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RELIGIOUS SERIOUSNESS: A LESSON FROM POSTCOMMunist EUROPE

By Dane R. Gordon

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Something of an industry has developed between the United States and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism. One might call it the "helping postcommunist societies adjust to a new world" industry. The "new world" is primarily a North American world, a world of advanced technology, international business, sophisticated banking, intense competition, large potential profits, and many actual losses. It is not difficult to show how extensive and multifarious are the needs these countries have, in order for them to adjust to their new situation, whether one looks at printing, aircraft, automobiles, marketing, banking, or the study of English. So, it seems to follow, what we have in the U.S. is what these countries do not have and need. As a result, business people, academics, scientists, financiers, diplomats, and others have been traveling to Eastern Europe from the U.S. in large numbers to help the postcommunist societies adjust to the new way of life. It is not quite an invasion like that of Haiti, but it is not unlike it.

The extent of what the Western world has to offer is not limited to the technical, the commercial, or the material. There may be some even more basic things the West can teach. At a meeting of representatives of U.S. and Eastern European universities a few years ago in Eastern Europe, several North American academics in scientific and technical fields, as well as businesspersons, were explaining what they could do for these various countries in practical, technical ways. It was then that the rector of one of the Eastern European universities quietly reminded those present from the U.S. that the countries of Eastern
Europe actually had very good engineers and scientists. What they would like to hear from the U.S. was something about how it handled the quality of its life, what it regarded as philosophically and ethically important, what its spiritual basis was. The rector's quiet comment made a big impression upon the U.S. delegation, for it seemed they were being invited to assume an even broader responsibility than they might have thought, namely to address concerns about the meta-levels of life, ethics, philosophy, and religion.

The story was told to me by someone who was there, and I have thought about it frequently. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been buffeted by ideological storms for several decades, so it might follow that they could use some encouragement and advice from the philosophically, ethically, and religiously more stable West. On further reflection, I decided, if we attempt to give advice at all, we should be exceedingly modest about it. We call these countries "postcommunist," which is correct, yet beyond a certain point the description is misleading. Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic, has objected to it, for it represents a relatively brief moment in political and cultural histories reaching back for hundreds of years. The two centuries of independence of which the U.S. is so proud is a short time when measured by those longer standards. The very fact of being postcommunist, of having survived despotic and vicious regimes, may not mean they need our help but that they have lessons to teach that we have yet to learn. Hence the title of this essay.

Before I attempt to explain what we have to learn, let me consider a curious feature of the American religious tradition. Many of its characteristics are positive and have helped to create good relations between those with religious beliefs and those without. However, the very success of this may have been counter-productive and may have led, at least in the case of three characteristics, to nonpositive religious developments in the U.S. In that respect I would say we have something to learn from Eastern Europe. These characteristics, ordinarily regarded as positive, are (1) open mindedness about critical discussion of religious belief, (2) separation of church concerns from state concerns, and (3) toleration of all religious and nonreligious opinions. Usually counted as positive, I will suggest another, more critical way of regarding them.

In 1993, I gave a set of lectures on philosophy, religion, and ethics at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. I had expected some debate, maybe even controversy, when I dealt with such ethical issues as sexual relationships, birth control, and abortion. There was discussion, but it was unexpectedly moderate. What I did not expect was the reaction to a lecture on personal religious faith. I had titled it, perhaps enigmatically, "Do We Only Not, Not Believe?" I attempted to explain how it is possible to engage in philosophical examination of what we believe. I advanced the thesis that it is not only possible but desirable to subject one's religious beliefs to critical examination. I endeavored to support the view, expressed
by David Hume, "that to be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound believing Christian." These are fairly ordinary ideas in philosophical circles in the U.S. and in Britain, and when I discuss them with my students there is no great surprise, dismay, or contention. At Adam Mickiewicz, however, the students were surprised; it seemed to be quite a new thing to be able to deal objectively and critically with one's personal faith, and it seemed paradoxical to regard that as good. For a time, I felt I was in a different intellectual and theological atmosphere.

Yet, despite my brief experience in that one place, there is a great deal of skeptical thinking about religion in postcommunist Europe. I encountered it directly when discussing religious matters with my colleagues and, no doubt, would have encountered it among the students outside the classroom. As one writer put it, "The intelligentsia is filled with religious cynicism and modernist indifference." This reference is to Ukraine, but such attitudes are found throughout Eastern Europe.

What is lacking in these countries is not simply the ability to be critical of religious beliefs (which obviously is not lacking), but the ability to be critical of the criticism. It is not difficult to be critical of religion. Some academics have made a business of it. The difficulty is to deal with the criticism on both sides in objective ways, to be open-minded about all sides of a religious opinion. This is the first of the characteristics I want to consider.

Turning to the second characteristic, at various times during my months in Poland I had conversations with friends within the academic community and others about the dominant role of the Roman Catholic Church, which provided strong spiritual and moral leadership during the communist era. It emerged with great respect; however, instead of permitting that respect to provide the impetus for its growth, it resorted to what many believe was a display of political power. In particular, it engaged in strenuous and ultimately successful efforts to introduce religious education in the schools--taught by priests, nuns, and lay workers--and it was influential in ensuring the passage of one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in Europe. In 1988 the Church forced the withdrawal of a sex education textbook from the public schools. That kind of ecclesiastical influence would be rejected as distasteful, illegal, and unconstitutional in the U.S., where a clear distinction is made between the activities of the church and the state. Prayer is not allowed in public schools. More zealous advocates have even had Christmas decorations removed from schools and Christmas music silenced because they conveyed a religious message. Apart from extreme positions, the state will not interfere in what people believe, and religion in whatever form will not interfere in how people conduct their lives.

A third characteristic of the American religious tradition is not, like the first, simply openness to different religious points of view, a willingness to give them a fair hearing. Rather, it is toleration, which is grievously lacking in countries around the world. I
encountered the lack of it in Poland and have read about religious intolerance in Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, and former Yugoslavia, but it is found in many places. When I was in New Delhi, I stayed with a Sikh family who described to me how, a year before, they had fled for their lives before a crowd of angry Hindus; while I was in India there were incidents in which Sikhs burst into the homes of Hindus and murdered them. This sort of thing is different in degree but not in kind from the subtle, almost imperceptible ostracism against those who, in Poland, openly declare themselves to be non-Catholic--imperceptible, that is, except to those who are affected. North America is not free from religious exclusivism, but it is a well-established principle that people can worship whom they want as they want, within the limits of public safety.

These are three characteristics of the American religious tradition: a willingness to hear all sides of a religious argument, a firm distinction between church and state, and a tradition of religious toleration, which is, in fact, part of the beginnings of this American society. On the whole all three work. Yet, as I have suggested, their very success in protecting the interests of religion may be counter-productive. Of the many enemies of the faith, two are especially damaging. One is hostility, such as has been experienced in many of the countries of Europe; the other is indifference and superficiality. It is that which I believe is the problem in the U.S.

Consider the first characteristic, open-mindedness. As in a philosophy course where the professor sets out all the ethical positions to be examined dispassionately without considering their ethical value, and the student may wonder whether any of them really matters, so with religious options, regarded in the same dispassionate way: Does any one of them matter?

The separation of church and state, the second characteristic, is undeniably a strength to a society. Certainly, it has been in the U.S. We can refer to countries such as Iran, where separation is not even considered, and Poland, whose primate (Jozef Cardinal Glemp) does not regard Poland as a secular society. Yet, in human history such separation is strange. One might ask: How is it possible to separate these two profoundly basic activities of life, religion and politics? For the Greeks the polis was civilization itself, which included all aspects of life, religion among them. How can religious concerns be separated from broader state concerns without damaging the society and to some extent trivializing religion? This is a tense issue in the U.S., increasingly so as a result of the 1994 elections.

With regard to toleration, the third characteristic of the American religious tradition, its lack in various countries has caused great human anguish. Nevertheless, there is another side. The Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland objected to its being tolerated as one of the minority religions. Indeed, we tolerate many things we do not care for and have no interest in. Wilfred Cantwell Smith once wrote that the fact we worship God in radically different ways "is a matter much too profound for glib or supercilious treatment." Glibness,
superciliousness, and superficiality are possible when toleration is regarded as a primary way of relating to a religious belief.

The cumulative effect of these characteristics, when looked at in this manner, is not as positive as when looked at more traditionally and admiringly. It has been at least partially responsible for a decline in the quality of religious life in the U.S. Religious integrity is at risk in a society where hardly anything religious really matters, where one finds widespread religious belief but much of it on the level of superstition, where interest in the truth of religious claims is subservient to what an individual feels to be true—feelings that may be guided by little in the way of reflection, education, or experience. Such a society, to a great extent American society, needs religious direction and definition.

This brings me to the point of this essay, for where do we find direction and definition if the society itself is not providing it, or not providing much of it, or whose own religious traditions may work against it? In the Hebrew Bible the word of God provided definition and direction through the medium of the prophets—in the case of Hosea, through the hard experiences of his life. For that reason the witness of Christians in Eastern Europe is of great importance. The most resolute attempt in history to stamp out religious belief failed, surely a major piece of empirical data. It does not prove religious claims are true, but it does show that, against all efforts, they are unquenchable. It shows that the religious dimension of life is an essential dimension, that life and religious belief of some kind are, for most people, inseparable.

Few persons in the countries of Eastern Europe, other than young children, have not in some way been scarred by the anti-religious crusade of the past several decades. Therefore, there are a very large number of people who have literally been baptized by fire. They are not saints, and they may not now be very religious, but they have suffered for their faith in ways few of us have in the U.S. At a time when the sea of faith for many is as shallow as a sand pool, we should consider the witness of those who loved not their lives to the death and many more who suffered various levels of physical and mental abuse for their faith and who were at the least uncomfortable and insecure—even if not to the outside, to themselves—because of what they believe. It is therefore not surprising, though generally overlooked in the Western world, that one can find a level of religious seriousness in the postcommunist countries, even among those who are not religious, a situation not generally found among those who lack such experience.

The concept of death is not the same to those who have just escaped it or who have lost loved ones, as to those who have not. Similarly, religious belief is not the same for those for whom holding such belief is a risk, as for those who face no risk. Perhaps only the former can understand the comment of the Czech pastor Alfred Kocab, referring to those days, “It’s a paradox when I look back. I think it was one of the best periods of my life, because it was
one of the most difficult. God permitted me to get through it and that meant that I could reach a certain deepness of experience that will help me surely till the end of my life.7 We need to share such experiences, to learn about them. We need the lessons they teach in the midst of our technical, commercial, often superficial society.

Just as it is not a one-way street from us to our brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe, it is also not a one-way street from them to us, even in the matter of trials of faith. The irrationality of life may come by way of enemy action or anti-religious bigotry, but it may also come by the loss of someone we love or by humiliating failure in our own life. There are many ways to be thrust to the depths, many ways to become members of the fellowship of suffering. Those who are, are united by a bond stronger than what separates them by geography and language. Hence, the importance of relations between Christians.

Outsiders sometimes draw conclusions that those directly involved may not. Yet, we must acknowledge, something extraordinarily special has happened in the former communist countries. The word of the LORD in the Hebrew Bible was frequently conveyed not only in words but by visions and dramatic actions, so perhaps it is not inappropriate to liken the former communist world to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. All was dead and seemingly without hope, but God was at work, and the Spirit gave life. It is a remarkable, even prophetic phenomenon. We in the West should take note.

ENDNOTES