

## **Change in Central and Eastern Europe: the Challenges for the Churches**

The life of the churches in the various countries of Europe with communist governments varied so widely that it was impossible to make generalisations about church-state relations, freedom of worship and other such quantifiable phenomena which would be applicable to the whole of the communist world. Nevertheless, the communist environment produced experiences which were unique to those countries; these experiences were shared by all religious bodies in those countries, and shaped their otherwise heterogeneous development. The same is true in the post-communist period.

In this essay I propose to make some generalisations first about what was expected of the churches of Central and Eastern Europe in the last years of communism and then about the particular nature of the challenges which have presented themselves and are still presenting themselves to the churches in the postcommunist world, and the problems the churches are experiencing in responding to these challenges.

### Expectations

Under communism the churches were the only legally existing non-communist social organisations. As such they tended to find themselves acting as a protective umbrella for all kinds of movements seeking changes in society. After the end of communism, the churches were expected to be central to the processes of social healing and reconciliation. Their help was eagerly solicited in such practical areas as work in hospitals, orphanages and old people's homes. They were also expected, moreover, to be central to the process of the spiritual healing of society. In Hungary, for example, a national congress in 1993 dealt with the question of the role of Christians in public life. Foreign minister Géza Jeszenszky said that 'in this century a powerful role has been played by political ideas which have denied thousand-year-old values. For example, the communists reevaluated the concept of sin and in so doing they caused unfathomable damage.' He pointed out that 'Christian intellectuals have to emphasise Christian values publicly.'<sup>(1)</sup>

In the postcommunist period, then, the churches have been expected to involve themselves in practical regeneration work and also to be able to provide society with new values to replace the old discredited and compulsory communist value-system.

### Challenges and Problems

#### Divisions within the churches

Immediately after the end of communism a fundamental problem within the churches was perceived to be that of achieving reconciliation between two groups now divided by bitterness and distrust: those who had 'compromised' or 'collaborated' with the secular authorities and those who had 'resisted' and had been persecuted or discriminated against as a result. It proved far from easy to effect this reconciliation, however, partly because it became increasingly clear that the picture was not one of black and white but of a whole series of graded greys: the motives of those who had taken up a particular position had to be examined before the validity of that position could be properly assessed.

The picture was, moreover, complicated by a further consideration. It soon became clear that a basic question needed to be asked about any religious believer

who had resisted the communist system: had he or she done so because that system was totalitarian or because it was atheist? An individual in the former category would now, in the postcommunist period, very likely be found in the camp promoting democratisation, pluralism and freedom of conscience for all. An individual in the latter category, by contrast, would in the postcommunist period tend to be defensive of the 'truth', conservative, triumphalist, intolerant of innovations in the spiritual sphere. During the communist period, both Fr Gleb Yakunin (a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church) and Bishop Ioann (later to become Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg) were a thorn in the side of the secular authorities. Fr Gleb continues his democratic political activity to this day, and has been defrocked for his pains; from 1991 until his death in 1995, by contrast, Metropolitan Ioann spoke out against the 'Jewish conspiracy' against Russia and called for laws against the activities of 'pseudo-Christian' western non-Orthodox denominations on what he saw as the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church. There has thus been an increasing estrangement between those who had been on the same 'side' in the communist period.

A similar estrangement has been seen on the other 'side' as well. Official church leaders under communism performed their expected duties. These included travelling to international conferences promoting 'peace', 'international friendship', 'ecumenism' and similar officially-approved concepts. It would obviously help the credibility of the exercise if these figures were genuinely committed to the ideals they were promoting. The present Patriarch Aleksii of the Russian Orthodox Church was one such. He now finds himself representing a more open, ecumenical approach within the church; an approach which is challenged by many enthusiastic young new converts to Orthodoxy. These are embracing their new creed with the same enthusiasm with which in communist youth movements they supported the old ideology when it was expedient to do so. They are now as xenophobic and isolationist as such long-time opponents of communism as Metropolitan Ioann; while Patriarch Aleksii finds himself less out of sympathy than they do with reform-minded former dissidents.

The progressive Russian Orthodox priest Fr. Veniamin Novik writes that 'if one had to describe the spiritual condition of Russia in one word, that word would be 'schism'.(2) The splits within the Russian Orthodox Church are growing more profound rather than healing; and the same is true for many of the other churches in postcommunist Europe.

## Isolation

Generally speaking the churches in communist countries were unable to develop their own distinct denominational responses to social or political problems. They were also unable to inform themselves systematically about developments in the world at large, including developments within the churches, remaining for example ignorant of the details of even such important events as the Second Vatican Council. One consequence of this isolation has been that the churches of Central and Eastern Europe have tended to remain theologically conservative; and this tendency has been and continues to be reinforced by two factors. Firstly, the churches have come to view with suspicion many apparently progressive concepts which have been tainted as a result of their exploitation by the communist authorities: not only words such as 'peace' and 'democracy' are suspect, but such purely ecclesiastical concepts as 'ecumenism', which is perceived as a politically-motivated process through which churches were compelled to go as the price for being allowed to continue to function. Secondly, Christians in Eastern and Central Europe are genuinely shocked by the excesses, as they see them, to which liberalising tendencies have led in some Western churches. They often see these as symptoms of that Western secularism which has so traumatically been revealed to them in the postcommunist period.

One example will illustrate the effect of both these factors. For a time in the communist period the Latvian Lutheran Church ordained women as pastors. Since the end of communism the church has renounced this practice. The church leadership sees its introduction as a temporary necessity forced upon it by the peculiar circumstances of communist rule; and the decision not to reintroduce the practice is now reinforced by those in the church who fear the consequences of suddenly accepting all the 'liberal' ideas with which 'Western' Lutheranism is now associated.

In Slovakia, Archbishop Jan Sokol has declared that 'We must bar our doors to the West', and has won support from many Catholics who are distressed at what they perceive as the corrupt values of Western society. However, this kind of reactions has its inevitable negative consequences. Catholic seminaries in Slovakia, long starved of theology, have recently rejected gifts of libraries from Catholic faculties in Germany fearing that they liberal ideas they contain might lead their students into heresy.

## How to communicate

One fundamental problem for the churches is that of finding a language in which to communicate with their nominal flock and even more so with those who have never had contact with a church. With the witness of the churches severely restricted for 40 years, and in the Soviet Union for 70 years, most people in these countries have no understanding of religion and no vocabulary to receive religious ideas. The Hungarian churches cooperated a few years ago in producing a handbook for the media, but as one spokesman told me it was at a very elementary level - 'just so that they don't confuse Baptists and Buddhists'.

Christian educational work has to be accomplished, moreover, within societies still suffering from the 'post-totalitarian mentality'. This mentality comprises contradictory elements. On the one hand, it includes such attitudes as the tendency to expect solutions from strong leaders rather than from personal initiative, and the tendency to dramatise oneself as the impotent victim of uncontrollable circumstances ('learned helplessness'). On the other hand the individual may dramatise himself as the measure of all things, as witness the tendency to seek maximalist solutions and to regard compromise as suspect and dishonourable - if you disagree with me you are not only mistaken but a scoundrel - and the tendency to identify personal opinion with absolute truth. Some of these latter features of the post-totalitarian mentality may well have helped to give the revolutions of 1989 the unique character they all shared: these were revolutions without a plan or a programme. The Hungarian sociologist Gaspar Tomas has described the revolution of 1989 as antiutopian and antiauthoritarian; as 'a victory for the first person singular'.

The contradictory elements in the 'post-totalitarian mentality' tend towards polarisation amongst those who are faced with the message the churches are trying to bring. Some eagerly embrace the Christian message as a new set of truths to be adhered to as unquestioningly as the old communist ideology; others are extremely skeptical and suspicious of any attempt to replace the old compulsory truths with a new set, however different in content it may be.

'There is an obvious need for a broad dialogue between the church and the various sections of society', says Aleksei Bodrov of the Open Orthodox University in Moscow,

*...But what language should this dialogue be conducted in? This language has yet to be created... Again and again we come up against the problem of Christian education: an education that is open and accessible to wide sections of the population, an education that is rooted in the Orthodox tradition and which also takes into account the development of modern society and science.(3)*

The problem of educational work is compounded by the fact that it is not only the ordinary people who are ignorant; very often the clergy have had no chance to re-

ceive theological education or pastoral training. A young Bulgarian Orthodox visitor to Keston Institute recently described the extreme case of her own country:

*Then, in 1989, the atheist, regime fell. People rushed to church. Most of them didn't understand the services, some couldn't even make the sign of the cross. Yet they wanted to learn every Christian truth... (But) it was suddenly obvious that the priests were totally unprepared both theoretically and practically for this transformation. Freedom to preach was the only obvious result of the change, and yet even here the preachers had been struck dumb. Some could not deliver a sermon, others preached completely incomprehensibly.(4)*

## Rebuilding the church

A complementary task to that of education is that of reestablishing the church as a properly functioning organism within society so that it can do its restorative work effectively. In most communist countries the church was severely restricted in its witness and now its infrastructure is disabled. According to the statutes of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, for example, a parish should consist of between 300 and 400 families. Today a severe shortage of priests means that every country priest has several parishes to serve; in the towns, a priest may be responsible for as many as 10,000 families. The "parish" as a meaningful entity doesn't exist in Bulgaria', said our young Christian visitor form that country recently.

A general lack of resources and infrastructure explains the extreme dismay with which the indigenous churches throughout Central and Eastern Europe have been reacting to the sudden influx of all kinds of foreign missions and sects. Many of these evangelistic organisations are quite happy to use the promise of material prosperity to attract converts. 'People will come running when they hear the dinner bell', a representative of one American mission has commented. This kind of approach does nothing to allay the suspicions of indigenous churches that such 'sects' are simply the aggressive tools of Western secular materialist interests operating under the guise of religion.

## The economic climate

In many parts of the postcommunist world the market economy arrived with unmitigated speed and in a particularly virulent form. The successful entrepreneurs were largely the same people who had been successful operators of the 'second economy' under communism, that network of barter and black marketeering which was essential to the survival of the old system. Widespread disillusionment was the result. Under communism citizens had eagerly awaited the arrival of 'the market' as a mechanism for solving all problems, moral and spiritual as well as social. At a conference in London in 1992 on the subject 'Business and Moral Standards in Postcommunist Europe' Professor Jack Mahoney spoke of a danger facing people brought up under a communist system which claimed to be able to solve not only economic but also moral problems: 'the danger that capitalism now in turn would be automatically looked to as providing guidance and directives in the social and ethical spheres of life as well as the economic.' This would be to expect something from capitalism 'which it is not able to deliver, far less designed to deliver'. As another speaker, the Polish sociologist Jolanta Babiuch, put it pithily, 'We do not know which values, if any, the capitalist system really represents.'

## The challenge of the pluralist society

A basic question facing the churches in the postcommunist countries is one which is also facing the churches in the West: what should be the role of a church in a pluralist society? Like the economic challenge, however, this particular question is presenting itself in a particularly acute form in the postcommunist world.

In resisting communism the churches in Eastern Europe were in fact doing something different from what they thought they were doing. 'In opposing its own con-

ception of totality to that which the official system was attempting to impose,' writes Patrick Michel, 'the church, whether it knew it or not, was in fact defending the relative' - an environment of pluralism and democracy. 'Everything seems to indicate that this will be a challenge much more difficult to meet than that which was posed by the Soviet system.'(5)

What, then, is the appropriate role for the church in these circumstances? Jürgen Moltmann argues that in a pluralistic society Christians do not have the right to speak on behalf of all citizens, but that all citizens nevertheless have the right to hear what Christians have to say. Those who follow this line tend to believe that the only meaningful way in which Christians can respond to a situation of moral dissensus is to accept that situation and contribute vigorously to the debate.(6) The Polish theologian Fr Józef Tischner has taken a rather different view. He has argued that after its confrontation with communism Christianity is now likely to have to enter into a confrontation with liberalism.(7)

For some, then, the primary challenge to the church will be whether it can now rise to the opportunity of entering the debating chamber on equal terms with all other partners; but for others, the primary challenge to the church will be specifically to combat the obviously deplorable consequences of 'pluralism' such as unrestrained individualism and self-seeking, exacerbated in the context of the new free-market economy.

### The influx of 'foreign sects'

One aspect of pluralism which has affected the postcommunist countries in the form of a traumatic shock is the influx of all kinds of sects and evangelist movements from abroad. Many of these have huge financial and technical resources which cannot be matched by the indigenous churches. There has been a natural desire in most postcommunist countries to curb the activities of these new bodies. In 1994 a proposed new law on religion in Hungary would have restricted legal recognition to churches which 'do not violate generally accepted morals'; in addition, a recognised church would need either to have 10,000 members or to demonstrate that it had operated in Hungary for at least 100 years.

There is an increasing danger that the established churches will not be discriminating enough about the religious movements to which they are opposed. Since the end of communism relations between major denominations - 'ecumenical' relations of the kind which have been developing steadily in the West since the Second World War - have been rapidly deteriorating. The Russian Orthodox Church is seriously alarmed by what it construes as a policy of aggressive 'sheep-stealing' on the part of the Vatican. A milestone on the descent to hostility was reached on 13 April 1991 when Rome named several apostolic administrators to Russia without any prior discussion with the Moscow Patriarchate. In March 1992 the heads of Orthodox Churches from all over Eastern Europe convened in Istanbul and condemned Catholic proselytism. Traditional Protestant denominations are also increasingly under attack. Baptists and Pentecostals have been strong in Russia since the last century; yet recently the Russian Orthodox Church has published booklets attacking these 'sects', and both booklets carry the printed blessing of Patriarch Aleksii, until a few years ago one of the presidents of the Conference of European Churches, an international ecumenical body. In Bulgaria, to take another example, established Protestant denominations - Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists - have found themselves increasingly subject to violence initially provoked by the activities of new religious movements coming into the country from abroad.

The French Jesuit Philippe de Régis, who died in 1954, looked forward to the time when it would be possible for missionary work to begin again in Russia. He was firmly opposed to all who would set out to 'conquer' Russia for Roman Catholicism. His words were accurately prophetic:

*When Russia opens up there will be a great temptation for us to rush into this vast mission field as though it were virgin land to be brought under cultivation. We will burn with the desire to 'convert' these people, and this will provoke a violently hostile reaction from Orthodox circles. The clergy will feel themselves under threat and will start looking out for 'wolves in sheep's clothing'; and so a rift will open up between the two halves of Christendom, which ought to be brought into unity rather than set against each other. There will be only one way to achieve this unity; impartial fraternal collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church in the task of education and spiritual formation among the people.(8)*

## The return to power of former communists

There is a persistent tendency in formerly communist countries for reformed communists to be returned to power. Some in the indigenous churches have feared that this might mean a renewal of pressure against religion. The tendency is however likely to be that the best-established indigenous churches in these countries will find that their aims as institutions have much in common with those of the reformed communists: a desire to mitigate the social damage done by the unrestrained activity of the free market; a tendency towards authoritarianism rather than democracy; and a tendency towards isolationism and protectionism. In many countries where reformed communist governments are returned, church and government are likely to find themselves collaborating in the new task of partial withdrawal from two sorts of free market - the economic free market and the free market of ideas.

Meanwhile any restrictive legislation on religion is likely to be directed against religious movements or 'sects' perceived to be of 'foreign' origin. Minority denominations already long-established within the various countries are likely to find themselves in an increasingly ambiguous situation.

## The resurgence of nationalism

Jacques Attali, former director of the Bank of Reconstruction and Development, once said that he found it interesting that there had been no trials in Eastern Europe of former communist leaders equivalent to the trials of Nazi leaders at Nürnberg. His explanation was that the citizens of the countries concerned had realised that the evils of communism were not to be blamed on particular individuals, nor yet even on a particular political party, but on the way in which the ideology had become identified with the state. It seemed to him that in the postcommunist period citizens were trying to bury the devils of the past by destroying the state and reverting to the unit of the 'nation'.

A complementary understanding of the process of the reassertion of the 'nation' in postcommunist Europe is that it is one manifestation of the process of building 'civil society', a process which started during the last two decades of communism with the creation of small unofficial self-reinforcing interest groups of citizens. This might explain the colour of 'tribalism' which the reemergence of nationalism seems so frequently to take on in Central and Eastern Europe. Former Yugoslavia may be taken as an extreme case of this tendency, and as one which demonstrates that it has a negative as well as a positive potential: here 'the affirmation of identities has turned into a practical denial of the possibility of living together peacefully and on a basis of equality with others and their otherness.'(9)

We saw earlier how, in resisting communism, the churches were doing something different from what they thought they were doing. The same applies to those churches which have championed nationalist aspirations. Since the nineteenth century the Serbian Orthodox Church, looking back to Serbian independence in the Middle Ages, has been championing Serbian national self-determination. In so doing, and without acknowledging this fact, it has in reality been taking part in a po-

litical modernisation process typical of the whole of Europe since the Industrial Revolution. The Serbian Church has been envisaging the resurrection of the medieval Serbian kingdom, but at no point has it shown understanding of the desire for self-determination on the part of other nationalists in the Balkans, especially the Albanians, Macedonians and Bosnian Muslims. The result is that the Serbian Church is now strongly opposed to the outcome of that modernisation process 'inasmuch as it involved both a modern way of life with a loss of traditional national and religious values and also the emergence of new national groups with their own political demands and their own national identities, which could not be integrated into the Serbian national-religious corpus.'(10)

### Minor Miracles: Achievements

Despite all the difficulties discussed above, which do not of course all apply to the same degree in all the diverse countries which have emerged from communism, a great deal is being achieved.

In his annual report published in the early 1990s entitled *Babilon után* (After Babylon) the presiding bishop of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Dr Loránt Hegedűs, describes his church as living amidst 'minor miracles'. Evangelisation is now possible; so is religious education in schools and amongst young people; church building is starting again; Hungarians abroad have helped to open a hospital; publishing activity is increasing; the evangelical theatre is doing important work; relations with Hungarians abroad are deepening; a Reformed university has been founded; preparations are in hand for a General Synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church.(11) Similar lists of achievements, each minor in itself but all, taken together, of cumulative effect, could be compiled for all the countries which have emerged from communism. The achievement of these tasks is moreover an opportunity for effective cooperation between churches of various denominations within the country itself and between churches and Christians of East and West. Practical work together is an opportunity for all to learn from each other and to foster mutual understanding and respect in a spirit of true ecumenism.

The Russian Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Men' was once asked whether he was afraid his spiritual pupils would cool toward Orthodoxy if they took part in ecumenical meetings. On the contrary, answered Fr Aleksandr, 'they will become better Orthodox if they are enriched with the knowledge of unity'.(12) The history of the churches in the postcommunist years is littered with stories of personal triumphs. Metropolitan Nicolae of Banat region in Romania and Petru Dugulescu, a Baptist minister in Timisoara, have for example been quietly developing the first significant ecumenical relations between these two denominations. Addressing a Baptist congregation in 1994 the metropolitan said 'I have not come here as "His Excellency" or "His Holiness", I have come simply as your brother in Christ.'(13) As a Romanian deacon studying at Keston Institute in Oxford put it to me recently: 'The truth is always more convincing when it is like a choir of voices.'

(1) Joseph Pungur, 'Church-state relations in the new Hungary', *Religion, State and Society* vol.22 no.4, 1994, pp. 359-66, here p. 361

(2) Fr Veniamin Novik, 'Russia - between past and future', *Religion, State and Society* vol.22 no.2, 1994, pp. 183-9, here p.183.

(3) Aleksei Bodrov, 'The Open Orthodox University', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 22 no.2, 1994, pp.199-204, here p.200.

(4) Ralitsa Derilova, 'Treading on eggshells', *Frontier*, March-May 1995, p.21

(5) Patrick Michel, 'Religious renewal or political deficiency: religion and democracy in Central Europe', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 20 nos 3-4, 1992, pp.339-44.

(6) Gedeon Rossouw, 'From a just to a good society, the role of Christianity in the transformation of former eastern-bloc countries', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 20 nos 3-4, 1992, pp. 321-9.

(7) Józef Tischner, 'Christianity in the post-communist vacuum', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 20 nos 3-4, 1992, pp. 331-8.

(8) Quoted in Constantin Simon, 'How Russians see us: Jesuit- Russian relations then and now', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 23 no. 4, December 1995, pp. 343-57, here pp. 350-51.

(9) Srdjan Vrcan, 'The war in former Yugoslavia and religion', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 22 no. 4, 1994, pp. 367-78, here p.369

(10) Geert van Dartel, 'Towards a culture of peace: remarks on the war in Bosnia and Croatia' *Religion, State and Society* vol. 23 no. 2, June 1995, pp. 199-205, here p.205.

(11) Pungur, op.cit., p. 363

(12) Sandr Riga, 'The Society of Ecumenical Christians before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union', *Religion, State and Society* vol. 22 no. 4, 1994, pp. 379-90, here p.388.

(13) Daniel Bulzan, 'Against the tide', *Frontier*, June-August 1995, pp. 24-25.