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The Dialogue with the ‘New Europe’: a Two-Way Street

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I am relatively new to *Religion, State and Society* and to the work of Keston Institute. It is most gratifying, however, to know that there is a research institute dedicated to highlighting and understanding ‘the experiences of religious communities in their encounter with communism’, for it is true (as the journal states) that recognition and comprehension of this experience ‘will be central to the evolution of the new Europe and of the western world in general in the next century’. The examples that are now available do offer insights, lessons, and models to religious communities in other parts of the world which face similar or parallel challenges.

We now have ever more accurate information about religious developments during the communist era. We are learning more and more about how church members both resisted and accommodated themselves to parties and dogmas in power. Current research is also disclosing how religious belief was affected by the encounter with communist ideology, what coping mechanisms were employed when such belief was seriously challenged, and how the content of belief was modified. There is still so much to discover. It would be interesting, for example, to inquire about the quality of religious life within the monasteries during that long era: which texts were read, which manuals and liturgical cycles were used, which feast days were celebrated. It would be intensely interesting to know how individuals contrived to keep historical traditions alive, and how such traditions were reshaped by the communist experience; and how, when the official ecclesiastical institutions could not operate in robust fashion, belief and practice were fostered in other settings such as the family.

In a church in Moscow in 1988 I had a long talk with an Orthodox priest on the subject of the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev (1875–1948), who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1922 and settled in Paris. Berdyayev was concerned with the role of the imagination and the ability of the powers of creativity to defend human beings against all forms of bondage, particularly those whose purpose is to diminish or destroy the spirit. I knew something of Berdyayev’s thought for I had given it serious consideration as the focus of my dissertation during my doctoral studies at Yale. It turned out that the priest was very knowledgeable on the subject – this did not surprise me – as was a professor of history at Moscow State University who happened to be listening to the conversation that we carried from the church to a nearby cafe. But I was dumbfounded to learn that the priest had not read any of Berdyayev’s writings. Indeed, if I understood him correctly, he was not allowed to. How, then, did he know Berdyayev so well? His answer was that Berdyayev’s ideas had become part of transmitted ‘oral tradition’ which was kept fresh by those in the church who knew that the present era would not last forever.

I had similar conversations in Almaty with students in the State University of Kazakhstan about books they were reading. These were students of psychology, a discipline which as far as I could tell was not at all influenced by western developments in the field. At the time the theories of Sigmund Freud, for example, were unknown to them in detail. They were extremely curious, however. Under the watchful eye of university administrators, I relayed as much as I could about Freud, the early history of the psychoanalytic movement and the revisions of Jung, all of which they received with intense intellectual interest. In the discussions following, no one questioned the validity of Freud's or Jung's theories; what the students wanted was more information to satisfy their avid curiosity. When we began to talk about literature and its influence on them, however, I was astounded by the internal coherence their responses showed. I happened to be carrying a copy of an English translation of Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *The Place of the Skull*¹, an account of an Orthodox seminarian whose aspiration to save his people from spiritual emptiness culminates in his own death, a death that Aitmatov intends should be interpreted as a crucifixion. The theme of spiritual emptiness in the book and the social and cultural issues the book raises intrigued me.

I asked the students some questions. I was hardly prepared for the first comment: 'But, professor, before you can begin to understand Aitmatov, you must read Bulgakov'. It soon turned out that to understand Bulgakov it was necessary to understand a third writer; and to understand him, to master the thought of someone else. Very soon we were back to the foundational writings of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. The message was that we were not going to make much sense of Aitmatov in discussion without establishing some common intellectual ground. The corollary for me was that it was not possible to gain entry into established intellectual traditions at some arbitrary middle point and then engage in analysis and interpretation isolated from the relevant cultural context.

Reflecting on this experience, I asked myself questions: How were such interpretative traditions – this deliberate sequencing of thought – kept intact during a period when some of their vital components were under intellectual attack? Was it perhaps the oppression itself that demanded such deliberate sequencing? By what methodological procedures was anything like normative consensus identified? On the other hand, how deep did revisionist interpretation reach? How extensive was its influence? And when does accommodation become sell-out? At what point do the accommodations that are necessary for intellectual and spiritual survival seriously alter received tradition? And finally, when simple intellectual survival is no longer the key question, how has truth been affected by any transpositions it may have undergone?

I enjoyed stimulating conversations on this same subject in April 1995 with citizens of Prague in the Czech Republic. They told me that in the years leading up to the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989 there could be as many as 2000 people queuing in front of a bookshop on a Saturday morning to secure a copy of a new publication, always written in understandable code language, that would help them gain perspective on who they were, how they were coping, and how they could help each other morally and spiritually during their difficult days. My questions: How did you get to know about these books? How much did you discuss the contents of these books informally, in your homes, as you worked, as you walked and talked? Again, was there a discernible intellectual sequence?

During the communist era, we in other parts of the world had only fragmentary knowledge of the collective spiritual and intellectual life of the people in these countries. But now, thanks to the opening of important channels of communication and to

freer travel back and forth, there is opportunity to fill in the blanks. And the stories that can now be told, we can be certain, will be among the most important stories of our lifetime. For suddenly, a large section of the world that for a long period was intellectually dormant to us (though, certainly, never for the people who lived there) will spring alive, and the conversation can be taken up again.

I call this conversation a 'two-way street' simply on the basis of what I have learned by studying the Czech situation in some detail. It should not be surprising – but it is as yet not generally known – that very sophisticated literary and philosophical work was being done in Czechoslovakia throughout the period. Had we known about this important work at the time we would have deeply appreciated it. To cite one example, a large piece of the history of Husserlian phenomenology has now quite dramatically come into view because of the growing availability of the writings of Tomáš Masaryk and Jan Patočka. One can detect Husserlian influence in the writings of Václav Havel, playwright, essayist, and president of the Czech Republic. In a few places Havel makes direct reference to ideas and concepts originated by Edmund Husserl; but even more compelling evidence of influence is to be found in the frequency with which Havel uses the words 'lived experience', often when criticising the position of his opponents – those who try to deduce life from dogma, as he puts it, rather than taking their cues from 'the flow of life'. When I first encountered passages like these I sensed that Havel possessed a lively understanding of Husserl's thought. Then I recalled that Husserl was a Moravian and that he had given one of his most famous lectures in Prague, and I began to suspect that the influence was going to turn out to be even richer and deeper than I had anticipated. Until I looked more closely into the matter, however, I had no idea that Havel was trained by Patočka, who was one of the authors of the *Charter 77* manifesto and who, in turn, had been trained by Husserl. I came to recognise both Jan Patočka and Tomáš Masaryk as writers and philosophers of first-rate ability and accomplishment, who would clearly have been much better known had their work not been affected by ideological oppression.

I have only a limited knowledge of the intellectual situation in only one or two countries; I am certain that my own experience could be duplicated by accounts from virtually every country throughout the region that is becoming part of 'the new Europe'. I have been particularly impressed, for example, by a new study of the situation following the collapse of communism in what was formerly Yugoslavia, a book called *Habits of the Balkan Heart*.¹ I am also paying particular attention to the work of Dinko Tomašić, who has been analysing the ways in which culture and personality influenced each other in communist countries and who has also studied the impact of traditional Russian culture on communist ideology.² A good deal of contemporary analysis in this field is based on theoretical structures of Ferdinand Tönnies, author of the highly influential study *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (in English translation, *Community and Society*).³ It is highly probable that some of the richest intellectual traditions of the modern world have been conceived and created in those regions about which least is currently known. After all, through the centuries the literature of oppression and isolation is among the most impressive and productive literature of all. Religious studies scholars are increasingly recognising that the development of a particular tradition always requires contact with traditions opposed to it. This means that the teachings of Christianity, for example, cannot be stated without the disclosure of attitudes towards Judaism and Islam. No tradition, then, can achieve self-expression if it remains a self-contained monolith; rather, all genuine self-expression will exhibit evidence of formative oppositional influences.

Methodological insights such as this one can now be tested on the information that is coming to light about the religious situation in 'the new Europe'. This is a boon for scholarship. We can also anticipate that we will be awed by evidence testifying dramatically to the invincible courage and intellectual resourcefulness of the human spirit. I am pleased that Keston Institute has taken the lead in exploring a subject of such intellectual richness and religious importance.

Notes and References

- ¹ Chingiz Aitmatov, *The Place of the Skull* (translated from the Russian by Natasha Ward) (Grove Press, New York, 1989).
- ² Stjepan G. Meštrović, with Slaven Letica and Miroslav Goreta, *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism* (Texas A and M University Press, College Station, 1993).
- ³ Dinko Tomašić, *The Impact of Russian Culture on Soviet Communism* (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1953).
- ⁴ Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society* (translation of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*) (Harper and Rowe, New York, 1963).