

## Christian Ethics and the Future of Eastern Europe

Charles C. West

The events which Eastern Europe is now living through are of course not the first radical upheaval which has changed the terms of the powers and the ideologies in the midst of which we live. It is reported by an apocryphal source that as they were fleeing the flaming sword that drove them from the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to Eve and said, "My dear we are living through a time of decisive historical change." When I heard that story more than 20 years ago, the word used was not "decisive" but "revolutionary." No matter. There have been many such changes since then and we are now living through another one. The failure of a revolution is also a revolution in its way. It forces us to ask the question, what is continuous with the past and what has really changed. What can be recovered from the past to guide the future and what is gone for good?

At first glance it looks as if the socialist experiment with its Communist dream and its police state nightmare was a texture of unreality, a form of demon possession, which has vanished in the daylight without a trace. Less is left of it than of Nazism for Nazism at least was rooted in the feelings and loyalties of a nation. So the future lies open, unencumbered by the illusions and the brutalities of the movement that grew out of the philosophy of Karl Marx.

Is this so? I do not think so, for three reasons. Let me say a few words about each.

1. The first is rooted in a parable of Jesus, from Matthew and Luke: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So it will be also with this evil generation." (Matt. 12:43-45. Luke 11:24-26)

In the life of nations, the swept-clean period is very brief indeed. In the Russia of 1917 it lasted six months. During the French Revolution, it was about three years long before it gave way to the Reign of Terror. After World War I there were about 14 years of relative peace before the rise of Hitler, and after World War II barely three before the lines of the Cold War were drawn. What is happening today? The spirit of Communism has been driven out to wander through waterless regions, and as a single army it may not soon return. But the various spirits that served it may simply change uniforms. Secret police methods and discipline can serve other masters than Leninism. We have seen them operate in Nazi Germany, in South Africa, in Latin America, and even in the American F.B.I. They could serve resurgent nationalisms just as well. Repression of dissent, and enforcement of an ideological line, can be the policies of any dictator no matter how small his domain. Corruption and exploitation can happen in any system. Already we see former Communist bureaucrats moving into dominant positions in the private sphere as the economy is denationalized.

The point of the parable is that there is no liberation in negation. A house in which there is no unifying vision, where no sense of public order and justice reigns, where no covenant disciplines the inhabitants, is ripe for conflict, new tyrannies and disintegration. Marxism-Leninism provided that unifying order and vision for two generations. It failed. In this vacuum, the seven other spirits will have their way, and in the chaos Communism may even return to join them, until or unless a new social covenant is formed.

2. Second, Marxism, even in its Leninist form, was in its day more than an unclean spirit; it was a coherent humanist ideology that claimed to explain the powers of history and move them toward the total liberation of the human species. It was at one and the same time a faith and worldview with a historical vision, a system of economic and political organization, and a structure of terror and thought control in the service of this new consciousness and new hope. It is part of the Enlightenment tradition, with its confidence in human goodness and power, which reaches from the 18th century down to our own times. Marxism was in one sense the inward refutation of that tradition. It was Marx who demonstrated in a way the world can never forget, how economic interest and the endless drive for profit which move the economic system determine human history and distort the human consciousness. On the other hand, Marxism was the logical extension of that very system. It defined humanity in terms of the power of labor rather than the quality of covenant relations. It glorified technological control over nature in ways which, though we are now beginning to question them, are also enshrined in the scientific-technological establishment of the Western world. It was, as Reinhold Niebuhr said many years ago, a hard utopianism which was a logical extension of the soft utopianism of our liberal humanist culture.

Therefore the Marxist-Leninist system in its breakdown has left a residue of both ideological and power questions which will be with us as long as our technological society persists. For example:

#### A. Ideological questions

(1) What does it mean to be human in the universal sense? What is the hope for human society as a whole and what holds the human race together? What view of humanity transcends the conflicts of special interests and cultural divisions? The Enlightenment humanists had an answer to that question, in terms of natural human reason and goodness expressed in structures of democratic political harmony and economic exchange. Marx unveiled the hypocrisy of that pretension by his analysis of economic exploitation and class conflict, but he reconstructed the vision on the other side of a socialist revolution which would dismantle the structures of human oppression and cultural division. His solution failed, but he has also destroyed our faith in the earlier ideal. Now what holds our world together? For what can we hope?

(2) The question of collective and individual human identity. Enlightenment humanism started with the individual and was suspicious of collectives. Marx exposed the self-centered destructiveness of a society based on private gain, private ownership and the interaction of individual interests. In its place, he exalted the solidarity of a class deprived

of all private property, which could therefore experience universal humanity in which there is no separation between the individual and the collective goal. His answer proved to be inhuman, but he has still left us with the question of the public versus the private in defining the human good, and human being.

(3) The question of equality. For liberal humanism it was legal and contractual only. Traditional distinctions of privilege and rank were swept away but distinctions of wealth and economic privilege were allowed to take their place. Marxism eliminated these distinctions as well. To be sure, a new class society based upon party privilege emerged in practice, but the theory that society should equalize rewards, provide basic securities for all citizens, and that all should share alike in the social product, remained. We are left with the question still: how much equality should be enforced in society and how may inequalities be justified?

(4) The question of government responsibility for social planning and for direction and control of the economy in the interests of justice. Minimal government and confidence in the self-regulating operations of a market economy was and still is the basic philosophy of liberal humanism. It was Marx who drove home the point that the structures of private economic power exercise real control in such a situation. Both freedom and justice become illusions insofar as government fails to defend its citizens against this exploitation. The Marxist answer, which abolished the market system in favor of a command economy, proved unworkable, and more than anything else brought about the breakdown of the Soviet and East European economy. But the questions which Marx and the socialist movement have raised remain critical for the future: how is economic enterprise to be both cultivated and directed so as to serve the public welfare and to include the poor in its benefits? How should government interact with economic powers to this end?

(5) The question of God in a world of secularized powers. Marx was not the first to raise this question. Already in the 18th century God was being redefined in ways which completed or undergirded the structures of human scientific thought and moral reason, to the point where some of the more honest philosophers of that age recognized that divinity had become nothing more than the projection of human ideals and qualities into an ultimate sphere. It was Marx, however, who uncovered the internal divisions and conflicts in the secular sphere itself, and exposed therefore the function of religion as the sanctification of the dominant economic forces in human society, and the offer of an illusory eternal reward to the victims of those forces. To put it bluntly, God was in his view an illusion and a fraud, a part of the self-justifying ideology of the exploiting classes.

It was a serious accusation. Almost every major theologian of the 20th century has faced it and tried to develop his theology in response to it. As a matter of history, Marx was in large part wrong about religion; or, more accurately, he was right about the human religious enterprise but wrong about the response of the church to the living God. In spite of this, however, secularization continues apace. Liberal Western society and Leninist socialism have agreed on one thing at least: that religion is a private affair, that divine

revelation has nothing to do with human politics and economics, and that society functions best with only a distant polite reference to God. Marx's question is still with us: what is the function of religion in public life, and what should it be?

## B. Power Questions

It is clear throughout the whole of Eastern Europe that there is a profound suspicion of all forms of power in society. The revolt is understandable, much more so than the similar revolt in the United States against the use of government to promote public welfare and social justice. Nevertheless the questions remain with which the new political authorities must deal if there is to be any peace and justice in that part of the world.

(1) What is the role of the police and the army in maintaining the integrity of political authority? How should these legitimate instruments of political authority operate in the midst of ethnic and social conflicts? To what extent may a political unit be held together by physical force? To what extent may the processes of negotiation about the future of a region be defended by the force of the police and the army, so that they may proceed in an orderly way? How is police and military force legitimated and what are its limits?

(2) What should be the role of government in planning the economy or in planning for the devolution of government economic control? How does one move responsibly from a command economy to a mixed or an open system with a private sector? How are private power and public power to be balanced in such a way as to serve the common good?

(3) What should be the role of government in securing and maintaining the basic welfare of the people? How far and in what way should the government take care of health care, full employment, utilities, transportation and the general infrastructure of the society, the care of the disabled, the unemployed and others who cannot work, and the general protection of the welfare of the people as a whole? In the socialist past of Eastern Europe government has been totally responsible for these matters. It has also controlled people's lives. How can power now be so used as to preserve freedom and provide security?

(4) What form of political and economic cooperation should characterize the order that transcends national boundaries? If the Soviet reality is now dissolving, what should take its place? What should be the relation of that reality to the emerging economic and political community of Western Europe? What must be the limits on the sovereignty, therefore, of particular republics or particular nations?

3. My third point concerns the role of the church and a Christian ethic in both the rise and the breakdown of the Marxist-Communist movement. Let me put the matter bluntly: Marxism and the Enlightenment humanism out of which it grew, have been generated by the Christian message against which they claim to be in revolt. They are the consequence of the inability of the church to control both the ideas and the powers of Western civilization which owe their impulse and authorization to the gospel which the church proclaims. Throughout this century the church in ecumenical deliberation and action has been trying to discern the form of its mission to this world once again, learning from, as it

confronts, these humanist heresies of left and right. Now the left as an ideology has collapsed, at least in eastern Europe. The ideology of the right meanwhile seems to be resurgent, fortified by think tanks and propaganda, especially in the United States. But it, too, is hollow, too obviously a rationalization of the dominant economic powers in our society. It may go on for a while in the bread and circuses pattern of credit financing and T.V. entertainment, or it may collapse in the next serious depression. In either case, the calling of the church is to discover and make known the form of a social hope and a social ethic that breaks new ecumenical ground. The resources of scripture and tradition are still there. The work of the Holy Spirit through and overagainst the scientific, technological and social revolutions of our time is still to be discerned and appreciated. The church has its own creative theological work to do.

This is, I realize, a sweeping general analysis. It seems in fact to run counter to the experience of the churches, especially in the traditional Christendom of Europe, where they seem to be defenders and sanctifiers of separate ethnic and cultural traditions. There seems to be a movement away from ecumenicity, both in politics and in religion, in reaction against the tyranny of "real existing socialism". The World Council of Churches is under a shadow because of its too-close connections with those church leaders who did not resist the Marxist oikoumene sharply enough. The private individualistic gospel of religious experience now being spread by Western evangelistic crusades seems to be more popular, in a strange combination of conflict and symbiosis with the traditional national churches of the people. Nevertheless, the ecumenical reality is dominant whether the people face it or not. The powers and principalities today know no national boundaries or cultural loyalties. Unless the church has a witness to these powers about the wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10) it will vacate the field for new secular ideologies.

Let me in closing suggest a few particular forms this mission might take:

(1) An intensified analysis of the actual forms of economic power at work in the world today. Marxist generalizations about capitalism and class war are no longer adequate. Neither are the theories of harmonious development through a free market, dominated by the search for private gain, which the conservative economists spin out. How then do these powers work? How can they be made responsible to the people as a whole? How do the motivations of creative production and development interact with the sins of greed and covetousness in the world of international credit and finance, and in systems of production and distribution which spill over national boundaries? How can political and economic power be so balanced against each other as to produce a higher level of justice and freedom for common people?

(2) We need a concrete vision of justice in political-economic policy to replace the failed Marxist dream of a harmonious, classless society. This justice needs first to be modeled in the Christian community itself, as a form of witness to, and interaction with, the world around it. Whose interests and welfare are being neglected in the new social structures that are arising on the ruins of socialism? Who needs to be empowered for more active participation in democratic decision making? What structures of basic social security, of guidance for the economy toward public as well as private goals and purposes, should be

built into this new world? Justice in biblical and theological terms is rooted in the righteousness of God who justifies the sinner by bringing her to repentance, death to self and new life in Christ, who reaches out for the poor, the excluded, the stranger, and brings them into the community of grace. How should this be translated into secular structures of the political economy?

(3) Our God is a God who liberates human beings from oppression by others and by their own self-centered sin. What structures of political and economic freedom and responsibility flow from this liberation? How should individual liberty be related to public responsibility in the conduct of business in a market economy? How should the assertion of cultural and ethnic self-identity be related to the task of government to maintain just order among conflicting groups? Now that the Marxist vision of individual freedom totally identified with the collective good, has been exposed as an illusion, how does liberation in Christ influence the relation between private freedom and public responsibility?

(4) As suggested above, the church now has no rival to its vision of a human destiny which will gather all the nations under the reign of Christ. No other religion offers such a vision. The secular ideologies have not made their visions convincing. But the Christian vision, too, can become an ideology if it serves the power and dominance of the church itself. How then can the church project a convincing vision of social hope which is forged in ecumenical dialogue with God and with each other and which effectively judges and transforms not only the world but the churches themselves in their ways of life and witness? The mutual searching and challenge which has characterized the ecumenical movement from the beginning is absolutely essential to any social ethic which will claim to guide a post-Marxist world toward its future.

Secondly, how should the churches be so related to the economic and political powers of this world as to preserve the freedom of Christian prophecy and yet not identify that prophecy with legal and coercive structures? The church is essentially a powerless witness to the power of God in human affairs. This means that the church is everywhere in the reconstruction of society, in education, in politics, in economic struggles, in social welfare, and in the preservation and cultivation of human culture. In all these spheres, it is servant, not master. It is witness, not arbitrator. One great spiritual benefit of atheist domination during the past two generations in Eastern Europe has been that the churches had to learn this powerless witnessing role in a new way. How can it be projected into the future where the temptations to take part in worldly power are so great?