

Christianity's Answer to Nationalism

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The Biblical Background

The Old and New Testaments form an integral unity not only theologically but in historical and cultural terms. It would be a grave error to view that unity in a static, fundamentalist way, for the Bible contains a development that leads from Israel's sense of vocation to the universality of a church which embraces all peoples. One can go on to say that Israel's national sense of mission is not an end in itself but serves to defend radical monotheism in the midst of other, polytheistic cultures. The great prophets of Israel teach that God is the creator of all men; even the rulers of the great civilisations of the time are the instruments of Yahweh. Israel's 'nationalism' is always self-defending, protecting its identity from the religious pluralism of neighbouring peoples by a system of internal constraints. The purpose behind its struggle to maintain territorial independence amid the vast, expansionist civilisations around it is to preserve its Messianic world-view for the whole world.

The universal system of values sustained within the national framework of Israel was transformed by the life of Jesus Christ, the experience of the Resurrection and the mission of the early church into a world event that exceeds all national bounds. The Jesus of the New Testament purposely breaks down the old barriers and builds the foundations of a new worldwide community. The apostles proclaim as sociological truth that in Christ there are no more Jews and no more Greeks. While affirming continuity with the Israel of the Old Testament the church has become a community open to all peoples. The deciding factor is a new programme of supranational unification.

Early Christianity raised all peoples into the brotherhood of Christ, while sustaining, ennobling and enriching their original cultures. This system of values makes the ancient idea of conquest irrelevant and allows two humanising notions typical of Jesus to come into force: solidarity and the idea of non-violence. For 2,000 years Jesus has been

working like leaven within the church itself, and although his influence has waxed and waned, he still represents to this day the only transcendent power able to cure a world riven by nationalism and the urge to conquer. What follows is an attempt to weigh in the balance of Jesus' value system the Christianity and national ideas of Eastern Europe today.

Diagnosing Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe is a region where the boundaries of states, nations and Christian denominations constantly cut across one another. The region has no traditions of democracy or of mass western secularisation, so that impatient nationalist and church influences alike have had, still have and will continue to have a growing significance. Though the majority of all the peoples of Eastern Europe still belong to a church, Christianity has not as yet succeeded in its desire to foster brotherhood and justice. The reason for Christianity's inefficacy is that the churches in the region have acted concurrently not only as instruments for the expansion of empires and of the majority inside a country but also in defence of small nations and minorities. Only once, in the face of the conquests of the Turks, did Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy combine. Catholicism provided a defence against Russian and German conquest, while Orthodoxy and Protestantism opposed homogenisation by the Austrian Habsburgs. Minority religions have championed minority peoples against majority nationalism in each country.

According to Jesus' system of values, all church efforts to give intellectual support to imperial conquest must be rated as negative, and so must support for a majority nation against minorities. On the same basis one must rate as positive all church efforts to defend the cultural and political autonomy and the identity of a small nation threatened by conquest or assimilation. According to Jesus' law of solidarity, conquest cannot be justified even in the name of the Christian ideal itself, and solidarity with the oppressed is a law binding on his disciples. The sole authentic response to violent integration in Jesus' name is the defence of minorities in Jesus' name. Although the Greek-rite Catholicism of the Ukrainians and Romanians is the consequence of Roman Catholic expansion promoted by an empire, the Ukrainian Greek Catholics (Uniates) today defend the minority interest against Russian Orthodoxy, just as the Romanian Orthodox defended minority rights under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and Catholic and Reformed Church Hungarians defend Hungarian identity against threatened homogenisation in Romania today.

Communism, Religion and National Affiliation

Examination of the Moscow-directed church policy of the regions of Eastern Europe leads to the clear conclusion that its motives were national, not ideological. The initial object of Russian messianism in spreading Orthodoxy was to extend its power worldwide. This world mission was the soil in which the idea of world communism subsequently took root. Moscow was to become the Third Rome not via Christian Orthodoxy but via orthodox atheism. Under the slogan of internationalism, the sense of identity, and, where possible, even the language of each conquered nation were to be destroyed, and by making atheism the state religion, the national churches that defended the minority and the conquered were to be destroyed as well. Paradoxically, the oppressive power achieved its purpose only with its own people, which it robbed of its own Russian values and thousand-year heritage of Russian Christianity. All other nations' national and religious identities seem to have grown in strength, as demonstrated by the current burgeoning national movements.

The tactics of Moscow's anti-church (anti-minority) policy were determined by the number belonging to the church concerned, its leaders' willingness to be subservient, whether its centre was inside or outside the occupied zone, the ethnic structure of the country, and the extent to which the church was a destabilising factor for communist rule. Thus the official Russian, Romanian and Bulgarian Orthodox hierarchies became intellectual slaves to Moscow (since prelates and clergy who resisted were executed or jailed by the thousand), while four million Ukrainian, one and a half million Romanian and 320,000 Eastern Slovak Uniates were simply annexed to Orthodoxy. The cynicism of communist church policy is clear: as the churches in the occupied areas were steadily brought under control, the churchmen who cooperated with the authorities were given hierarchical power and manipulated by the KGB. A world church organisation, the Christian Peace Conference, based in Prague, was set up to mislead western Christians and to promote the current Soviet 'peace plan'. Secret agents infiltrated other world Christian organisations, ostensibly as delegates of Eastern European churches, to whittle down the solidarity of western Christians.

There was severe persecution: of Russian Baptists for breaking the easily controlled Orthodox monopoly; of Romanian Uniates for jeopardising Romanian Orthodox-national unity and of Romanian Baptists for being members of a church based in the United States; of Jews since their centres were in Jerusalem and the United States. In countries like Hungary, with a plurality of denominations, the authorities tried to corrupt the leaders of the major churches and

break down their mass following while remaining quite tolerant of smaller denominations. Communism had little success against the rock-hard national resistance of Polish Catholicism, but managed to undermine the Hungarian Reformed Church, one bastion of Hungarian national consciousness, by putting in key posts those prepared to serve the authorities and scaring off the masses with a barbaric and drastic policy of terror.

As the oppression from Moscow weakens today, there is a reciprocal revival of the nations and national groups, and of the churches which identify with them. But communism was only one demon stalking the region. Now Eastern Europe faces another: burgeoning nationalism. Can the nations, which were all oppressed in the same way, make peace with each other, or will oppression break out all over again?

The Gospel as Post-Communist Political Therapy

After decades of imposed atheist uniformity, the revival of national awareness will clearly encourage the various peoples to emphasise their native languages, cultures, folk cultures and histories, and also the histories of their national churches. This rediscovery and preservation of values is quite proper, but since it entails self-assertion by the majority in each country, it may well turn into aggression and intolerance towards minorities at home and towards neighbouring peoples. The churches, with their responsibility for peace in Eastern Europe, must underline that Christianity is the common heritage of all Eastern European peoples; they must stress that the essence of the Christian message is to unite, not to separate, and that it cannot, under any circumstances, be an ideology of antagonism. But knowing the nature of nationalism, we must expect to find the majority denomination in a polyethnic country viewing the minority as a disuniting, nation-dividing factor. The minorities of all Eastern European countries must be prepared for several rounds of struggle, with tensions rising almost to a level where there is a danger of pogroms. To save our region from becoming a Karabakh, we must discover and apply non-violent methods to solve these conflicts.

Jesus' principle of non-violence has proved its political worth in this century in the liberation of India and the victory of Martin Luther King's black people in the USA. It is the Christian churches which must help in the struggles for minority human rights by devising tactics and strategies for non-violent resistance in the region, initiating such resistance and backing it up with transcendent forces.

There are not only Christians but Jews and Muslims in Eastern Europe. They too have been oppressed. Some of the Jewish community continue to choose mass emigration, fearing post-communist nationalism as much as communism. But a high proportion have stayed, and we must help them by proclaiming that the Christian heritage is a Jewish-Christian heritage. There is no New Testament without the Old. We believe in the same God and await the coming or return of the same Messiah. The problem of the Muslim minorities has been partly solved in Bosnia, but in Kosovo the failure is as complete as in Bulgaria, and the situation is particularly difficult in the Soviet Union, where it must be realised that conquered Muslim peoples can no more be russified by Orthodoxy than by atheism. To my knowledge no attempt has been made to initiate Christian-Muslim dialogue in the region. Only the Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian Orthodox churches, although they have such strong national commitments, can take the first steps towards Muslim-Christian reconciliation. A system of oppression that flouts national and religious autonomy can no longer be sustained; more bloody oppression will only postpone fraternisation for future generations. Meanwhile there is a significant Muslim-Christian dialogue in the West, based on the common heritage from Jesus. It needs importing without delay.

The world Protestant organisations and the Vatican did a great disservice to Eastern Christianity in recent decades by taking communism seriously as a 'partner' world-view. By opening up a dialogue, they gave practical recognition to hierarchies chosen not by the churches themselves but by the communists. The Western churches which really helped were those which insisted on publishing the truth about persecution and helped the resisting churches at grass roots level.

There will now be changes in the leaderships of all Eastern European churches; newly elected leaders who are trusted in their churches will take over the key positions. What the East would like the western churches to do now is to share their experience of centuries of tolerance, pluralism and democratic protection of minorities. The East expects the western churches in future to address moral needs and not simply support the majority *status quo* as they did under the communists. It would be regrettable if western Roman Catholicism were merely to try to expand its own church in the East, so that homogenisation of minorities again became a means to that end, as it has so often been in history. It would be regrettable if the neo-Protestants of the United States used their capital and powers of agitation merely to bolster their coreligionists in a manner that is culturally alien to the East's traditions, rather than taking the region's

ethnic and religious factors into account when deciding on the line their solidarity should take. The ethics of Jesus always teach solidarity with 'the little ones', the minorities. The West can help the East by using its spiritual, political and financial capacity for solidarity to redress the imbalance from which the region's minorities suffer. It should support the Turks in Bulgaria, the Protestants and Catholics in the Baltic states threatened by russification, the Protestants in Poland, the Uniates in Ukraine and Romania, the Hūngarian Reformed Church and Catholics in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Sub-Carpathian Ukraine, and so on. We need 'goodwill visits' from western Christians representing democracy and tolerance. The conscience of the church can be a guideline, but it cannot substitute for detailed expertise. The visitors should investigate whether the legislation on minorities and religious matters in these Eastern countries which are aspiring towards democracy is in fact in accordance with practice. They should clearly state that any theological justification of aggressive, majority nationalism should count as heresy. Self-examination in Europe could help a lot too, for not everything there is in order in this respect, and so could effective solidarity among the minorities themselves, both inside and outside the region.

Meanwhile it is encouraging to see a democratically inclined attitude growing in the Russian church as well, with the neo-Slavophile brands of nationalism basically on the defensive. Ten years ago, Aleksandr Ogorodnikov, the Orthodox apostle of Russian Christian renewal, wrote this promise for a new Russian mission: '1. We are united in love for our Mother Russia. 2. We feel brotherly love for the Christians of all nations. 3. We are striving to express our respect for the national dignity of the various ethnic groups'.