

WARMTH FROM STONE CHURCHES
Experiences of the Church in Eastern Europe
— *an essay on political theology* —

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“Wherever you had the Americans, they created Communists
and wherever you had the Communists, they created anti-Communists.”¹



“The project of bringing heaven down to earth
always results in bringing hell up from below.”²



“. . . a persistent inner voice keeps saying
that I should be the one to change the world.
This is a waste of effort. You cannot set
a single person against the spirit of the time.
Each age is a stream in which we drift or drown:
we swim in the current but do not direct it.

The sun does not rise because the rooster crows:
the rooster crows because the sun is rising.”³

¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 34.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Eerdmans, 1986).

³ Imre Madach, *Az ember tragédiája* (1860), my translation of lines in section vii. A full text can be found in Imre Madach, *The Tragedy of Man* (trans. George Szirtes - Budapest: Corvina, 1995).

Church and society as a question

My experiences in Central Europe have been mainly with the Hungarian Reformed Church. However, in this essay I am thinking of “the church” and “Eastern Europe” in a very wide sense. I am not presenting a history of the churches, but rather I shall present some characteristics of the historical situation and some basic tendencies. This essay deals with church and society, especially from the viewpoint of political ethics. By political “ethics,” I mean discussing what is morally good or bad about a variety of political ideologies and their effects on society. By “political,” I mean the use of power for justice or injustice in the *polis*, that is, in society. By “society,” I mean not only in various countries, but also on a global level. Society refers to patterns of human relationships.

In Eastern Europe, the traditional stone churches are found in almost every village. They are often very cold in the winter with no adequate heating, for these are high buildings with no insulation. Heating them is a major cost. Therefore, people dress up with layers of clothing in order to be able to sit in cold or even freezing churches. A common alternative during the winter is to hold the worship service in a smaller congregational meeting room (“prayer rooms”), which can be more readily heated.

How warm are stone churches? I ask this now not referring to the temperature, but to the role of the church in individual lives and in society. What has been the role of the church during times of freedom and times of war, times of tyranny, and times of opportunity? Let me begin with some lines from the Hungarian Transylvanian poet, Sándor Kányádi:

In pure white churches
a pure white prayer
read my riddle read it

in dark black churches
a dark black prayer
read my riddle read it

in pure white churches
a dark black prayer
read my riddle read it

in dark black churches
a pure white prayer
read my riddle read it
and god in his wisdom
may graciously heed it⁴

What is this riddle all about? It seems to refer to the paradox of the identity and the role of the church. Where does the church stand? How does it react to power in society? How does it act when it has the power, and how does it act when others have the power? When can we

say that the glory of the Lord is transparent, and when must we say that the glory of the Lord has departed?

The experiences of the church in Europe (West and East) include the legacy of Hitler and Stalin. During times of peace and times of social turmoil, religion can be used for good or bad. It can be collared to support positive transformation or to support dictators, terror, and war. The same poet Kányádi says:

churches bridges factories houses
their bombs devastate what they have built
races languages kill each other
There’s not a trace of loving kindness
humility or a sense of guilt

when they praise you and say their prayers
they want your help for tomorrow’s crime⁵

History is full of immense ideological struggles and in every generation, the church needs to ask about its own identity. What is the church, what is its present practice and what should it be? “Kányádi’s riddle” cannot be answered merely on paper, as a doctrinal statement or as a given definition, which no longer needs be questioned. Rather, church and society, as living entities, must always be questioned—not merely for the sake of clarity, but also for the sake of transformation.

Sociologists on religion

Sociologists⁶ have contributed to our understanding of the many roles of religion. Marx (in the line of Feuerbach) emphasized that religion often plays the role of maintaining alienation. Instead of improving the problems in the world, we then take flight into the comfort of a heavenly Father. Thus Marx made the famous statement that religion is the “opium of the people.” Marx meant not only do we accept injustices and inequalities, but also we actually justify these by means of religious views, which back the powerful and wealthy. Durkheim emphasized the socializing role of religion: big steps in life, from birth and baptism, to marriage and death are major points of religious orientation. Thus in a secular society we still need some kind of reverence and scale of values, an experience of the sacred. We may also think of the sociologist Weber, who emphasized that the Protestant Calvinist ethic helped produce capitalism and democracy. This can be stated as the idea of having a holy calling in daily life to work, do good, and to develop things. We see here a prime question: while Marx talks about religion as opium, Weber says the Calvinists used their religion as a power for transformation. This difference is significant for the different experiences regarding religion and society. There are indeed various kinds of society, and various kinds of religion, and some religions

⁴ From *All Souls’ Day in Vienna*, trans. from Hungarian by Peter Zollman, in *Sándor Kányádi: There is a Land (selected poems)* - (Budapest: Corvina, 2000).

⁵ From *Epilogue*, trans. Peter Zollman, *op.cit.*

⁶ cf. Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), ch.14.

are contemplative and detached from history, while others emphasize our calling to transform history.

Communist icons, soviets, and co-operatives

When the communists came to power in Russia in 1917, they began an anti-Christian political program, which quickly led to the execution of thousands of priests, the closing of hundreds of monasteries, and the seizure of church treasures and properties. Throughout the long history of Communism, there were times of intense persecution of the church and short times of a thaw, when society was given back some rights for a while. It is estimated that more than 8,000 priests, monks, and nuns, were killed in the year 1922.⁷ In addition, we know that over many years hundreds of thousands, eventually millions, of peasants starved in their villages or were sent to work in factories and work camps in Siberia, when food was taken to the cities and land was collectivized. In 1929, Stalin started collectivizing all farms. The government took over the land, the farm equipment, and the crops. Out of protest, many farmers burned their crops and cattle. It is thought that a million families at this time were sent into exile by Stalin, with more to follow.⁸ Due to his suspicion, fear, and jealousy, Stalin would eventually also have even faithful members of the communist party imprisoned and killed. Later, for example, because the church was seen as helpful during World War II, Stalin (1879-1953) permitted thousands (perhaps 20,000)⁹ churches to reopen and gave more freedom again to run monasteries and theological seminaries. However, Khrushchev (1894-1971) closed down two-thirds of the churches again. Therefore, it is estimated that while there were more than 50,000 clergy in 1914, by 1988 hardly 7,000 could be found. (Yet we know from the persecution at the time of Elijah that God shall always have “7,000” who are faithful.)

Communism brought to the Russian church and the Russian people an immense amount of persecution and martyrdom. However, Communism was not merely iconoclastic, knocking down and destroying the churches symbols and treasures. Though “. . . Christian icons could be burned on public bonfires, the state proposed its rival icons and its rival cult.”¹⁰

“Soviets” or councils were set up on various levels and these were controlled—centrally and ideologically. We know that democratic institutions are also strongly influenced by ideologies: but the difference is that of plural

freedoms, including a voice in matters, or at least the freedom to be a member or not. This is different from centralization and forced ideological control. Thus the collectivized farms, or co-operatives, were not models of co-operation, but of domination. Looking back on Christian political ethics, we can see that there were prophetic voices in Europe, such as Abraham Kuyper, who spelled out the need for a plural model of society in order to avoid the tendency toward dictatorship, which indeed soon arrived in the form of communism and fascism.

The sinews of peace and the river of time

In his famous “iron curtain” speech in 1946, Winston Churchill said:

. . . [A]n iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere . . . and increasing measure of control from Moscow.¹¹

After knowing the pattern of Communism in Russian since 1917, the pattern for East and Central Europe could be stated ahead of time: to live behind the iron curtain would mean persecution and abolishment of many freedoms. This is what happened. Finally, by the time of Gorbachev, the signs of a new era were in sight. Already in the millennial year for Russian Christianity (1988), Gorbachev was showing a new flexibility and the long dreamed of turn to personal rights and freedoms was on its way with *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Thus, by the year 1992 at Fulton Missouri, in a speech that refers back to Churchill’s speech given at the same place forty-six years earlier, Mikhail Gorbachev talked about future global progress after the end to the Cold War.¹² He spoke about the advancement of a “democratically organized world community” with attention to the problems of nuclear weapons, the illegal export of conventional weapons, the stronger use of the United Nations Security Council to help end regional conflicts, and attention to poverty and economic help for the poor nations.

Meanwhile, after the turn of the new millennium and another six years later, we now know that there is as yet no new world order as proclaimed by certain politicians. In many ways, the idea of global progress is greatly in doubt in the minds of those who remind us of the ongoing wars, terror, and the question of ecological/climate change.

⁷ Bamber Gascoigne, *The Christians* (New York: William Morrow, 1977), 289.

⁸ cf. the article of “Joseph Stalin,” in *The World Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Books, Inc., 1985), vol.18, 648ff.

⁹ Michael Collins & Matthew A. Price, *The Story of Christianity - A Celebration of 2,000 Years of Faith* (New York: DK Publishing, 1999), 207.

¹⁰ John McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 541.

¹¹ Churchill gave this speech on March 5, 1946 at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, calling his speech *The Sinews of Peace*.

¹² Gorbachev gave his speech on May 6, 1992, calling it *The River of Time and the Imperative of Action*.

After the Nazi horrors, it has been said: if we do not remember history, we shall repeat the same errors. Nevertheless, the truth, I believe, is that the corruption of power is not easily corrected; memory alone, even the memory of genocides, is—we would all agree—not sufficient. We need both the motives for seeking a better use of power, and the means to achieve these. Gorbachev's speech on the imperative to act for a better global situation was put on the back burner by the next generation of political leaders after the collapse of communism. One would be tempted to agree with Machiavelli: politics is all about power and the need to survive in a wolf eat wolf world. Politics is not about ethics. Moreover, one would be tempted to agree with Marx: politics is all about power, and the motivating force is economic self-interest. However, Marx did have a vision of grand changes toward a communal society. However, Marxism, as applied by what we call Communism (or we could call it Stalinism), failed even in its own special area of economics, and it failed socially and psychologically, because it created fear in the hearts of its own people. Eastern Europe was officially atheist under Communism. Today it is officially post-atheist, that is, more pluralist, and more democratic.

European experience and North American experience

To understand Europe we need to remember that it underwent two world wars on its own territory, which partly accounts for European pessimism (think of the philosophy of Sartre) compared to North American optimism (based on pragmatism). We may also add that North America has been the place of ever expanding frontiers (geographically, economically, and technologically). Western Europe has the economy and technology, but not the open geography, compared to North America. Eastern Europe has the geography, but not the economy and technology, yet. The philosophical difference remains important:

1. North America has been pragmatic, interested in practical results and has wide internal horizons. Europe has been existentialist, interested in finding deeper meanings, and has long roots. We may say that old Europe had a philosophical mind and an emphasis on ideological systems. New America has a practical mind and an emphasis on skillful hands. Obviously, this is a very simplistic contrast, yet these tendencies have been often noted (even though in our global times things have rapidly shifted).
2. In the USA, the dream was to make one nation out of many peoples (immigrants): *E pluribus Unum*, as written on the dollar. But what shall give the unity? Certainly no longer the idea of a *corpus christianum*. Today the emphasis is on individual freedom, democracy, and economic progress. In Europe, there is also a recent move to

e pluribus Unum: the European Union. What shall give the unity to the many languages and cultures? Perhaps there is not such a great difference, but it has been said that while the USA model is that of the soup bowl—everything mixed into a unity—the European model is that of a tossed salad bowl—a mixture of pluralities, each retaining some of their own colors and qualities. Today there is not merely soup, but also more salad: Latin American immigrants have made Spanish a strong second language in the USA.

3. A traditional difference between North America and Europe has been the tendency toward individualism in North America, and toward socialism in Europe. In North America individualism has dominated, providing many freedoms, but also leading to the competitive mentality in all areas of life, and to a fragmenting of social bonding. Yet time and again the “stars and stripes” gives people a feeling of solidarity, especially after 9/11. In Western Europe, socialism has been democratic, but in Eastern Europe, it was dictatorial and tyrannical: there was no freedom from fear and no freedom for thought and personal choice during much of the twentieth century.

In our global world today, we find great interaction of cultures by means of television, the internet, and travel. Differences found in older generations are rapidly changing among the young. However, we still find different cultures and traditions, and different subcultures, values, and choices. So today, there is on-going uniformity expressed for example in blue jeans and the fast-food chains. Nevertheless, there is also more plurality of cultural choices than ever before, if we think of endless choices via satellite television and the internet, for example.

How has this affected the church? Everyone knows about the difference between “traditional worship” patters (which differ in a variety of denominations) and the “contemporary worship” styles of more recent origin. Some would say that North America thrives on contemporary worship; Europe survives on the music rooted in Gregorian and Genevan traditions. In addition, what about the theological tendencies? North American fundamentalism and some evangelicals look for pragmatic and preferably quick answers; they are also attracted to the market idea of a theology of success (God blesses those who work hard). There is also a kind of theology by numbers, which emphasizes church growth (in terms of quantity more than quality). This is not all bad: but it is one-sided. European traditionalism gives more value to older theological predecessors and older liturgies. Some would say that European theology has often become lost

in a labyrinth of philosophical discussion. They dive down deep and never come up to the surface again. North American worship often emphasizes the friendship aspect of the church, while European worship often emphasizes the existentialist aspect of meditating on life's meaning. If we were to visit an unknown church while travelling, we would not know ahead of time if we would sing century-old heavy psalms and hymns, confess our sins, and seek the face of God and his forgiveness; or if we would sing "contemporary lite," and meet our fellow pilgrims in a time of caring and sharing. Obviously, both aspects should be held together. The church often (and always in some aspects) reflects the cultural environment. That is why worship today sometimes reminds us of the fast food culture: quick, easy, and simple. This was different in past times.

Church and state—political theology

In Europe for centuries, the Roman Catholic Church was the church of western civilization. After the Reformation, the principle of letting the kings and princes choose the religion for their regimes (*cuius regio, eius religio*) meant that regions had a national church: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, or Reformed. Until the middle of the twentieth century, there was considerable cooperation between state and church. The Communist ideology broke down this partnership very quickly in Eastern Europe by forbidding it.

Meanwhile as we have entered into the twenty-first century and the so-called new world order, it turns out that the old world order of poverty and nuclear tensions, ongoing wars and lack of a world community spirit, has not changed. Theological notions for politics explain the ongoing disorder because of sin: particularly the sins of pride and greed. In the middle of political power games, the church calls us to follow Christ and therefore to struggle against injustice, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to honor the image of God by respecting all people. This is both an individual and a political task.

The church in Europe has traditionally been seen as more closely entwined with the state than in North America. Separation of church and state was a founding principle in North America. However, this has not kept theology (religion) and politics (including national policies) from influencing each other. We could mention example from both right and left wing politics, and right and left wing theologies.

Religious political fundamentalism and terrorism: aggressive views on international politics

Originally, North American fundamentalism was largely nonpolitical, concentrating on the fundamentals of the faith in relation to personal salvation. Along with the evangelical movement, it reached the stage of hoping to become the "moral majority." The fundamentalist approach has become more politicized. There are quite a

few fundamentalist preachers, theologies, and conservative evangelicals, who voiced support for the military politics of President Bush, and did this saying that this was their Christian viewpoint. Some of these theologies combine apocalyptic views with politics. "Apocalyptic" means a special revelation, often in relation to the end-time. For example, premillennialist views on the return of Christ are combined with political views concerning the Middle East. One need only mention names such as Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, and Tim LaHaye/Jerry B. Jenkins, and the theology of the rapture and tribulation expressed in the series of novels on the theme of *Left Behind*. This fundamentalist theology gives support to a kind of zealous USA nationalism. Such apocalyptic zealous nationalism is also found in Islam. In other words, religious fundamentalism combined with a zealous nationalism, is not just theology, but also an ideology. The kind of religious fundamentalism that ends up as zealous nationalism today is an expression of the search for doctrinal certainty in an insecure and violent world. The irony is that this kind of fundamentalism does not overcome violence, but adds to it. There may be a separation of church and state in democratic countries, but there is always a tendency to mix theology and politics whether according to a right wing or a left wing model.¹³ We cannot easily defend the idea of a "holy war" based on the Old Testament, since we are not Old Testament Israel; and there is no such basis in the New Testament. Even in the Old Testament, Jewish nationalism is not the main point, and "religious nationalism is the mark of the false prophets."¹⁴ Moreover, in the New Testament, we have the opposite direction than in the Old Testament: namely, now the apostles are sent away from Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth. In other words, the understanding of the place of Israel in God's plan is important, but is also debatable from both a theological, and a political viewpoint.

Now, we know that the Apostle Paul says that the government does not carry the sword in vain. Nevertheless, governments may sometimes use the sword in vain. That is the point today when the idea of negotiation and "just war" criteria are replaced by militaristic agendas and the "preemptive right to attack." Now a zealous nationalism is at work in many countries. Zealousness on the one side calls forth zealousness from the other side. Violence produces more violence. That is why the first agenda at negotiation tables is to hold a truce, so that the positive

¹³ cf. Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005). Also, Robert Jewett & John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The dilemma of zealous nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (University of Chicago, 1951), 158: "The Old Testament certainly is full of Jewish nationalism, but it appears over and over again as that against which the Old Testament fights. Religious nationalism is the mark of the false prophets."

possibilities may be discussed. If there is no normal “law and order,” by which I mean a respect for human rights, then we are in danger of the terrorist recipe: people become a means and no longer an end. Unfortunately, what we see as the democratic west, others see as a demagogic west. Peace, we must learn, is not only an end to be sought; it is also the means to an end. This was shown in the twentieth century by Gandhi and by Martin Luther King. If a major ethical goal is respect for others, then this must be displayed in the motives and the means, as well.

Daily reports speak of numerous foreigners and refugees in western prisons. I personally know a young man from Afghanistan, of whose family several members were killed. He had temporary refugee status in the Netherlands, but they suddenly put him in jail for many months. He is back out now, but without any legal papers. The new Xenophobia has roots in fear and sometimes in revenge. The new intolerance is a sign that our moral compass is in danger of going into a free spin and we do not know which way it should be pointing. Nevertheless, something must be done. Therefore, we say that we need to be preemptive—to act first. If we conclude that we have the right to a preemptive military strike, we have already (at least in our own minds) left the negotiation table and we have decided that we have the right to preemptive opinions and decisions. In other words, what I think and what I say counts and I do not need to listen to you. That is the sad psychological state of affairs, on a wide xenophobic level, in the early 21st century. It is also found in Islam, in the form of fear that their culture is being challenged and eradicated by western domination. Islamic revivalism, fundamentalism, and terrorism, are the signs of a culture reacting in paranoia as it is pushed more and more into a self-defense of its own identity. Both in western democracies and in Islamic countries xenophobia has become part of the new world disorder.

What has this to do with Eastern Europe? It has a lot to do with Eastern Europe, because of the extreme xenophobia that dominated the Nazi ideology, and because of the ideological zealotry that dominated Communist plans. Political theology of the church and of Christians in Eastern Europe usually has no relationship to the premillennial apocalyptic kind found in North America. Europe is weary of wars. Europe has known so much zealous nationalism and so many forms of ethnic cleansing, that the churches and the governments in Europe today usually emphasize negotiations for peace as the best way for long-term resolutions to old questions. However, in a global world we need to see that postmodern relativism is helping produce the reaction of fundamentalists grasping for security. I am using the word “fundamentalist” here to refer to a simplistic “black and white” approach that does not see the grey in one’s own position. Terrorism is a war for cultural values and a way of resisting globalization, even though history cannot be turned back. Terror-

ism has a problem similar to postmodernism: virtual reality is confused with true reality. In virtual reality, daily values may be denied and ignored (e.g., when engaged in “virtual violence”). However, in reality, these values always count, and violence has effects. Postmodernism began with Nietzsche’s “revaluation of all values.” This can easily lead to a “devaluation of all values.” Postmodernism has terrorist tendencies toward historical values, while terrorism today is fighting a cultural battle against modern values.

Why and how did the church suffer in Eastern Europe?

It is obvious why there was a clash between communist states and their churches. Communism (in the line of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin) declared itself officially atheist. It therefore tried to push back the influence of the church. Communism was materialist in two ways: first, because it held to a materialist idea of the cosmos (for which there is no divine source), and second, because it held to an economic understanding of history that determined social values. Put differently, the church as a representative of spiritual power was seen as a smoke screen for the economic and ideological goal of taking power and wealth away from the common people and siding with the elite.

There is another way of explaining why the communists could not tolerate the church. Namely, they did not tolerate freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom for social organizations. If there was no freedom of this kind, there obviously could be no freedom for Christian organizations: no freedom for Christian schools (these were closed), and no freedom for neighborhood Bible studies, or discussions about social-political things. A centralized society does not allow other sections to have a mind of their own. If we may say that the church has the calling to be the conscience of society—to remind people of spiritual and moral values, including justice and freedom—then this would be a direct challenge to an atheist and dictatorial doctrine as practiced by Communism.

So the Communist politics had what they in Hungary call a “salami policy”: that is, the centralized party sliced off more and more segments of society and placed these under their party and state control. They further used this “salami politics” as a means to “divide and conquer,” for they were thus able to weaken other organizations and viewpoints, dividing the people and society against each other in a climate of suspicion and fear of punishments. There is the irony that Marx said the state would gradually wither away in future socialist society, whereas the state apparatus became extremely over-dominating. When we first arrived in Hungary in 1992, we met people of the older generation who could tell first-hand stories of the Communist times. Things similar to what we had read in the writings of Solzhenitsyn were also told by people we met in Hungary, Ukraine, and Romania. We

met elderly pastors from Ukraine who had spent years in work camps, including as far away as Siberia. We met a colleague whose father had been placed in a psychiatric hospital and kept on drugged medications because he had said that Communism was not improving society as it promised to do. We read the story of the Lutheran bishop who was sent to prison because he had defended the right of the church to keep control of the Lutheran church school in Budapest. The communist government solved the Christian school question by turning these schools into state schools. All teachers had to sign on as members of the communist/socialist party. At that time, just after the Second World War, the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches ran 6,500 schools across Hungary, and all but a token few were taken away by the Communist government. By way of example: the seminary where we teach was closed in 1951 and only again reopened in 1991.

How did the church suffer? It lost lands and some buildings. While the church sanctuary buildings were sometimes left alone (in Central Europe, not in Russia), extra meeting rooms, or church-owned houses were confiscated. There was great psychological pressure against the church. The church was pushed back out of public life into the retreat of its own walls. Even there it was neither free nor safe, for “informers” would report if a sermon or other church activities had any hint of not supporting the Communist state and society. Church influence was kept out of the newspapers (except for bad press), with no rights to use the radio or television, or to hold public or even private Bible studies in homes. Almost all of activities that would influence “the laity” were forbidden. Catechism classes were restricted to a few weeks between Christmas and Easter, and were only allowed for those making profession of faith. Pressure was placed on parents and children not to be involved in church instruction. Children who were involved with the church would be teased at school or receive bad marks. To baptize one’s child might lead to problems at work, or even the loss of a job for the parents. Therefore, it ended up that mainly the elderly women went to church since they had no jobs to lose. As a Hungarian pastor told me, “The Communists said that since there were only old grandmothers in church, the church would die out in a generation.” But, said the pastor, forty years later the church still had lots of old grandmothers. In the early 1990s when we asked our students who had grown up under Communism, what Christian influence there had been on their lives, quite a few said that it was especially from their grandmother. Grandmothers not only attended the church, but they also looked after the children while the mother was at work. God has his home missionaries in every generation.

There was a climate of fear and suspicion, for one never knew who was “informing” against their own neighbors or colleagues, and whether the information was a lie.

Why would someone “inform” against another? Sometimes “informing” came out of jealousy and revenge, sometimes in order to gain status and special privileges with the socialist authorities. For example, one needed a special permit to travel across any border. This was difficult to obtain, and friendship with the authorities could help pave the way. The same can be said for job promotions, or some extra rations for basic living supplies. Under Communism, there were problems with supply and demand for there was mainly demand without much supply.

The stories from people who witnessed the Stalinist style tyrannies remind us of the climate of imprisonments, deaths, and fear always present in society. Kányádi says:

At noon the sun is golden bright
and hums a short refrain of cheer:
it is the ultimate delight
to be alive and not to fear
and in that radiant golden stream
perhaps a small chink may appear
even when it’s a hopeless dream
to live and not to fear¹⁵

Quiet witness of the church and of Christians

Former USA president, Jimmy Carter, tells the story of a visit he had with the Communist head of state for Poland. Carter says that the Polish head of state was torn between the faith of his mother, who was a devout Roman Catholic, and his political identity as a loyal Communist. Carter says, “I felt that privately he was a Christian, but publicly an atheist.”¹⁶

The choices for Christians and for the church—indeed for every honest citizen—were not easy ones during the decades of Communism. One could speak out, and disappear. One could consider civil disobedience of a more passive or a more active kind, including the use of violence.¹⁷ However, such often does not succeed, as in the case of the Hungarian rebellion in 1956. One could not easily flee across borders, for these were barricaded with barbed wire and police dogs—not to keep people out, but to keep them in. Alternatively, one could lay low, and perhaps survive—or one could collaborate. Christians and all citizens were confronted with ethical choices concerning civic duties and Christian freedom. The spiritual temptation of that time was to free oneself from psychological and material pressures and receive some rewards by collaborating. Even some church leaders developed the idea that the church as the Servant Church should

¹⁵ From a poem called, *A Song for the Raod*, in Peter Zollma, *op.cit.*

¹⁶ Carter, *op.cit.*, 24-25.

¹⁷ For a good summary of many aspects of civil disobedience and violence, see “Civil Disobedience,” ch.13, in Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989).

serve the socialist state and collaborate with Communist goals. This is not much different from the church today collaborating with the zealous nationalism I mentioned earlier. Would the church remain the church? The church under Communism was a church “carrying the cross.” This expression has been used at various times in the history of the church when it suffered persecutions and martyrdoms.

What I call a quiet witness could be found at times in unlikely places. Various voices spoke up for Christ in their own way. Consider one illustration from the heart of Moscow: Pasternak’s novel *Dr. Zhivago* is remembered in the West for the dramatic film version, but the book and the film were not allowed in Russia until the early 1990s. Many details in the novel raise the question of individual personality and spirituality in the face of the doctrine of materialism and social centralization. Consider the following quotation of one of the voices in the novel:

. . . [Y]ou can’t make [cultural and scientific] discoveries without spiritual equipment. And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels. What are they? To begin with, love of one’s neighbor, which is the supreme vital energy. Once it fills the heart of a person it has to overflow and spend itself. And then the two basic ideals of mankind—without them humanity is unthinkable—the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice. . . . [The ancients] had blood and beastliness and cruelty and pockmarked Caligula, who had no idea how inferior the system of slavery is. . . . It was not until after the coming of Christ that time and humanity could breathe freely.¹⁸

You can imagine this was not acceptable literature to the Communists. In his poems, Pasternak irritated the official materialist-atheist doctrine by writing about Christmas, Holy Week, and the parables of Christ. In a final poem in the collection, Pasternak suggests that Christ is the judge of history—and therefore the judge of the twentieth century, including the judge over Fascism, Communism, and Capitalism. In the final poem, Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane says the following:

But now the book of life has reached a page
Which is more precious than are all the holies.
That which was written now must be fulfilled.
Fulfilled be it, then. Amen.

I shall descend into my grave.
And on the third day rise again.
And, even as rafts float down a river,
So shall the centuries drift,
trailing like a caravan,

¹⁸ Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Hayward & Harare (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 10.

Coming for judgment, out of the dark, to me.¹⁹

The centuries like barges floating down the river—is this Gorbachev’s “river of time”?—are to be judged by Christ. We learn a lot about history from the church in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the church in Eastern Europe, more than in the West, has begun the painful experience of learning that its highest banner is not political power or cultural prestige. Nor could its highest banner be evangelistic rallies, which were forbidden. Nor could it rely on Christian schools (which were taken away) nor on numerous other outreaches in society (which were forbidden). It was sent back to its sources and resources of faith: the Bible could still be read privately (though it was “out of print,” Bibles were smuggled in during these years). People could still privately share their faith. There was still an opportunity for some pastoral care. Even though diaconal organizations and social homes were taken away from the church, there were still some local signs of care among people. The Psalms and hymns—which tell of the judgment of God in history and the hope of the Good News for people in an oppressive situation—could still be sung by a “remnant” (e.g., the grandmothers). This was a difficult time, but perhaps also a purifying experience for the church.

The transformations in post-communist society have been far reaching. After the centrally dominated society, there is now a new pluralism in the media and in daily life: people can now make choices and take initiative. There are certainly many variations in the many Central and East European nations. Changes after the Communist era also depend on the pre-communist history of a particular nation and culture. For example, pre-communist Russia was not a modern democracy but only emerging out of feudalism when communism arrived there in 1917. It cannot merely return to the past, but needs to make a qualitative leap. It has a great cultural heritage, but is only now beginning the experience of modern democracy. What the church becomes today in Eastern Europe also partly depends on what the church was like in the pre-communist times. For example, the Hungarian Reformed Church in its pre-communist times already knew about the relationship of reformed theology to the idea of the Christian faith as a catalyst for social transformation.

It is an amazing story: in the west, we speak of becoming post-Christian. First, it was said that God was hidden, then that God was absent, then that God is dead.²⁰ Christianity, it is said, was born in the East, grew up in the West, but also, as Nietzsche says, has died in the West. Just when God is pronounced dead, another generation comes along and the debate about intelligent design begins, and philosophies continue to ask about the meaning

¹⁹ Pasternak, *op.cit.*, 558.

²⁰ Okke Jager, *Oude beelden spreken een nieuwe taal: Geloven na de geloofs crisis* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1990), 65.

of the cosmos, the meaning of your life and mine. Heidegger asked about the meaning of being, and atheist philosophers said he was a crypto-theologian. Sartre promoted atheism as a sign of freedom with no fixed meaning, but Sartre himself was fooled for a time by communism, as Camus saw clearly. Freedom with no fixed meaning thus leaves us open to detrimental experiments. Religion itself is continually with us, even if in new forms, whether universal or sectarian, status quo maintaining or a new trend setter, peaceful or terrifying. The religious question is always “What next, how further?”²¹ “How can I go forward if I don’t know which way I am facing?” (John Lennon). That became the question after the ideological revolution of 1989.

Eastern Europe is no longer atheist, but post-atheist. That is, the governments no longer promote atheism. The Communists proclaimed themselves materialists and atheists, but this did not silence the search for a spiritual orientation. After totalitarianism and its terrors, old and new religious choices are taking on a new meaning again. In Dostoevsky’s writings in pre-communist times, when a drunken man was senselessly beating his horse, an old man in the crowd gathering around, calls out, “What’s wrong with you, beating an animal like that—aren’t you a Christian?” There was a time in Eastern Europe when it was “natural” to talk that way. Those times may still exist in some villages in Eastern Europe, but the globalizing tendency has already brought new times to people there. The church is still blinking its eyes, I think.

Theological insights into political power and the Christian life

Let us now list a number of points that the church in the “East bloc” and we in the west may learn from the communist times.²²

1. Sovereignty of God.

We learn that God is transcendent and not to be identified with ideologies. We learn our own finitude, our limitations when we want to transform society. The first commandment: you shall not worship any other gods, is a safeguard against the idolatry of power and violence.

2. The creation order and the law of God.

Considering the ideological temptations not only under communism, but also under postmodern relativism, we need to find an order of justice and freedom. The first step toward such a good order is to recognize the creation order given by God. The creation order is not just a matter of the “let-

ter” but of the “Spirit.” Our moral compass should be focused on the law of God, which we find in the Ten Commandments and in Jesus’ discourse on the mountainside. It is significant that the longest Psalm (119) meditates on the law order of freedom and justice given by God. Psalm 119:45 says, “I will walk about in freedom for I have sought out your precepts.”²³ Freedom to follow the law of God includes freedom for responsibility. Kuyper understood that to mean freedom and responsibility for all the spheres of society.²⁴ It is thus noteworthy to hear a study on justice today (a hundred years after Kuyper spoke of “sphere-sovereignty”) say: “. . . the autonomy of spheres will make for a greater sharing of social goods than will any other conceivable arrangement.”²⁵

3. The human image of God.

Under Communism, people were not seen as image bearers of God; people were not seen as valuable. Communism valued abstractions: “the workers,” “technology,” “the future society,” but not people and their rights and freedoms. Communism missed the positive contributions of the famous saying (which someone attributed to the attitude of Voltaire): “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend unto death your right to say it.”²⁶ Alternatively, as Hegel said: “The absolute right is the right to have rights.” Hegel connected this to the moral command: “Be a person and respect others as persons.”²⁷ Without this, we cannot fulfill our task to be reflecting images of God’s will. Today the church may bring back to the center of society the importance (as Pasternak wrote) of personal love, sacrifice, and freedom. Even in the *Gulag* there were many who kept their humanity in relation to others. That is one of the main points in Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. In western culture today, we seem to be sacrificing our humanity to money and other virtual realities. Christian ethics, in following Christ, “the image of the living God,” calls us back to better values.

4. Sin is active in every human heart and life, not just in the hearts of the wealthy class. It would be naïve to deny the class struggle; but the church can now proclaim justice, in a new way, for the

²³ New International Version.

²⁴ On Kuyper see, James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Also, Peter S. Hieslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism - a commentary* (Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁵ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism & Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1983).

²⁶ Lloyd Spencer and Andrzej Krauze, *Introducing the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2006), 163.

²⁷ Christopher Kul-Want and Andrzej Klimowski, *Introducing Kant* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005), 161.

²¹ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

²² cf. “The Christian Church and Communist Atheism,” ch.7 in Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Demands of Freedom* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

poor, but within the framework of reconciliation. Christian theology and catechism have always summarized the idea of Christian freedom in Christ as freedom from sin, and freedom to serve. True reconciliation produces better fruit than the conflict model of promoting a violent class struggle. Ironically, violent class struggle was supposed to be a means to overcome the class struggle. However, it only proved the tautology, that violence produces violence.

5. Ideologies.

We must learn and confess that ideologies in both east and west (socialist and capitalist) act like gods: creators and saviors. That is why it is good to be reminded of the importance of the first commandment: you shall have no other gods. In addition, we are reminded of the relevance of the tenth commandment: you shall not covet. For it is the overbearing desire for power, control, honor, and possessions that turns ideological dreams into nightmares.

6. Limits of freedom, limits of resistance.

Ethics always recognizes moral duties. Christian ethics places moral and civic duties in the light of eternity. Thus the Hebrew midwives “feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.”²⁸ There are other examples in the Bible: Obadiah, who worked at the royal court, hid a hundred prophets of the Lord in two caves, to save their lives from the death command by Queen Jezebel.²⁹ As a third example, we may consider the words of the Apostles Peter and John, who when commanded no longer to tell the Good News of Jesus Christ, replied: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”³⁰ Clearly, we may need to disobey the government sometime. Nevertheless, the difficult question is “by what means?” One can think of the refusal to obey an unjust law. One can imagine many ways to work peaceably and legally to overcome oppression and tyranny. However, it is also characteristic of tyranny that exactly the freedom for peaceful and legal transformations is often severely limited. In extreme cases, there are three choices: 1) to flee, 2) to submit to punishment, or 3) to fight back using force and violence.

What do Christian ethics have to say about revolutionary resistance? First, that the church may never call for revolutionary resistance nor take sides in politics, rather, the church proclaims the need for

justice and peace, for reformation, but not for revolution. Second, some remnant of order is usually better than the disorder of violent revolution with an unknown future. Third, one can imagine the choice of violent revolution as a decision of individual conscience; it cannot be based on a system of Christian ethics. Fourth, Christian ethics emphasizes that any possible positive actions are always better than using violence. We normally need to concentrate on the statement: “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). One could imagine that the criteria for a just revolution are similar to those of a just war: distinguishing soldiers, unarmed citizens, and the use of appropriate means, indeed, as a very last resort. Nevertheless, the dialectical remark can be made: in democratic countries, violent revolutions are unnecessary; while in tyrannical systems, they are impossible. In any case, what comes after the revolution? Often chaos, a struggle for power, and a new form of tyranny. What comes after tyrannicide? Another tyrant. Christian ethics warns against utopian thinking that presupposes that revolution will solve all the problems.³¹ While Calvin tried to avoid an approval of revolution, soon after his death the Calvinists were involved in several revolutionary movements in France, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Calvin has given us an ethical view that is also a practical question: resistance should be the work of the lower magistrates. This was Calvin’s way of trying to promote stability of leadership in the volatile situation of revolution.³² Thielicke says that the failure of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 illustrates that it did not meet the full criteria for a successful revolution.³³ Even though the will of the people and nation was to overcome Russian domination, the situation was not ripe for a collapse of the tyrannical regime. Obviously, the success of such a revolution depended on help by outside sources; but these did not come.

7. “The church carrying the cross.”

The suffering church is now better able to talk about the grace of the cross of Christ. Not only because suffering often brings us closer to God than does success, but also because we come to understand the suffering of Christ and the power

²⁸ Exodus 1:17, NIV.

²⁹ 1 Kings 18.

³⁰ Acts of the Apostles, 4:19. NIV.

³¹ Ferenc Szucs quotes Paul Tillich as follows: “The authentic Christian message is never utopian, whether through belief in progress or through faith in revolution,” quoted in “Authority and Resistance in Reformed Hungarian Theology,” in *Studies in Reformed Theology 10 - Christian Faith and Violence 1* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005).

³² I.J.Hesselink, “Calvin on the Nature and Limits of Political Resistance.” p.57ff. In *Studies in Reformed Theology 11 - Christian Faith and Violence 2* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005).

³³ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, vol. 2: Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 347.

of his grace. We learn again that God has made a covenant with the *ecclesia*, those called to follow Christ. While this may lead to suffering and to martyrdom, the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (Tertullian). “A servant is no better than his master,” and this means that the church and Christians may be called upon to be like Christ, the suffering servant of God. This is happening in various places around the world today and is part of our *imitatio Christi*, as the church carrying the cross, but also a blessing. “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,” writes the apostle Paul in Romans 12. We may understand this as being willing to pursue the perfect will of God in all our ways. Throughout church history, this has meant the actual sacrifice of some saints, due to martyrdom. Today we find terrorists willing to self-sacrifice themselves for their cause. Ideologies have always demanded human sacrifices, because the individual does not count when those with power pursue utopian dreams. As Christians, we must consider which sacrifices are required of us in order to follow our Lord day by day.

8. ***Praxis vitae christiana.***

Practice Christian life as justice, love, and fairness. The church in the former East bloc and we ourselves should learn that our Christian calling is not merely to make judgments about our enemies, but that we need to judge fairly toward both sides of ideological positions:

- to learn to say when we have failed or followed our own self-interest, and
- to learn to say when even a wrong ideology had some good elements, and
- to learn to acknowledge the critique of others toward the church and Christian patterns of culture.

Politically speaking we must ask what our Christian goals are. Are we trying to establish some kind of theocracy? If this is not the case, we must settle today for a just pluralism, which allows for a variety of religions, a variety of beliefs and disbeliefs, and as we see in democratic culture and the mass media, some variations in ethical choices. Our task in such a situation is yet to shine forth the light of the Good News in Christ.

9. **The eschaton.**

All of these points together give us purpose in life, in relation to creation and salvation, the past, the present, and the kingdom of God, which is indeed among us and on the horizon. Among such historical dynamics, the Christian freedom is that of serving God and our neighbors, by means of the freedom and limits of God’s law. This will include respect for, but not with too much allegiance to-

ward national flags, political parties, church decisions, theologies, or any other human devices, which often lead us astray. Madach says the sun does not rise because the rooster crows, but the rooster crows because the sun is rising. That is the same with the church living under the sign of the rooster: a warning to be faithful. The kingdom of God does not come because the church is singing; the church is singing because the kingdom of God is coming.

10. **Living by providential grace.**

Dostoevsky placed on a foreword page to his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the words of Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”³⁴ This spiritual principle of death and rebirth explains why we may expect new fruit from the churches in Eastern Europe. After the death camps under Hitler and Stalin, today there are the new youth camps run by churches, so that today many young people are finding a new orientation in life. The church is a voice again on radio and television. Christian projects can be found in society and on the internet in Eastern Europe. The church in Central and Eastern Europe is learning to walk again—in freedom, and in the fear of the Lord. Let me end with one more verse from Kányádi, who tried to balance out the need to have hope among the fears:

somebody walks atop the trees
who lights your star and makes it fade
those do not fear their destinies
whom hope has finally betrayed

my fears my hopes don’t disappear
this is the grace that helps me stay
this caring providential fear
has held my hand along the way³⁵

I trust that these voices have illustrated for you the warmth of faith coming from stone churches and their members, in Central and Eastern Europe.

³⁴ John 12:24, Revised Standard Version.

³⁵ From the poem, *Somebody Walks Atop the Trees*, trans. Peter Zollman, *op.cit.*