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IMPLICATIONS HERE OF THE TRANSFORMATIONS THERE

by Max L. Stackhouse

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In 1789 and 1790, the West was shaken by the French Revolution. The shockwaves reached around the world. The ancient regime, presumed natural hierarchy of life was broken. "The way things really are" appeared not to be hard, solid, fixed and settled but soft, plastic, changeable, and temporary. Further, the image of how transformation happens became symbolized by the vision of militants in the street confronting the rich, the high, and the powerful, storming the Bastille, and shouting: "Liberty, equality, and fraternity."

The implications of great events are long; they come to us in many forms. Out of that heritage has come the most radical revolutionary movement of modernity. More than anyone else, Karl Marx is the nineteenth century theorist who made it possible for this vision to find its way into the 20th century and into thoughts of people and the policies of nations all over the world. Marx used Hegel to criticize Adam Smith. Commerce, trade, factories, corporations and individualism, and urban citizens were judged to be dehumanizing. And when he imagined an alternative he turned to the French Revolutionary tradition.

He envisioned a new solidarity of primal interests that he believed stood at the origins of human society--prior to the development of complex civilizations with all their disharmonies. To accomplish this return to communitarianism, he argued that the people had to rise up and overthrow all established authority. His ideas were extended and developed in harsh forms by Lenin and Stalin, and adapted in milder forms by millions all over the world, crying "liberation, socialization, and solidarity."

In 1989 and 1990, the harsh forms of this heritage were themselves overthrown in new Bastilles in precisely those lands where Marx was most honored. China, Burma, and Eastern Europe exploded, with the people crying for liberation from the liberation propaganda, desocialization of the society, and pluralism in political parties and individual life styles. The
two-century old theory of the future of human civilization is discredited—in the Far East
by the bloody repression of the Communist regimes, in Eastern Europe by the massive
exodus of people away from the system whenever and wherever they can leave or change it.
Marxism may have been able to overthrow the degenerating forces of old elites, but it is not
able to provide a vision for the rebuilding of a humane society. We now suspect that it will
be studied in the future as we discuss Pelagianism or Arianism—as heresies that many still
believe.

We do not yet know how deep the new distrust in the socialist vision will cut. It is likely
to influence the mild as well as the harsh forms of socialism. The more progressive forces
in the West will be shaken by these developments, even if they have argued for decades that
the Bolshevism and Stalinism were a recipe for political and moral disaster. They will be
shaken because they too adopted many of the basic presuppositions behind Marx and the
French Revolution—ideas, for example, that religion was a matter of personal preference or
tradition, and not a matter of public importance, that morality was a function of social
conditions, and not a matter of universal principles, and that civilization was entirely a
matter of artifice, something that could be reconstructed by human will, if we could only
gain control of the sources of power—political, economic, and military. And these are the
ideas that are dying.

Among the progressive forces of the West new questions will be posed now that this once
great vision of the future is wounded and the echoes of this crash will resound well into the
21st century in the developing countries.

It will be felt first because the relative freedom that "Third World" and "Non-aligned"
countries had, in the last four decades, came form the fact that they could play off the
super-powers against one another. That is no longer possible. While many find it dangerous,
the United States has become the policeman of the world; although Western Europe moves
toward a new "united states of Europe" of world significance, several powers will be quite
influential regionally, and Latin America will continue as critic in residence in the Western
hemisphere. The problem is this: no one is clear what principles will guide any of these
powers not that the Cold War is over.

It will be felt, second, because many poor countries looked to Eastern Europe to find
models of how old cultures, mired in stagnation, might find ways to modernize quickly
through various forms of "guided" democracy, centralized planning, and controlled
economies. It turns out to be much more difficult and ambiguous than anyone imagined.
The countries that tried to follow these models in various degrees—Tanzania, Angola,
Mozambique, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Cuba, Nicaragua, etc.—are all a mess.

Politics is to serve, not master, the people. Democracy too much guided by the state,
becomes tyranny; centralized planning puts the instruments of public policy, administration,
management, production, and enforcement by police power in the hands of the same clique; and controlled economies do not generate goods and services for the common good. What is shared is increased poverty and despair. Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany have more closely approximated the Third World by these methods than have the Third World countries approximated them by the same methods. But the problem is this: the West does not at the present time have a positive sense of the responsibilities of government to help those least able to help themselves, nor does it have a clear vision of how to do so if it decided.

It will be felt, third, because both Marxism and much of the progressive West has exported the idea that we are dealing with the most basic realities of the human situation most directly when we take up the material needs that people have. What really makes things happen is material forces. But, in fact, it was not these that defeated the Marxists. It was ideas--ideas carried by cultural memories, ideas carried by radio and television, ideas passed from hand to hand in furtive publications, ideas sung in pop music. Vaclav Havel's West German Peace Prize address, delivered in absentia only weeks before he became President of Czechoslovakia, focused on John 1:1, as the source of power. Theologians, philosophers, social analysts, and pundits of the last decades who tried to outdo one another with their ersatz-Marxism missed this revolution. The Power of the Word.

We have not begun to imagine what this means yet, there or here. As to there, we should remember that after World War II in Germany, textbooks had to be rewritten; teachers had to be retrained; handbooks on everything from farming methods to health care had to be redesigned; every organization had to be redesigned. That was after seventeen years of Nazi control, in one country. In our present situation, we face many countries, forty years of one party control, and a generation that never knew another option. The implications are perhaps clear: what ideas shall be put in the place of those that are now discredited? And as to here, all those who became apologists for the methods used, who thought they were being prophetic by being anti-anticommunistic, will be exposed less as reconcilers with enemies, than as unprincipled compromisers who could not bring themselves to call evil wrong.

It will be felt, fourth, because that French Revolution, and the Marxist ones, proposed the idea that society could and should be governed by purely secular ideas, on which people could presumably agree, and not be the "myths" of the world's religious or theological ethics, about which there was little agreement and for which there was little evidence, they said. There are surely areas in which socialism and the great world's religions could, and have, in different forms, shared many principles; but in the Marxist tradition, we find "scientific socialism," advocated in a way that not only repudiates, but actively attempts to suppress religion.

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In fact, it is precisely those places where religion was most repressed that the tyranny was greatest. China, in centuries of a Confucian philosophy that demanded honor to the Emperor, followed first by Nationalist and then Communist domination, has never had an expansive place for anything religious that did not fit into the imperial pattern. Similar stories could be told not only of Burma, Romania, North Korea, and Albania, but in some measure of every socialist country in the Marxist tradition. Students, scientists and workers who wanted to overcome tyranny, had no alternative institutions into which to go, and in which they could work out serious principles to shape an alternative future.

But in Poland, "Solidarity" could go into the Roman Catholic Churches when the pressure from the regime got too heavy. And in East Germany, the Evangelical traditions became the centers of the formation of a serious reconstructed vision, while in Hungary it was the Reformed Churches. Further, we associate the most important movements against tyranny and imperialism not with the overcoming of religion but with the renewal of religious ethics, with the formation of both new religious communities, and with the reformation of religious commitments and the development of the theological capacity to speak against every purely political, economic, or military analysis of the structure of power.

The most difficult and critical period of any great event in life is what happens on the far side of the drama. The Marxist Revolution is over. It fought noble battles, but it plundered its own victories. No one believes its stories any more except a few fading ideologists. But the questions remain:

- What principles will guide and constrain the powers that remain?
- How shall poor lands modernize if this fails, or brings tyranny?
- Which ideas are more powerful than interests, which not?
- Whence come religious values that are reliable in societies?

I think that these are the questions before the Christian community as seldom before. Do we have, can we find, is it possible to develop a Public Theology with the amplitude to aid us in this situation? The alternative sources of a vision by which to construct guidelines for the globalized, technologized, cosmopolitan civilization of the twenty-first century—Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Secular Liberalism, Liberation Theology, seem even less adequate to the task.