

## ***Religion in Eastern Europe Journal as Forum for Conversation***

by Walter Sawatsky

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### **Rooted in a Long Tradition of Study and Conversation**

When the first *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* were published in 1981, they were an attempt to circulate informed, balanced overviews of the situation of the Christian Churches in eastern Europe. Several books on the subject were also appearing at the time, together marking a renewed effort to take the current data and historical background seriously. So CAREE, as sponsoring organization, and founding editor Paul Mojzes understood themselves to be in cooperation with a growing circle of scholars, church leaders and activists that were publishing news services and journals. Yet it was characteristic of *OPREE* (and later *REE*) that the editors and writers avoided the bifurcation between those persons and organizations stressing issues of human rights, religious persecution and the evils of communism, and those who emphasized official ecumenical relationships to existing churches, even if their leaders were compromised by state interference. That is, the life of the churches and believers were viewed contextually in their complexity, which meant that restrictions on believers and on church activity were reported frankly, as were the attempts to find positive, creative ways to live in such contexts.

Many of the early contributors were shaped in their thinking by the work of Paul Anderson, an American working with the YMCA and student Christian groups in the Russian Empire before the Revolution of 1917. Later Anderson was able to publish information on the deteriorating condition of the Russian Christians under the Soviets through the journal *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* (RCDA), and to advise the National Council of Christian Churches in USA (NCCC). Through his efforts YMCA Press emerged as a major publisher of Russian language works, Nikita Struve for many years serving as editor from his place of exile in Paris. The literature in English translation by Berdyaev, Struve, Bulgakov, Florovsky formed the theological understanding on Orthodoxy of eventual CAREE members, many of whom had participated in international student congresses, then in the ecumenical gatherings were they again met friends from Eastern Europe. In the 1960s Anderson was assisted and then succeeded

by the Czech immigrant Blaho Hruby as editor of *RCDA*. Its content emphasized translation of documents, including the *Samizdat* from religious dissent that began appearing after 1961. Increasingly its tone was becoming more anti-communist, the editor was aging and unable to maintain the pace of translation, so that the journal fell behind before ceasing to appear. Although Dr. Paul Steeves insists his web-site<sup>1</sup>, that provides translations in English of articles and documents from the Russian press, is unsystematic and not comprehensive, nevertheless, part of the *RCDA* tradition is being carried forward by him (for years he assisted in translations for *RCDA*).

The WCC Assembly of 1975 (in Nairobi) and the subsequent report to the WCC Executive Committee 1976 on the religious situation in member countries marked a turning point for new cooperation. Three research centers, Keston College (UK), Glaube in der 2. Welt (G2W) of Switzerland, and the Center for Ecumenical & Missiological Research in Utrecht (headed by Dr. Hans Hebly) jointly produced a 100 page report booklet on the problem of religious liberty in Eastern Europe & the USSR.<sup>2</sup> The support of numerous western national councils of churches, as well as WCC staff approval for circulating the report to Central Committee members, indicated the new recognition of the necessity of solid information from areas where information was limited and suspect.

By 1981, what was needed was an English language publication whose support base was American. Its readers would get analytical articles by specialists, rather than more frequent news stories on specific events available through *Keston News Service*, and the subject matter went well beyond the theme of religious liberty. In what follows I will introduce *REE* from its present context, showing major periods of development and shift, and identifying a few of the major themes of future interest.

### **Where Does REE Fit as Resource for the Study of Religion in Eastern Europe?**

*REE* (and *OPREE* before it) sought to reach English speaking readers (mainly North American). The perceived audience were not experts in Slavic studies, but were scholars of religion (from a variety of disciplines) and activist pastors, who sought relatively short articles that provided solid background with ecumenical balance and an eirenic intent. That is, *REE* was a deliberate alternative to those publications that fostered an ‘underground church’ rhetoric on behalf of the western side of the Cold War. Some will recall the famous contrast in perspective of John Foster Dulles, speaking as churchman at the first World Council of Churches (WCC)

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<sup>1</sup>Russian Religious News: <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews>.

<sup>2</sup>To clarify possible bias, this author was a staff participant in the preparation of the report, having been seconded to Keston College from 1973-76. See the separate articles on G2W and Keston in this issue for more information.

Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 when he called for the WCC to be another bulwark against Communism, and the perspective of Czech theologian Josef Hromadka. Hromadka urged church leaders to transcend the bi-polar divide. When he later organized the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) he envisaged a community of churchpersons from both sides of the East/West divide, who would take the social, economic, political, cultural concerns of their contexts seriously and responsibly, but would nevertheless strive for a churchly fraternity more inclusive than that managed by the World Council of Churches.

The sponsoring body of **REE**, that is CAREE, chose to continue to relate to the CPC following its takeover by the Soviets after 1968, but did so differently by forming an independent organization. CAREE always sought relationships both with CPC figures, even when in disagreement with them, and with persons within Eastern Europe who exercised a churchly leadership role, both official and unofficial. *The essential concern of CAREE has always been to seek relationships, to keep talking, to keep trying to understand and get another perspective when the disagreements were so profound.* Because many CAREE members had extensive experience in Eastern Europe through their own denominations, CAREE increasingly became the consultative body for the National Council of Churches of Christ in USA (NCCC) Europe Committee. The latter is now functioning as a forum in the revised NCCC and CWS&W structure. Some CAREE meetings are held in conjunction with the Europe Forum.

**Religion in Eastern Europe (REE)** is a bimonthly journal, averaging about 50 pages of text per issue. CAREE members receive **REE** and the CAREE Newsletter. Individual and library subscribers may receive the journal for the subscription price of \$36.00. Since 1998 complete issues have been posted for reading or downloading at a web-site provided by George Fox University (the home of Assistant Editor Sharon Linzey) <http://ree.georgefox.edu>. **REE** is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16<sup>th</sup> Fl., Chicago, IL 60606, E-mail: [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com), WWW: <http://www.atla.com/>. The Indexes are also available online through BRS Information Technologies and DIALOG Information Services. Microfilms of past volumes are available from the Theological Research Exchange Network, P.O. Box 30183, Portland, OR 97230. **REE** is listed in *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*, as well as in the reference books, *Central and South-Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia* published by Europe Publications ([www.europapublications.co.uk](http://www.europapublications.co.uk)). The web-page also contains a nearly complete archive of **REE** issues.

Currently the subscribers can be divided into three major groups. Of the approximately 550 subscribers, about one third are individuals, the majority resident in USA and Canada, but also in several dozen other countries around the world. A second set of subscribers are college and university libraries, mainly in North America but also in other western countries, including

also many of the headquarters of ecumenical and denominational offices. Indications from correspondence received are that there are a plurality of readers of each subscription, depending on the subject matter. Since 1990 it has become relatively easy to send subscriptions to addresses in Eastern Europe (without postal interference), but currency conversion is expensive and the financial ability to pay dropped drastically. That provided the occasion for individuals and denominational bodies paying (through CAREE) for complementary subscriptions to be sent to now nearly 200 theological institutions of a wide spectrum of confessional orientation, within Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. **REE** therefore serves as resource for many students and their professors.

When **OPREE** began its primary concern was to circulate good quality materials with the minimum of delay and expense. There have been improvements to the visual format but the editors have resisted shifting to a book-like printed format in order to keep costs low, and have come to think of **REE**'s unpretentious appearance as a statement of simplicity. Many articles have also been published elsewhere, including in translation, **REE** editors welcoming that fact though requesting that the initial publication be acknowledged. Without salaried editors, the contributors are expected to submit final drafts of papers that do not require extensive editing. Similarly, articles written by persons for whom English is not the primary language are edited sufficiently to make sure that the meaning comes through clearly in English, but at times an awkward turn of phrase is retained so that the reader will recognize the sense of the expression in the original language. We have probably erred on the side of excess by including extensive bibliographies, in order to alert the reader knowledgeable in other languages of materials not readily available otherwise.

*Who are the writers and readers?* They are historians, religious studies scholars, theologians with interest in Europe, sociologists of religion, peace and mediation specialists, and more recently there has been interest by missiologists and theological educators. Pastors and church activists with an interest in Eastern Europe continue to subscribe - it is a regular and unusually cheap resource.

More significantly, readers include scholars within Eastern Europe who are rethinking their understanding of religion, looking for scholarship that locates their part of Christianity within the whole, or looking for teaching materials, in the absence of materials in local languages, for students at both religious and secular schools. *In general, REE is serving as a forum for conversation across the divisions of Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Classic and Neo-Protestant churches, and for seeking dialogue with Marxists, Jews and Muslims or those seeking to understand the churches' role in the building of civil society.*

As is true of most of the serial publications on religion, there has been very little foundation funding, modest but now shrinking support by denominations. The editors serve

without remuneration, hence the costs are limited to production. There too, the printing services of Princeton Seminary constitute a major contribution. The current wish list points to recently articulated intentions that have some hope of realization: more book reviewing, including non-English language books. Better searching of *REE* titles for scholars and students - a comprehensive index (authors and titles) was published in December 2002. We hoped to launch a Russian translated version in 2000 [since Russian serves as lingua franca for many in the region] but anticipated personnel did not materialize.

*How do articles emerge?* A few are solicited, many more emerge from conferences organized by CAREE or with which CAREE members are involved. Still others result from visits to Eastern Europe by the editors and by other CAREE leaders soliciting contributions. In the past decade, graduate students from Eastern Europe studying in western Europe and America have offered their writings as a way of becoming acquainted and finding the conversation partners back home.

When dividing the REE publication record into three phases (see below): 1981-89, 1990-95, and 1996-2002, the shift in who has contributed articles is obvious from a simple statistical review. During the first phase, 86 of the writers were North American, 35 were from western Europe, and 38 from eastern Europe [also counting authors of documents]. Of the latter group, 31 contributors were published from 1986-89 - mostly on the theme of Perestroika and religion. Between 1990 & 1995, the proportions had shifted - 92 contributors from North America (counting the many short responses to 1989 and five years later), compared to only 12 from western Europe, but 62 from eastern Europe. The high degree of east European contributions has continued (1996-2002), numbering 56, compared to 64 from North America and 9 from western Europe.

### **How to Periodize a 22 Year Publication History**

Technically speaking, this can be divided into two phases: *Occasional Papers* 1981-1992; a bimonthly journal *REE* 1992-present. *OPREE* issues reveal considerable unevenness in the amount of content and its quality. But well before the name change, *OPREE* had demonstrated its legitimacy by producing bimonthly issues and getting indexed by abstracting and bibliographic services.

There has been considerable consistency of editing. Paul Mojzes, who founded *OPREE*, was the primary editor till the end of 1997. He was succeeded by Walter Sawatsky 1998 till the end of 2002, after which Mojzes and Sawatsky have collaborated as co-editors. Charles West of Princeton Seminary handled much of the production side throughout this period, others have contributed as associate editors and book review editors.

Generally speaking *REE* went through three general periods of publication emphasis. The first phase involved drawing attention to the flowering of religious thought in eastern Europe, to new forms of conversation with Marxists or with serious thinkers of secular commitment, during the ‘normalization’ of the Soviet era, approximately 1981-1989. During its second phase *REE* was seeking to make sense of the Great Transformation (Mojzes’ apt term) between 1988 (the year of the Russian Christian millennium) and 1995 (when signals of serious change in the religious landscape set in). That included numerous essays on the nonviolent revolutions of 1989 and the role of the churches. By 1995 the drift toward greater legal restrictions on religious practice, new anxieties about proselytism by western churches in Orthodox territory, and a widespread societal depression due to economic chaos and societal fragmentation had become apparent. Around 1995 the expectations of extensive western aid were over. Even more significant for *REE*, we were beginning to notice a new generation of religious scholars within eastern Europe, some completing studies in the West, others retooling or refocusing their work following their conversions to Christianity.

We might describe the latest phase as one of analyzing the contextualization process of Christianity within eastern Europe in the context of a Global Era (1995-2002). The content of *REE* began to reflect the fact of regional difference in the way Christian scholars approached their tasks in society. There were broad points of comparison, such as testing the reality and the meaning of claims about mission as proselytism, examining ways in which Churches were attempting to articulate a social ethic for their setting, and comparing the types of theological schools, or approaches to theological education that were a major concern everywhere. On each of these themes, western scholars were engaged in similar reflection, particularly those theological schools attempting to teach with a globalized perspective. The profession of Slavic studies in general was re-aligning along regional lines (linguistic, cultural) for addressing new themes, while also re-examining earlier interpretations of the past in light of access to new documents.

A quick tally of major topics that appeared does reveal both the primary emphases I have described and reveals some serious gaps. For example, attention to issues of church and state was extensive and persistent, as were articles on ecumenical themes. Till it was integrated into West Germany, the number of articles on the GDR were second only to those on Yugoslavia and its successor states. The heavy focus on the southern Slav region has continued, in part due to the religious factor in the nationalist wars there, but also due to editor Mojzes extensive connections to contributors from a very broad range of viewpoints. The number of articles on the USSR and its successor states was third in frequency, also due to editorial connections. At a more moderate level there were contributions on Poland (mostly related to Roman Catholics), Romania, Czechoslovakia (now Czech & Slovak states) and Romania. Coverage on the central European

regions, and including attention to the minority churches, remains a continuing challenge. The Russian focus has included Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic and the secular philosophers, but aside from treatments on the religious situation in Russia and Ukraine, there was virtually no separate attention to Central Asia or the Caucasus. That inattention remained during the past decade, except for a number of contributions on the Baltic countries.

### ***REE Within the Context of Shifts in the Ecumenical and Evangelical Worlds.***

CAREE's relationship to the NCCC and WCC had always been friendly, but its membership included many who were not from member churches. Both the NCCC and WCC have been in a process of structural adjustment that has resulted in widespread uncertainties. Most American denominations have also been weakened in their ability to pursue visions and programs by the culture wars that have produced deep divisions within, and the denominations have been weakened by the turn to regionalism and localism. Thus sustaining relationships to churches and Christians in Eastern Europe has become even more tentative than was the case a decade ago.

A major section of the North American Evangelical community, if it was following religious developments in Communist countries at all, relied on the flashy magazines of missions to Eastern Europe who were smuggling Bibles, advocating for religious rights. For a time some missions offered newsletters that were more substantial. Many of these organizations disappeared around 1989. The new missionary involvement by Evangelicals in Russia and eastern Europe that caught the headlines during the mid-nineties consisted of established mission agencies now entering a new 'mission field' and needing information, and it consisted of countless local initiatives of relatively short duration. Some of those missionaries and their leaders began to read REE, as did the teachers and students at the new Evangelical theological schools that were proliferating.

The observant reader will also notice that the editors have almost never used the label 'Iron Curtain' when referring to Eastern Europe. Some of the contributors did use it, especially after 1989, including contributors from Eastern Europe. Nor has the concept of 'Totalitarianism' been used. These were terms that served the purpose of ideological stereotyping, generally to dismiss from serious analysis what was "behind the iron curtain" (which mostly meant behind the eastern side) or now in hindsight for east Europeans to speak dismissively of totalitarian regimes that represent a past to be rejected. *Avoiding ideological stereotyping is necessary for taking new contexts seriously, to understand better usually requires careful differentiation.*

### **Major Issues - Passing Issues, Emerging Issues, Persistent Issues.**

Here it may be instructive to comment on what turned out to be passing issues, and what are the emerging issues of the present. *REE*'s continuity may also be best understood by keeping in mind the persistent issues, even if aspects of them seemed to disappear with the changing paradigms.

*Passing Issues:* Church in Socialism was long a topic of interest, especially in East Germany, for it was seen as the contextual way of working out what Liberation Theology seemed to mean in Eastern Europe, in contrast to what it meant in Latin America. During the transition phase, *REE* carried numerous articles on the issue of seeking an economic order that was not as opposed to Christian morality as Marxism in power had been, or as unfettered global capitalism had become. As did Keston and G2W, *REE* drew attention to the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) discourse, from the European gatherings in Basel 1985 through Graz 1997. Although CAREE discussed drafts of Europe's *Charta Oecumenica*, we failed to carry articles from those discussions because of missed deadlines.

*Emerging Issues:* An emerging and persistent issue early in the 1990s is best stated as a question: Must theological education replicate the classical seminary and divinity school model of the west? Some new schools also asked: What role might Christian universities and colleges play in building of civil society, in providing professionals with a self-conscious sense of vocation?

With the new degree of open and free discourse, the deeply rooted westernized bias of theological reflection became more noticeable, even for visiting lecturers from America who assumed a Protestant Reformation paradigm. How does a world for whom the Reformation struggles, the wars of religion, the secular Peace of Westphalia, the rise of tolerance and of religious pluralism are rather distant histories, now work its way through such shifts in consciousness in short order as seems required? Or is that really necessary, even for the Catholic and Protestant communities in eastern Europe?

One emerging issue, really a persistent one but truly new in the world of Orthodoxy, is the attempt to articulate a social doctrine from a Christian perspective. *REE* has carried articles from conferences it helped organize, as well as other contributions addressing the major declaration of social doctrine by the Russian Orthodox Church in August 2000. *REE* has also carried articles on Catholic statements on society, or ecumenical ways to contribute to the rebuilding of society.

The record shows that after 1995 *REE* began to include more articles addressing the issue of mission - missiological analyses, historical and contemporary activities including the growth of new religious movements (NRMs), and the complex issue of proselytism. Toward the end of the decade *REE* published some of the essays from a prolonged study of proselytism that had been funded by Pew Foundation, with reviews of the major book publications that emerged from

that study. Since missiological reflection generally has revolved around the first versus third world dynamic, and since inter-Christian conflicts or tensions have usually been about mission activities, continued attention to the issue of mission seems a likely continuing issue where *REE* and its contributors can make important contributions.

*Persistent Issues:* *REE* has always been seeking dialogue (now the Trialogues in Macedonia), seeking the theological conversation, fostering peace and reconciliation, primarily in terms of the more generally acknowledged role that Christians and churches must play in healthy societies. No longer is there a dialogue with Marxism, but seeking dialogue with secular world views remains important, since eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union territories remain overwhelmingly secular.

The war with religion may have failed, if we think only of the attempts to destroy religious institutions and eradicate formal religious practice. The war with religion through systematic atheist propaganda was more successful - its legacy will pervade for some time to come. A new focus for the dialogues on which *REE* has been reporting, has been the religious elements of nationalist conflicts or ethnic enmities.

The earlier attention to church in socialism was predicated on the assumption, that in spite of official atheist claims that religion was a purely personal need of some personality types, responsible Christians as citizens were seeking to make a positive contribution to society, not merely fighting the authorities. For a time it seemed as if new political parties with a Christian philosophical orientation might merit attention. The sixteen major sections of the Social Concept statement of the Russian Orthodox Church delineate the most major areas of civil life to which Christians and churches need to have a theologically grounded position. The churches generally agree that the list is appropriate and increasingly secular politicians are acknowledging the necessity of churches making a serious contribution. Approaching such social issues within the framework of an east-west conversation will be the persistent issue.

### **Observations on the State of Religious Studies in the World of Slavic Studies**

At the time that I was in graduate school (late 60s, early 70s) only a very few universities offered courses on religion in eastern Europe, and fewer still were the individual professors ready to guide a dissertation on a religious theme. I recall reading with great admiration James Billington's *Icon and the Axe*, and Donald Treadgold's book, nearly a decade later, *Russia and the West*<sup>3</sup>, in which the role of religion was taken seriously when developing a general

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<sup>3</sup>The title was Donald Treadgold, *Russia and the West in Russia and China. Religious and Secular Thought in Modern Times* Vol. 1: *Russia 1472-1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

interpretation of Russian history. Both scholars were unusually erudite in reading the religious and secular literature. Nevertheless, most publications on Russian history would open with remarks about not being able to understand the Russian story without paying attention to religion, but since the scholar was not a trained theologian, that scholar's focus would be elsewhere. Most particularly since the AAASS convention in Washington a half dozen years ago, much has changed. Not only are there more seminars on religious themes, usually with papers by young scholars fresh from extended exposure to archives now available, but one round table in 2001 was devoted to the ways in which an actual integration of the religious dimension in general survey courses was happening, thanks to the availability of new literature in English. I would hope that some of the contributions from *REE* do indeed get cited in student papers, or listed as recommended reading in syllabi. Indeed, anecdotally I can confirm that is indeed the case. Further, in at least one university in Russia, the professor assigned to teach new courses on Christianity found *REE* to be one of the few resources available, whose articles often provided the brief general background and bibliography needed for a lecture.

Among the areas of study now more evident, that a *REE* readership is likely to be interested in, are the following: revisiting the nature of the Soviet war on religion, in terms of local variation, understanding the nature of the popular response, the role of propaganda. We still know very little more about the actual functioning of the churches (Orthodox and others) during various phases of the Soviet era, in particular few studies of how they were financed, what role the state played, and in what way, in controlling finances. There are several new studies of monasticism, though the bulk of very extensive archival holdings have not yet been tapped.

Both in recording the life of church persons during the war on religion through oral history methods and in publishing documentary records from state archives now open, scholars in the former Soviet territories have already achieved extensive results - very little of that is known in English or has appeared in journals like *REE*. Yet another area of creative study might be described as the opening of Siberia and Central Asia to studies in comparative religion. That has also included new studies of Orthodox missions among the peoples of Siberia, studies by Protestant scholars in Germany of Protestant mission efforts in the region are less visible in America.

Finally, through my own circle of contacts I am aware of many joint projects in the organization of schools of social work, counseling programs, projects in agricultural recovery, or initiatives to foster such programs as Alcoholics Anonymous and similar addictions support groups, in which there is a deliberate effort at pursuing a Christian vision in so doing. Very little of this Christian activity has been assessed in the publications about ways of building civil society, of recent vintage. I find that curious, apparently still reflecting the notion one must be a trained theologian before one can assess such Christian movements. It is particularly curious

because the emergence of the Charity societies in 1988 was so explicitly an attempt to restore a tabu Christian word - Miloserdie (gracious heart) to the Russian vocabulary.

The current level of inter-Christian, indeed inter-religious, cooperation of which *REE* is a part, is unusual. At a time, when the suspicions between the evangelicals and ecumenicals in America have become more pronounced again, I am aware that both in North America and across eastern Europe readers from both stripes follow what we publish, and appear to think that we have been even-handed and fair. At a time when the relationships between several national Orthodox churches and the Vatican as well as national Catholic communities are more strained than was true in the 1980s, and when the Protestant relationships (classic and neo-Protestant) to each other and to Orthodox and Catholics within Eastern Europe in general are often less amicable or more non-existent than during the Brezhnev years, then it seems to me that scholars from those communities seeking to reach out to the other through the vehicle of *REE* deserve to be published and responded to.