

Belief in Central and Eastern Europe Today

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Preliminary Remarks

When this subject for an introductory paper to the Ampleforth international conference on 'A Time for Change: Believers, Society and State in Central and Eastern Europe' was suggested to me in June 1989, nobody had foreseen what great and radical changes would take place in the countries of Eastern Europe. An entirely new situation has arisen. Nor, at the moment when this paper was prepared (Easter 1990), can it yet be foreseen how things will develop in the months to come. I find myself constrained to preface my paper with a short section on the distinguishing features of the profound revolution and transformation in the church in Central and Eastern Europe, so that I can go on to speak in the main part about belief, that is to say the Christianness of Central and Eastern Europe, and in conclusion to offer some thoughts about the tasks of Christians in Central and Eastern Europe.

Features of the Change in Central and Eastern Europe

There are to date many reports, studies and analyses of the great political, social, ideological, religious and ecclesiastical changes in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. It is to be expected that such publications will greatly increase in number. An increasing number of symposia, congresses and conferences are dealing with the problems and consequences arising from these revolutionary changes. Only a few features of the change can be outlined here.

What may well be instanced as the first and possibly most important feature is the breakdown of the ideological, social, political and economic system in Eastern Europe. If *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and the changes and developments in Poland were already long under way, the changes in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and

especially Romania came about much more drastically and dramatically. Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were not so powerfully affected, the development of the situation in Yugoslavia being very complicated on account of the disparity of the republics and because of national and denominational tensions. The situation in Albania is at present still little known. But on the whole it has to be said that the whole of Eastern Europe, which a short time ago was regarded as a solid, monolithic block of enduring permanence, has suffered a total collapse. The communist and socialist systems have played out their roles in history.

The second feature might be said to be the removal of the Iron Curtain and all the bulwarks of tension between East and West, symbolised by the demolition of the Berlin Wall. The Iron Curtain had indeed long been riddled with holes, but dividing walls and hardly passable frontiers between the countries of Eastern and Central Europe lasted until about the end of 1989. As the walls fell and frontiers opened up, human contacts, not only in the geographical but also in the ideological, religious and social sense, followed. The bitter tension between Eastern and Central Europe and Western Europe was also gradually eradicated, so that today we may speak about the emergence of a single Europe, although many obstacles and difficulties of various kinds still exist.

In the third place might come democratic elections, on the basis of which people will look for new forms of social, political, economic and cultural life. The consequences of the decades-long communist monopoly and reign of terror cannot be got rid of so easily. It takes vital prerequisites — structures, manpower, experience and not least financial resources — to build a new social order. Resistance of various sorts will also have to be reckoned with. But the first requirements for pursuing a new way for the future are elections and new political mandates.

The fourth feature to mention is the fact that for the churches and Christian faithful a new situation has arisen practically everywhere. The church has much more freedom to carry out its mission. Since the required structural conditions have been created by the appointments of bishops and the restoration of relations with the Holy See, totally new possibilities for church action now present themselves. Certainly with these new possibilities the lack of personnel, institutions, schools, church organisations and money is that much more clearly noticeable. Political change has brought the church new tasks for which it is still little prepared, and for which it was not able to prepare because of suppression and persecution.

Finally one last feature of the changed situation must be mentioned:

a new awareness of the solidarity of Central and Eastern European Christians in their new involvement. It is a cause for rejoicing that the spirit of reconciliation and readiness to forgive, to break down national, language and cultural barriers and conflicts, is stronger than the revanchist movements that are surfacing here and there on one side or the other. The universality of the Catholic Church across all state and national borders, ecumenical efforts amongst the Christian churches, unity in diversity and diversity in unity as the only possible way of life, exchange of experiences and mutual help in giving and receiving to enrich all, typify ever more markedly the image of the church in Central and Eastern Europe. The sponsors of this ethos and this way of thinking are not only bishops, priests and ministers but also lay people and institutions of various kinds, such as theological faculties and colleges.

Many other features of the changed situation and dynamic evolution in which we find ourselves might of course be mentioned, but we cannot go into them in detail here. We must now move on to the main theme: how do matters stand today with regard to religious belief in Central and Eastern Europe? This will not simply be a matter of showing how things stand as regards subjective belief and Christian life in Central and Eastern Europe on the basis of academic research or situation reports on individual countries. Rather an attempt must be made to answer the question whether Central and Eastern Europe are still Christian today. In this inquiry general observations and assessments will have to serve as a basis for answering this question as concretely as possible for individual countries.

Are Central and Eastern Europe Still Christian Today?

The question assumes that Europe at one time, or perhaps even up until a short time ago, was Christian. Is it still Christian today? It must no doubt be admitted that in a total sense Europe was never, geographically or semantically, wholly Christian. There were only certain parts of Europe, even at times rather large parts, that were more or less Christian, and this is still the case today. History proves, and the present demonstrates, how the Christian character of Europe can change. If, however, I may be allowed to take *partem pro toto*, then the premise that Europe was Christian is more than well-founded. This for three main reasons. First, historically, and especially in the period following the migrations of peoples, the spread of Christianity went hand in hand with the spread of culture and the spiritual and political construction of Europe. Not without reason are Benedict and Cyril and Methodius patrons of Europe, and we could

add many missionaries besides. Secondly, Christianity and the culture shaped by it are so essentially an integral part of Europe that Europe without Christianity is absolutely unimaginable and incomprehensible. The cultural and social face of Europe today is still strongly marked by Christian elements. Thirdly, the designation of Europe as Christian, especially when compared with Africa and Asia, is generally admitted. There is no way in which one can speak as intelligibly of an atheist, socialist, humanist or merely post-Christian Europe as one can of a Europe that is Christian.

Nevertheless the question whether present-day Europe is still Christian is a quite legitimate one. The question is prompted not only by those features of present-day Europe which have already been mentioned, but for other reasons too. Without going into too much academic and statistical detail, we might highlight five historical developments which denote great inward and outward change.

Firstly, from a sociological point of view, Christianity, Christian belief, the church and Christians have increasingly been pushed to the margin of society. The churches' influential presence, Christians' witness to the Gospel and the shaping of public opinion, education, culture, social life, politics and the economic order by the Christian faith are decreasing.

Secondly, inside the churches an ever-steeper decline is discernible in so-called religious practice, such as church attendance, reception of the sacraments and church work. Criticism of the church and rejection of a full identification with it seem to be on the increase. As the churches seem ever less credible to their own members, so are Christians all the less credible to people on the fringes of the church and outside it. As evidence of the decline in Christian practice we could cite the deliberate disregard for, or even rejection of, Christian moral norms, especially in attitudes to marriage, the family and sexuality.

A third fact is growing ignorance about the faith, or religious uncertainty. Compared with the possibilities for training and education in other fields that are available to, pursued and taken for granted by people nowadays, those in the religious field are sadly underused. There is indeed no lack of supply, but the demand, in some churches and areas in particular, is almost completely absent.

A fourth fact is the existence of other religious, ideological, philosophical and scientific or pseudo-scientific attitudes to and understandings of life which are in deliberate opposition to Christianity. Some of these come from the Far East, and some are differing variants of materialism and Marxism. It is remarkable how effectively they are spreading in Europe: they give the impression of offering a kind of substitute for outgrown and outworn Christianity.

Finally, we have the fact of religious indifference, practical materialism and consumerism as the way of life of an affluent society. In those countries where, by means of the official ideology that until recently held the field alone, a materialistic philosophy of life was propagated and inculcated by all the media, this way of life displays some peculiar features. But even in Central Europe the materialist view of life is very widespread.

Considering the great changes which have taken place in private and public life in contemporary Europe and how short a time they took to develop, one might be inclined to say that Central and Eastern Europe are no longer Christian. But such a sweeping categorical statement would be mistaken. In fact there is plenty of obvious evidence, based equally firmly on scientific research and statistical enquiry, which can be adduced in support of the contention that Central and Eastern Europe are still Christian. Let me very briefly mention the following points.

The Christian tradition as a way of life and as an essential component of European history and culture is still alive in private and public life. Statistically, at least in some countries, by far the greater part of the population even today still belongs formally to the church and keeps up at least the external signs of church membership. In this way the churches are still definitely present in today's secularised society not only in the number of their members but also through their institutions, buildings, activities, public profile, preaching and statements.

Even in a so-called post-Christian, lay, liberal, socialist, humanist and secularised Europe, there are still very many Christian elements both in the prevailing doctrine of man and philosophy of life and also in the prevailing understanding of existence and the universe. Europe still draws its life much more strongly from its Christian roots than many people are often prepared to admit. One might also mention the clear testimony of historical monuments of all kinds, monasteries and churches, literary and musical works and masterpieces of the fine arts, and the spirit they bear witness to.

There is today a widespread reawakening of Christianity and the church that is expressing itself in new communities, movements and organisations. Since the Second Vatican Council examples can be found in practically every country in East and West. It is hard to say whether this reawakening of Christianity and the church is proceeding in the same way and to the same extent among Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. But even if certain differences are perceived, one must not be too quick to confine the breath of the Spirit to one church or one country alone.

Further evidence of a renewed and revived Christian Europe is provided by the longing expressed by more and more people,

especially young people, for transcendence, for genuine values, for definite moral rules and for an ultimate meaning to life. Disenchantment with the assertive offers and vociferous propaganda of a materialistic philosophy has been clearly expressed in the massive changes which have recently taken place. This general longing shows itself in many forms and no doubt cannot be immediately interpreted in a Christian sense or be claimed by the church as its own. But since life in a spiritual desert is impossible, the Gospel has a new opportunity today to be wanted, preached, witnessed to, embraced and lived.

Finally, one might cite general uncertainty, despair and anxiety about the future. The question is not merely whether we shall survive at all, but also what we should and must do in order to survive with human dignity. Questions of this kind can be the occasion for facing up to the Christian message as an answer. Of course the Gospel does not contain any recipes for the practical solution of all our problems. But it declares a spiritual position and opens up new dimensions for the future, which give people in the Central and Eastern Europe of today new hope and confidence.

Let us now try to answer the question: 'Are Central and Eastern Europe still Christian today?' in the form of five propositions.

* The first proposition. Europe is not Christian in any ideal sense; it never was and never will be Christian in this way. Europe would be ideally Christian only if the total population fully accepted the Gospel and were in complete allegiance to Christ. There never was and never will be such an ideal Europe. Central and Eastern Europe were always, in any case, only more or less Christian.

The second proposition. Europe is no longer as Christian as it was historically. The historical shape of Christian Europe is a thing of the past and will never return again. A verdict on the historical pattern of a Christian Europe does not imply a value judgment on the quality of the Christianity that moulded and shaped Europe at certain periods of its history. Since the present and future cannot be a repetition of the past, it is senseless to regret the way a Christian Central and Eastern Europe materialised in history. We must rather turn to new patterns for the future.

The third proposition. Europe is still Christian as regards both the intrinsic substance of Christianity and also the historical tradition that has always continued to take its life from the deep roots of the Gospel. Europe is also still Christian in the concrete visibility of the Christian churches, in their presence in public life, in their individual and social activity, in their preaching, worship, ministry, and in their action on behalf of mankind and a human spiritual, cultural, social and material environment. But although Europe is still Christian, it is in the process

of drastic change, and this involves a major challenge for the church.

The fourth proposition. Europe is still more Christian than might have been expected, to judge by all that has happened in history and by all that is happening in the present. It is more Christian and closer to genuine Christian sources than can be verified objectively and statistically. Above all it is still more Christian than many who have pronounced the death sentence on Christianity and the church would admit. Christianity is so essentially a part of Europe's spiritual heritage that it is virtually indestructible.

The fifth proposition. Europe, and especially Central and Eastern Europe, will also remain Christian in future — and this means more or less Christian, and to differing extents within individual churches and countries. The Christian character of Europe will be subject to various fluctuations of a qualitative and quantitative kind. The extent of these fluctuations will depend on the gift of God, on how people cooperate, and also on spiritual factors. But from the experience of European history we may take hope that God will remain true to this continent in spite of all its unfaithfulness.

The answer, one way or the other, to the question of whether Central and Eastern Europe are still Christian could be stated with these five propositions in mind. Statistical evidence and the results of scientific research can always be adduced in evidence either for and against. The answer to the question is in large measure a matter of personal standpoint, personal experience and personal conviction.

My own answer is clear and unambiguous: Central and Eastern Europe are still Christian. My main reasons for giving this answer are the following.

Christians are still present in considerable numbers in Central and Eastern Europe, not only as holders of baptismal certificates, but as convinced, professing Christians, who order their lives by their faith and dedication to Christ and who are active members of the church. Christian churches, and within them Christian associations in all their forms, such as local churches, parishes, various groups and movements, are still numerous, strong and alive. Christian faith in the Gospel and in the church's teaching, a Christian understanding of mankind and of the meaning of life and Christian moral values and norms are still an essential element of the spiritual life of Central and Eastern Europe. The Christian cultural heritage is still very relevant today in all fields and continues to have an effect not only within the churches but on intellectual life as a whole. The witness of many individual Christians, as well as Christian groups, church societies and the churches themselves, attracts much attention in Europe; it is often impressive. Church statements and documents, especially on general human questions, are taken seriously and, because of general

disillusionment with previous ideologies, are increasingly influencing public opinion. Ecumenical cooperation, openness of Christians to one another, work for the unity of all Christians, are on the increase in Central and Eastern Europe and are a sign of hope for all. The willingness of Christians to talk to one another and with other religions as well as with non-believers exposes more and more those elements that all men of good will hold in common and enables Christians to make their contribution to the well-being of mankind. The commitment of the churches and Christians in Europe to human rights, peace, justice, freedom and aid to developing countries binds Christians together in real solidarity with one another and with people everywhere in the world.

Some Tasks for Christians in Central and Eastern Europe

A first task might be called the creation of a Christian topography and topology of Central and Eastern Europe. The aim would be to discover and describe those places where the Christian faith is still especially alive, where the Christian life is lived; those places where the Christian heritage has remained particularly rich and has been kept alive. 'Places' should be understood here in the geographical but even more in the spiritual, cultural and historical sense. One would first turn one's attention to geographical sites: many towns, monasteries, castles and other buildings would call for mention, as well as places where important historical events have occurred. There are certainly more than enough such places in Central and Eastern Europe. The pity is that they are far too little known, too seldom presented in their historical and cultural significance and related to each other. Pilgrimages, tours and educational outings thus tend to pass these places by, or else treat them from a particular point of view which is often narrowly nationalistic, denominational or ideological, if not totally distorted. Important European *topoi* to be taken into account in a spiritual topography and topology, however, also include various institutions, such as universities, academies, libraries, museums, churches and schools, especially when these are not just historical monuments but at the same time places of living spiritual debate and cultural, scientific and artistic exchange. And finally one might also include in this spiritual topography and topology various events, such as commemorations, congresses, exhibitions, conferences, symposia, conventions and other meetings of wide general interest.

Let a second task be the search for a qualified spiritual task force to build up and maintain the Christian faith of a Christian Europe. Politicians and economic experts, technocrats and so-called

'Eurocrats' have their own tasks in today's Europe. Many other Christians are also called to witness to the Christian faith, whether as individuals or as groups or as representatives of their particular calling. It is generally accepted that young people have a special task and opportunity here and that they have their own distinctive new contribution to make. But even pilgrims, tourists and immigrant workers would have great possibilities here given sufficient spiritual preparation and guidance.

Those qualified to build up and maintain the idea of a Central and Eastern Europe that is to be renewed for all by means of the Christian faith include those people who because of their profession, calling and personal gifts have tasks to do that transcend frontiers and bring people together. These include clergy, priests and bishops in particular. It is gratifying that for over 15 years this realisation has been growing among the European bishops and that they are increasingly aware of this task — individually, as well as in the Bishops' conferences, in the Council of European Bishops' Conferences and in ecumenical cooperation in meetings with the Conference of European Churches. The present leader of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II, sets an example in this field with his programme of visits, contacts, conversations and addresses.

Those who are to be involved in this field require certain spiritual qualifications. The most important of these include spiritual breadth and maturity; a feel for the difference between genuine and fake; openness and a readiness to receive and to give; selflessness in service; and a deep grounding in Christian faith.

A third task might be called 'observing the signs of the times'. I have in mind here not only those signs of the times which become evident in the course of historical evolution and which are more or less independent of mankind, such as spiritual turning points, natural catastrophes, the appearance of extraordinary personalities, the emergence and disappearance of intellectual trends and ideas, or inventions and developments which have the potential to exert strong influence on the future of mankind. I mean also those signs of the times which men themselves produce, either as the result of conscious decisions, or as symbols of their longing, or even as mere incidental signals, without people even being fully aware of what they mean.

It would of course be a naive approach if people were to be willing to look only for favourable signs of the times. There are, alas, also many unfavourable signs of the times, on the military, economic, political, social, denominational, national, linguistic and cultural fronts. In addition, many individuals, in their hardness of heart, unbelief, narrow-mindedness, egoism and reserve, are, both for themselves and other people, unfavourable signs of the times: this fact

makes it difficult to deepen the Christian faith.

There remains one last task to mention, but it is an important one for us Christians: paying attention to what is specifically Christian in our cooperation with others to rebuild Europe spiritually. We Christians are conscious that we are not the only, and today indeed not even the most important, of Europe's builders, even though the contribution of Christianity and Christians during the course of European history might be evaluated otherwise. We are at work alongside others, Christians and non-Christians, believers and unbelievers. This readiness to work with others, in co-responsibility and collaboration, in communicativeness and concern, is in fact part of that which is specifically Christian, not in the sense that others do not have this readiness, but rather in the sense that there can be no genuinely Christian contribution without it. We must confess honestly that we for our part have not always been conscious enough of this; that we have been too self-confident, too self-satisfied and too exclusive.

Today we must be ready to work with others. But this involves no watering-down of what is distinctively Christian. It is a question rather of contributing Christianity's own genuine identity and image, that special originality which distinguishes Christianity from all ideologies.

What is specifically Christian is expressed most markedly in the Christian understanding of man as creature and likeness of God, whose destiny consists in communion with God and in eschatological perfection; in the hope that is never confined to this world or based only on man's performance; and in the concept of peace which for Christians is essentially God's gift and transcends this world. We Christians believe that God is at work in today's world. We believe in the communion that exists between God and mankind; this communion also forms the strongest bond between one man and another. Therefore we are full of hope and confidence for the future.