

"TRANSCENDENCE" IN EASTERN EUROPE

By Paul Peachey

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Our modern era is filled with paradox. It is of all eras the most "spiritual." Our gadgets, the products of the human mind, free us from many constraints imposed by space and time. Moreover, as the global quest for human rights demonstrates, our consciousness of human dignity is rising. At the same time, however, we find it increasingly difficult to define the human spirit. Though the conquests of the human mind increasingly transform the conditions under which we live, our inquiries into the mysteries of the human spirit make us increasingly agnostic as to its reality.

Accordingly, we have abandoned traditional dualist conceptions of body and mind in favor of monist views that assimilate the latter to the former. Mind is a function, not of eternal Reason, but of physiology. Secondly, individualist conceptions of personhood yield to social accounting. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is Karl Marx's oft-quoted aphorism, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Finally, positivism has become the prevailing mood in our intellectual endeavors. We take as real only that which can be verified by our senses. To speak of the invisible, of reality beyond our senses, is to invite a shoulder shrug.

Paradox--and irony as well! The "West," the peoples of Europe, and the lands they settled, pioneered notions of both: the dignity and the rights of the human individual, on the one hand, and doubt that the person is real, on the other. The irony: for decades, the rhetoric of the Cold War has turned in part on the ostensible atheism of the "Communist" East versus the implied godliness of the West. Meanwhile, however, some peoples and cultures in the countries in the Communist sphere remained more traditionally "religious" than were the "liberal democracies" in the West.

More importantly, as we now learn, it may turn out that the deepest awareness of the limits of positivist views of human are to be found, not in the West where freedom has been proclaimed the most loudly, but in the lands of Lenin, where politically, transcendent reality has been most vigorously denied.

Vaclav Havel's sudden emergence on the horizon dramatizes the point. For example, in his appearance before the US Congress in February, 1990, near the end of his notable address, he observed, that his prison and other experience, have given him "one great certainty: Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim." The human spirit is not simply reducible to the determinisms in which it is rooted.

Havel had developed this theme in various other addresses. A month earlier, in a fraternal and celebratory address to the Polish Sejm and Senate he observed, "But paradise on earth has not been victorious, nor can it win in the future. The notion that it would win could console only the vain minds of those who were convinced that they understood everything, that there was no higher mysterious institution above them, and that they were in charge of history."

In his acceptance address on receiving the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers Association on October 15, 1989, Havel was more explicit. "In the beginning was the Word: so it states on the first page on one of the most important books known to us. But surely the same could be said, figuratively speaking, of every human action? . . ." Yet there is ambiguity, the possibility that "a well-intentioned cause" can be "transformed into the betrayal of its own good intention." Thus he asked, "What was the true nature of Christ's words? Were they the beginning of an era of salvation . . ., or were they the spiritual source of the crusades, inquisitions, the cultural extermination of the Americas, and, later the entire expansion of the white race that was fraught with so many contradictions . . .?"

Havel, though at the moment perhaps the most dramatic example, is by no means alone. Other intellectuals in Eastern Europe are emerging with the same insight and conviction. A conference on medical ethics between American and Soviet Georgian scientists, in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, already in 1988, concluded that the latter were more "Christian" than the former. Where the Americans were steeped in the prevailing positivism, the Soviet scholars had learned at great cost the perils of human systems that deny the transcendental. Human being, the human spirit, is not simply reducible to its biological and social substrata. Transcending those determinisms, an indeterminate mystery defines the center of our being. "Religion" resonates to that mystery.

Yet "religion" in its institutional manifestations, as Havel intimated, is likewise burdened with ambiguity. Over many centuries churches as institutions and hierarchies became embedded in the structures of economic and political injustice. Not without reason, distrust arose between laity and higher clergy. Thus, if in some instances churches and church leaders have been prime movers in the transformations now underway in central and eastern Europe, in others their position has been more problematic.

What in fact is taking place in central Europe and the Soviet Union? Where does "religion" fit into the picture? How has it contributed to the astonishing changes underway? Where and how has it been part of burdens that have so long afflicted? To celebrate this miracle as the victory of capitalism or of the West is surely a superficial reading, as superficial, no doubt, as the expectation that McDonald culture will spell happiness in the East.