



Freedom is Coming

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Pravda is different these days. The full text of speeches by the State President are still there, several pages of unbroken print to tempt the reader to great feats of endurance. The photographs have improved a little. No longer is one confronted only by poorly reproduced and unimaginative pictures of foreign politicians standing in a line next to Brezhnev, Andropov, Gorbachev, or whoever happened to be in power at the time. Images of sexy combine harvesters have been superseded by full-page adverts for Japanese or Korean electronics: Samsung computers, videos and semiconductors.

Soviet television has changed, too. A recent edition of *The Media Show* on Channel 4 discussed the explosion of sexual images on both large and small screen in the Soviet Union. Repressed for so long, the urge to explore and exploit sexuality publicly has caught many people by surprise. Depending on your values, this explosion is either to be deplored or celebrated. Those in the latter category see sexual liberation as being inextricably intertwined with political freedom.

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Those in the West who have believed the simplistic (though expedient) myth about a black and white world in which 'Good' fights its justified moral crusade against 'Bad' will now have to wake up to reality. The world is not simply the arena for a battle between the 'Free' (i.e. the West) and the 'Enslaved' (the communists). The situation is much more complex than this and needs some radical reappraisal. It is the powerful values of the West which are now being embraced by people in the newly-democratic East...but almost without question. The assumptions that Capitalism is right and that individualism¹ is an absolute are being grasped by people who have seen the Communist experiment fail. They believe they are free from state oppression. However, it must be questionable whether the new freedom will be much better than the old slavery.

In this article I wish to address myself to some of the phenomena of our recent history in order to help us think realistically, honestly and biblically about our view of the world. I do so from a background of having studied European politics and having worked as a Russian linguist specialist in British Government service (GCHQ). I am more concerned to raise questions than to supply neat answers. If these questions stir up some hostility, so be it. I will merely return to the basic tenet of Christian faith: that all humanity is fallen and limited in understanding; that all hu-

manity is limited in its variety of world-views by the narrowly-defined cultures it shares; that all humanity, including Christians, needs to address prejudices with honesty and humility; that truth matters more than theological, psychological or political expediency; that Jesus Christ challenges our cultural assumptions and calls us to live in the real world as citizens of his Kingdom.

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Optimism and disappointment

When Mikhail Gorbachev began to show the human face of Soviet leadership in the mid-1980s many in the West were deeply suspicious. Whilst welcoming reform and greater openness, many were reluctant to consider the possibility of the Soviet monolith changing for the better in the longer term. By 1987 Gorbachev's seduction of the West was achieving results. He began to assume the image of the peacemaker in a world where Reagan and Thatcher appeared as hawkish and belligerent. Whilst the Soviet leader was smiling for the cameras (thus playing Western politicians at their own game and doing very well by it) and offering massive cuts in Warsaw Pact weaponry and military deployment, the development of the illusory *Strategic Defense Initiative* was costing millions of dollars: an expensive fantasy if ever there was one.

In 1989 it became clear that Soviet *perestroika* meant not only the re-structuring of the Soviet political and economic systems, but also that the satellite states of Eastern Europe were to be allowed to determine their own futures. Though welcomed by countries such as Poland, where Solidarity had already made change inevitable, the leadership in East Germany and Czechoslovakia particularly felt very threatened. The future of the Warsaw Pact itself, the economic structure of Comecon, and the political alliances of the Eastern Bloc became gradually more uncertain.

By autumn 1989 the revolutions were beginning to erupt in the wake of widespread popular defection to the West. Portrayed in the West as popular uprisings by captive people whose human spirit was proving itself to be indomitable even after forty years of oppression, it is by no means clear that this is quite what happened. Permission had more or less been given by the Kremlin leadership when it stated unequivocally that no intervention was either planned or desired. Furthermore, the demonstrations were neither random nor anarchical; rather, they dis-

played clear organisation and strategic planning. Particularly in Czechoslovakia and Poland the structures were already established to enable a transfer of power to occur relatively smoothly once the communists had stepped down.² However, whatever the events and orchestrations that led to the uprisings and mass demonstrations, the single irrefutable fact that remains is that the monochrome and anachronistic governments of Eastern Europe fell from power. The Berlin Wall was demolished, thus offering a potent symbol of liberation: the prison walls had fallen and the innocent prisoners were finally free.

The collapse of the Honecker government in the German Democratic Republic, the victory of Civic Forum and Vaclav Havel over the Husak regime in Czechoslovakia, and the bloody demise of the hated Ceausescus in Romania appeared to bring to a close a dismal and fearful chapter of European history. The ghosts of Hitler and Stalin, the supreme butchers of the twentieth century, seemed about to be laid to rest. The future looked bright with people talking freely about liberation, economic restructuring, political realignment and even spiritual revival. Optimism was running high; the past could be left behind, like a bad nightmare, and we could all walk happily into the glowing sunset of a wonderful future.

In late 1989 and early 1990 it was a brave person who urged caution and hard-thinking in the face of unbridled optimism. On a personal note, I found myself agreeing with Margaret Thatcher in her constant reminders that this was a time for hard decisions and realistic appraisal of the costs of liberation. (Having said that, I must also say that I rejected her almost messianic proclamations of the West's, and therefore capitalism's, moral conquest of communism.) The destruction of one establishment inevitably means the establishment of another system. If the East was simply to copy the values of the West and call the result 'freedom', then they would eventually encounter the truth that 'our' freedom is a double-sided experience. Western societies have their victims, too. The derelict site left by the demolished communist building would soon see a new structure rising. The choices of design, foundations and building materials would be crucial for the future.

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Some observers of events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe could not suppress a nagging fear. The West had gloated about its wealth and power, its colour and variety and its standards of living for a whole generation. We had beamed TV images of our glamour and opulence, our full and brightly-designed shops, into the drab and badly-maintained societies of the East. We had conveyed the clear message that material abundance was the universal and consequential reward of a Western, capitalist and democratic system. How, then, would the newly-

liberated people of Eastern Europe cope with the disappointment of realising that instant success was an illusion? To have lived with disillusionment for a generation is bad enough. But to suddenly burst into a bright new world, full of promise and glory, only then to have these new hopes dashed could cause a terrible resentment. This disillusionment and its consequences could be far worse than that which preceded it.

Konrad Adenauer, the first Federal Chancellor of the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, wrote in a letter in 1945: 'Die "Befreiung" ist eine grausame und harte Enttäuschung' ('Liberation' is a horrible and severe disappointment)³. The aftermath of Germany's destruction in 1945, followed by the appalling winters of 1946 and 1947, makes this awful judgment understandable. However it might one day prove to be the conclusion some will draw from their experience of 'liberation' from communist rule in Eastern Europe.

What have the peoples of the East been liberated for?

The question here is a simple one: what have the peoples of the East been liberated *for*? We know what they have been liberated *from* and we know what social values they have for the most part rejected. But it is less clear what sort of societies will rise from the ashes of the dead regimes and which values they will espouse. This question leads on to further important questions.

The legacy of history

It is easy to assume that the pre-war shape of Europe corresponds to its current arrangement. This is not so. World War Two did not occur in a historical vacuum. The Bolshevik Revolutions in 1905 and 1917 did not happen because of some fiendish plot by megalomaniacs intent on grasping power for its own sake. The Tsarist empire seized by the Bolsheviks was not exactly the epitome of good, democratic and benevolent government. Its demise was inevitable just as the eventual demise of the Soviet monolith was inevitable. But even these revolutions can only be understood in the context of the convulsions in Europe in the 1840s. And those find some of their roots in the French Revolution half a century earlier. Furthermore, the nation state, which we worship today as an inviolable norm, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Cold War Soviet suspicions of Western imperialistic intentions found their root in the fact that Great Britain, the USA and France invaded Soviet territory between 1917 and 1921 in an attempt to strangle the baby born of the Revolution. History, and our understanding of it, matters a great deal.

For us in the West it is vitally important that we learn about and learn from history. It is not enough for us to throw stones at the nasty atheistic communists without first straining ourselves to understand why they arose in the first place. Erich Honecker suffered in Nazi Germany alongside Christians and others. His espousal of the communist ideal in the light of his experience of fascism is to be respected, even if his corruption and paranoid suspicion of capitalists is to be deplored. Even if the vision became increasingly perverted, at least it originated in a vision of human worth and dignity within a social framework.

I have no personal axe to grind about communism. I am not blind to the inconsistencies of Marxist-Leninist thought or their application in Eastern Bloc politics, ideology and behaviour. But the steel girder in my brother's eye does not mean the plank of wood in my own eye is justifiable by comparison.

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The following question also arises when we consider the problems and consequences of history: *How are Eastern Europeans to learn democratic values and new politico-economic relationships?* If they have lived in states which discouraged initiative and responsible, mature thinking for half a century, they cannot be expected to suddenly adapt painlessly to new patterns. Freedom can become licence. The post-revolutionary experience of Romania is clear evidence of the need for re-education and cultural adaptation to new values and patterns of behaviour. Romanian peasants are not going to attain in eighteen months the same level of political and social maturity acquired by Britain in four hundred years or more. (Or is that patronising?)

Misha Glenny makes this point succinctly when speaking of Hungary. 'Hungary may have a proud history, but its democratic traditions would barely fill a school exercise book.'⁴ He also warns of the consequences if there is not some sort of a *Wirtschaftswunder* in Eastern Europe supported by the West: 'If the countries of Eastern Europe are allowed to rot in the economic quagmire first nurtured and then bequeathed by the communists, these countries will revert to their old political habits, which bear little resemblance to democratic ones and will benefit nobody.'⁵ Certainly economic success or failure will determine the shape of the political structures in these countries. The future is a complex of very serious problems which require a bold and realistic (*i.e.* expensive) reappraisal of Western economic and political priorities. It remains to be seen whether the West will be prepared to face the economic and political cost of the freedoms they so boldly proclaimed for half a century.

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The problem of nationalism

The real problem facing the new Europe in 1991, however, is the sudden explosion of nationalist feeling and organisation. I say *sudden* because that is how it appears to many in the West. It comes as a big surprise to some people to discover that the ethnic organisation of Europe does not correspond to national bounda-

ries. There is a history to the presence of the Hungarian minority in Romanian Transylvania. The Baltic states did not always exist as separate entities. And their incorporation into the USSR as the result of an arbitrary pact between two foreigners fifty years ago was always bound to fail. However, the political and psychological sticking point for both sides in these ethnic disputes is almost unresolvable: *to which point in our history do we go back in search of a base-line, a starting point, a norm?* A correct understanding and analysis of cultural and political history is vital in the search for solutions to very practical dilemmas.

When ethnic groups, united by a distinctive language and culture, refer back to a common origin several hundred years ago, they are not going to be impressed by citizenships forced upon them fifty years ago by powerful politico-economic and military neighbours. The programme of social engineering begun in 1948 in the name of internationalism was designed to iron out any cultural diversity. The attempt to legally impose a *lingua franca* on populations at the expense of indigenous languages is a good example of this. The consequent construction of an artificial fraternity of peoples was hollow. The West, however, has largely accepted the illusion of a cultural and political monolith. At least the events of the last couple of years have blown that image apart.

This problem of deeply-rooted national identity is to be seen all over the world, not just in Eastern Europe. The Gulf Crisis arose essentially because of this issue. The Palestinians seek an identifiable homeland and political justice. Serbs and Croats struggle to live together in Yugoslavia, whilst immigrant Albanians only confuse matters. Germans living in Poland and Poles living in the Soviet Union struggle with divided allegiances. Brezhnev had to send European Russians into Afghanistan because he was not sure of the ultimate allegiance of his Moslem soldiers from the southern Soviet republics.

The problems thrown up by this historical untidiness are now beginning to emanate in extremely worrying phenomena. Racism and religious intolerance in the newly liberated Europe are becoming very visible. Jews are once again fearing for their safety and are not always finding themselves defended by their new leaders. For many minority groups in many countries it is no longer the Marxist spectre of communism which haunts Europe, but rather it is the spectre of Hitler's accession to power on the backs of racial and credal intolerance. The fear in Central Europe is that there are always Hitlers around, ready and willing to exploit latent weakness, confusion and intolerance.⁶

Misha Glenny summarises the problems of a future Europe better than I could: 'Although the revolutions began as beacons of piercingly sharp light, they have become dull, almost invisible glows behind the dark cloud of nationalist intolerance whose shadow swamps the region's history... To dismiss the threat of nationalism in Eastern Europe is to be lulled into a dreamy world of harmonious European integration. The assumption that, following the liberation from communism, there will be a rational way to resolve the more bitter historical disputes in Eastern Europe suffered some mortal blows within weeks of the revolutions...'⁷

Whereas the uniting force in the 1989 revolutions was the common enemies of poverty, disillusionment, economic distress, anachronistic leadership, the search is now on for a new unifying factor. If it is to be a new enemy, there is a distinct danger that further innocent suffering will be unleashed. Freedom to oppress is just one of the new freedoms discovered in Eastern Europe. And minority groups such as Jews, gypsies and homosexuals now fear a repeat of their recent history.⁸

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Morality and values

The collapse of the Berlin Wall did not only allow East Germans to stray into the 'free' world; it also allowed outside predators the freedom to pour into a potentially vast new market. Pornography was thrust into the breach in the walls. The glittering images of the capitalist dream swamped societies where food was scarce, pollution horrendous and social welfare structures in a state of collapse. Though unemployment began to rise sharply as state-subsidised factories were drained of their lifeblood the first noticeable boom area was video outlets. One East German friend told me that, within a month of the borders opening, there were four video outlets in his village. There was little fresh food available, but the leisure industry had found its niche. The joy of freedom meant the freedom to sit in front of a television screen watching American films and pornography in all its glory.

John Goldingay, Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, has observed: 'The vision of East Germans free to enjoy West German consumer goods and pornography has given us cause to ask questions about the society into which we are welcoming them. The communism which they have endured was evil, but there lay behind it a vision of humanity which we cannot afford to dismiss, especially given the state of our own visionless society.'⁹ What price 'freedom'?

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Western society is characterised by its worship of success and the individual. The East Europeans are going to have to realise that the same societies which are giving them videos and consumer choice are also selfish and greedy. The free market economy brings with it the freedom to be cast on an unemployment scrap heap, to see welfare institutions starved of funding and resources. Only the fittest survive...or deserve to. It is clear now that this message is beginning to be perceived in Eastern Europe. One widow of the Romanian revolution was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that 'people are more selfish than they

were before the revolution'.¹⁰

The battle is well under way for the values which will characterise the new European community of nations and peoples. The backlash against communism could hinder a proper development of societies which respect the freedoms of the individual and the responsibilities of individuals within a corporate society. A caring and consistent social ethic could easily be neglected.¹¹

The role of the churches

Much of what has been said so far has been descriptive of the more desperate and urgent problems facing the countries of the new Europe. It is the West that is going to have to seriously address some of these issues in order to achieve a long-term peace and stability in Europe. Ironically the newly-liberated countries are in a relationship of almost total dependence on the economic power and generosity of the West. This is not a healthy state to be in, as has been shown in the so-called Third World. The problem of debt and interest repayments will dog the East as they have the poorer countries of our planet. After all, that is how the newly-embraced free-market capitalism works: the fittest make their profits at the expense of the weakest.

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This, however, is the ground in which the churches of Europe are to be a fertilising salt. Christians cannot just satisfy themselves with new freedoms for evangelising and proselytising. If they have learned anything from European history of the last century it should be that the church has political and economic responsibilities. For the churches to retreat into the privatised piety of much of Western Christianity would be tragic, if not surprising.

The function of churches under the communist regimes was to offer a prophetic challenge to the atheistic and materialistic values of their respective societies. This has not changed. But their function might have now become more difficult to sustain. It is not an exaggeration to say that the revolutions rode on the back of the churches. The churches often supplied the only locus of dissent and the only truly independent voice. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and the Protestant Church in East Germany supplied the venues and (sometimes) the leaders of the revolutions. The support of the churches was vital to the success of the struggle for freedom. However, now that the revolution has been achieved, the churches are losing their people in increasing numbers.

Clearly the churches in Eastern Europe are now having to discover a new role for themselves. In a penetrating article in *The Independent on Sunday* in December 1990 Neal Ascherson identifies the key problems facing the churches: 'Now that the heroic years of struggle are over, the churches have to live in a

world coloured in shades of grey rather than black and white.¹² Whereas, for example, the Roman Catholic bishops maintained an overt political commitment, with whom should that commitment now lie? Many intellectuals sheltered under the wings of the church because the church was the agent for preserving and transmitting the threatened national cultures. The church provided a continuous link with the past. She became associated with the cause of national independence and democracy. She promoted and preserved social values such as truth. However, many of those who used the church in this way (and 'used' is not meant to be pejorative or represent a value judgement) are now party leaders, government ministers and presidents. Will they still expect the Roman Catholic Church to endorse all that they propose and do?

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The prophetic witness of the churches must be allowed to continue. The new regimes also need critical judgement and the churches are uniquely placed to do this. If the churches become introspective, preaching only a spiritual faith whilst remaining indifferent to the newer evils of the free-market economy, poverty, violence, racism and unemployment, they will have reversed all they gained during the years of communist rule. As Ascherson comments: 'The Communist period enabled them to sever their old links with the possessing classes, and to become genuine churches of the common people. Can that be preserved?'¹³ A further question is whether the churches of the West are ready to listen to the critique of its life, values and theology from those in the East.

The essential task for the churches in the new Europe is that of reconciliation. Liberation brought with it hatred and calls for vengeance. Brian Cooper, writing in the *Church of England Newspaper*, identified one particular area for careful thought and wise engagement: 'helping those who had sincerely worked for a moral and caring society within the communist framework only to find themselves betrayed by corrupt leaders, will be a huge pastoral problem.'¹⁴

We should not be deceived that somehow the church in the East is monolithic and united by a common suffering. Already Christian churches are fighting with each other. In Eastern Slovakia returning Greek Roman Catholics, dispossessed by the communists, have been expelling Orthodox priests from their churches...often violently. There is conflict over ownership of buildings and land.¹⁵ The challenge to churches of all hues is to seek a common vision and mission in a spiritually hungry area. Careful thought needs to go into what messages about God are being communicated by the churches' evangelism and competition with each other. Genuine evangelism will be marred if the churches become caught up in the drive for materialist success and satisfaction. It must be remembered that in opening the door to the West the East, including its churches, has also opened the door to Western degeneration, immorality, materialism and

spiritual impotence.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about this matter. General overviews such as this one can be irritating because they open up whole areas of questioning without then giving adequate consideration to the possible answers. This cannot be helped. The churches in both sides of the new Europe face severe challenges and great opportunities. They also have grave responsibilities in shaping new societies and a new Europe. The church has always claimed to be the place where demarcation lines between rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, black and white, male and female, find no accommodation. In a new Europe addressing questions of faith, values, cultural and political identities, Christians will have to face the challenges to their complacency, cultural prejudices and theological packages. The next couple of decades will be interesting as we discover whether the church of Jesus Christ is all she claims to be.

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FOOTNOTES

1. *i.e.* that individual rights take priority over corporate needs.
2. *e.g.* both Civic Forum and Solidarity had popular respect and credibility because they were not merely opportunist, but well-organised and (reasonably) consistent.
3. See Wolfgang Malanowski, *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 40/1983, p.82.
4. Misha Glenny, *The Rebirth of History*, Penguin, 1990, p.72.
5. *Ibid.*, p.71.
6. This is captured brilliantly in Brecht's *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*.
7. *Op. cit.*, p.205.
8. Accounts of the Oslo Conference on *The Anatomy of Hate* in September 1990 are worth reading. See, for example, Madeleine Bunting's account in *The Guardian*, 19 September, 1990, p.21.
9. St John's College Newsletter, No. 52, December 1990, p.2.
10. *The Guardian*, 22 December 1990, p.7.
11. Communist Parties have fared much better in some countries' first 'free' elections; notably Bulgaria.
12. Neal Ascherson, *The Independent on Sunday*, 23 December 1990, p.21.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Church of England Newspaper*, 12 October 1990, p.12.
15. Edward Lucas, *The Independent Magazine*, 9 June 1990, p.18.