

From a Just to a Good Society: the Role of Christianity in the Transformation of Former Eastern-Bloc Countries*

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In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union the political and economic order collapsed because, among other reasons, it did not succeed in gaining legitimacy in the minds and hearts of the majority of the people. The countries of these regions are now involved in a process of transformation during which they are trying to work out new political and economic dispensations capable of meeting the demands of these people, who are living with the dream of a more humane society and a more prosperous future.

In this article I wish to argue that although the creation of new political and economic orders in these regions is of immense importance, such measures alone are not enough to transform these former radically unjust societies into good societies. Over and above new political and economic arrangements, these societies also need citizens who are committed to living a good life as a prerequisite for transforming them into good societies. More specifically, I wish to indicate the role that the Christian religion could play in transforming the former eastern-bloc countries from 'just' to 'good' societies.

The Limitations of Political Frameworks

In societies with a radically unjust past, people tend to believe that a new political and economic order will bring an end to their suffering and replace it with living conditions characterised by security, happiness and significance. A new and just political and economic order can indeed put a stop to the systematic abuses of the old regime. It is hard to overemphasise the importance of a strong democratic government and the role that it can play in protecting the human dignity of every individual.¹ This conviction is nowadays widely shared: among political liberals as well as communitarians in the USA; by the former racist South African government as well as by the South African Communist Party;² by newly formed governments in Eastern Europe as well as by former communists in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.³ It is crucial, however, to clarify what one can realistically expect from just political arrangements, and what one cannot expect from them. It seems that the only realistic expectation is one of minimal justice. What political structures can provide can best be defined in negative terms. They can discourage the person and the state from doing harm to one another. A just political order will, for example, ensure that

*This paper was originally written for the conference 'The Role of Religion in Newly-Formed Pluralist Societies: the Case of Eastern Europe' organised by the International Religious Foundation and held in Budapest in May 1991.

persons or institutions do not discriminate against others on the basis of race, sex, language, religious convictions and so on. It will prevent persons from taking unfair advantage of public office. It will prevent unfair treatment of employees by employers.

Despite all the differences and disputes among schools of thought in political philosophy, there seems nowadays to be consensus among them that political structures are inadequate to ensure anything more than these minimal just procedures. They all assert the importance of just political arrangements, but they are also willing to admit that a good society requires more than these. A just political dispensation can merely supply the framework in which people have the opportunity to live a good life; but the good life and good society are attainable only when people commit themselves, within the structures created by the political order, to certain moral values. John Rawls, politically a liberal, states that 'justice draws the limit, the good shows the point'.⁴ Meanwhile, communitarians like Michael Walzer also acknowledge the fact that political structures in themselves cannot prevent people from living lives that do not contribute to the good of society. Part of the aim of his communitarian critique of political liberalism is to motivate people to enact certain moral values that would contribute to the creation of a better society: 'Communitarian correction of liberalism cannot be anything other than a selective reinforcement of those same values or, to appropriate the well-known phrase of Michael Oakeshott, a pursuit of the intimations of community within them.'⁵ Gorbachev too acknowledged that not even revolutionary political changes in his country would be enough to build a better society. What is needed, he said, 'is spiritual values. We need a revolution of the mind. This is the only way toward a new culture and a new politics that can meet the challenge of our time.'⁶

The Contribution of Religion towards the Good Life

I would argue that religion can play an important role both in identifying the good and in motivating individuals to live a good life. It would be simplistic, however, merely to identify a Christian response to the question of the good life: I shall consider some of the perspectives that are emerging in the current debate.

Given that just procedures are insufficient to ensure a good society, and that at least a fair number of people within a specific society have to commit themselves to living the good life, the following questions inevitably come to mind. What is the good life or the good society? Who is supposed to provide us with the notion of good? Is it possible to reach consensus on what constitutes the good life or the good society? Is it necessary to reach at least a reasonable degree of this kind of consensus within a specific society in order to ensure a good society?

These are some of the most pressing questions in the current debate on morality. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues quite convincingly that modernity has brought an end to moral consensus in the western world.⁷ The Aristotelian ethical scheme, which held sway from the twelfth century, envisaged a threefold dynamic in the moral transformation of the individual:

- 1 Human nature as it happens to be (human nature in its untutored state).
- 2 The precepts of ethics, which can transform a person through his or her practical reason.
- 3 Human nature as it could be if it realised its *telos*.⁸

The function of moral theory within this scheme is, then, the transformation of the

individual from an untutored state to a realisation of his own *telos* or end. This threefold scheme was the model on which Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other ethical systems were built during the Middle Ages. It was radically altered, however, with the arrival of Protestantism and Jansenist Catholicism, because they introduced a new understanding of reason: that reason cannot supply mankind with a true *telos* because the power of reason was destroyed by humanity's fall into sin. In the seventeenth century this view of the inability of reason to design a *telos* gained further support from the role that the dominant philosophy of science ascribed to reason. With regard to the latter, MacIntyre says:

Reason does not comprehend essences or transitions from potentiality to act; these concepts belong to the despised conceptual scheme of scholasticism. Hence anti-Aristotelian science sets strict boundaries to the powers of reason. Reason is calculative; it can assess truths of fact and mathematical relations but nothing more. In the realm of practice therefore it can speak only of means. About ends it must be silent.⁹

The rejection of reason as the source of morality has very important implications for the enterprise of morality as such. If reason is not regarded as capable of supplying humanity with ethical precepts that are universally valid and acceptable, what other source could then be appealed to in order to attain such ethical norms? In a secularised world the only thing that individuals have in common that can serve as the source of ethical precepts is their human nature. It has therefore become fashionable to appeal to one or other aspect of human nature in order to justify certain moral positions. Some thinkers, like Nietzsche, have appealed to human will, while others appeal to the emotions, or even to some form of intuitive *a priori* knowledge, which they claim all people have in common. The problem with all these approaches is that they involve a rather arbitrary decision to declare a certain aspect of human nature as the source of morality. The result is the moral dissensus evident as far as all the ethical issues of our day are concerned. This dissensus evokes different reactions from different people. One possible reaction is to conclude that any moral debate has become senseless in this situation. Another reaction, however, is to accept the fact of moral dissensus, without simultaneously concluding that it implies a suspension of moral debate. The fact that no individual any longer has a monopoly on moral truth does not mean that moral debate has become a futile exercise. Whenever an individual participates in a moral debate, that experience itself tends to produce an awareness of the potential harmfulness of certain actions or policies and also stimulates a sense of personal responsibility.

I regard this latter approach as constituting the only meaningful way in which Christians can respond to a situation of moral dissensus. Christianity does not experience a fundamental problem in defining the ends towards which moral action should be directed, because the Bible provides a source of guidance and defines the end or *telos* of human activity. This does not mean that Christians have a monopoly on moral truth, however: in our secularised world, where the church has lost its medieval authority, its moral claims have the status simply of one more contribution to the moral debate, or even of one more contribution towards moral dissensus. I am not arguing that Christian views on moral issues are unimportant or irrelevant – quite the contrary. Christians should, however, take notice of the intellectual climate in which their views are to be presented. Moltmann says that in a pluralistic society Christians do not have the right to speak on behalf of all citizens, but all citizens have the right to hear what Christians have to say.¹⁰

I now wish to consider four areas where I believe Christianity could make an important contribution in the transformation of the former eastern-bloc countries from just to good societies. These four areas are: promoting the importance of personal responsibility; promoting the eradication of injustice; providing an antidote to aggressive nationalism; and sustaining debate on the question of the meaning of life.

Personal Responsibility

Michael Walzer has pointed out that a major stumbling-block in the process of transformation of a just society into a good society is presented by those who lack personal commitment to the improvement of their society. He refers to such people as the 'free-riders' of the society and describes them as 'people who continue to enjoy the benefits of membership and identity while no longer participating in the activities that produce those benefits'.¹¹ In identifying this stumbling-block, Walzer acknowledges that just procedures are not enough. What are needed are people committed to building and maintaining a good community life. Václav Havel also acknowledges this fact: 'The only possible place to begin is with myself. . . it is I who must begin. . . Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether I am lost.'¹² Thirty years ago, a compatriot of Havel also emphasised the importance of personal responsibility in transforming any political framework into a society where people can enjoy security, happiness and significance. This compatriot was the philosopher Milan Machovec.

Machovec was a unique phenomenon: at once a revisionist Marxist, an atheist, a philosopher and an expert on Christian theology, and above all a dedicated believer in the value and necessity of dialogue.¹³ In one of his best known works, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*, he undertook an atheistic interpretation of the life and message of Jesus. In this work he succeeded in capturing the Biblical emphasis on personal responsibility in a way not many theologians have been able to improve on. His interpretation was atheistically based, and there are, of course, certain elements in it that are unacceptable to Christians; but its main thrust is certainly not incompatible with the Bible. I shall use his interpretation as the nucleus of my own exposition regarding the importance of personal responsibility.

In his interpretation of the Old Testament, Machovec contends that God always acts in such a way towards his people that he never undermines their responsibility or capacity to act. On the contrary, his intervention always stimulates his people to act in a more responsible way. Moreover, in order to encourage his people as a community to act in a responsible way, God directs himself, in the first place, to the individual. This is why he introduces himself not as a vague and distant God, but as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This emphasis on personal responsibility is further underlined by the fact that God himself very seldom acts, but always appeals to individuals to do so. According to Machovec, the importance of personal responsibility is also one of the main themes in the New Testament, and especially in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The theme of this sermon is the radical implication of the divine command to love one's fellow-men, and the climax of the sermon is the demand to love one's enemies. Machovec stresses that the demands made by Jesus of his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount should not be seen as a new set of strict rules to replace the Ten Commandments. Jesus wants his disciples to live a life motivated by the vision of the Kingdom of God: they are not to take the status quo as the final reality, but to live with the vision that a future that is radically different from the status quo can be achieved. Once an individual is gripped by this vision, he starts to

see his fellow-men, and especially his enemies, in a new perspective. He then realises that a better future will never be achieved if people keep on treating one another in an immoral way. A qualitatively better future can emerge only if individuals take upon themselves the responsibility of breaking the vicious circle of retaliation and mutual destruction. The demand to love one's enemy, therefore, has two implications for the person who has committed himself or herself to the vision of the Kingdom of God. On the one hand, it demands that such a person should uncompromisingly restrain the self from acting in ways that could estrange other people from the ideal of a qualitatively better future. On the other hand, it means that such a person should be most tolerant towards those who are not yet committed to the vision of the Kingdom of God. The committed person should be willing to walk the extra mile with them in order to convince them of the truth of this vision.

It would be hard to deny that Machovec's understanding of the responsibility of the individual is in accordance with Bible teachings. A Christian is someone who commits himself or herself to the hope offered by God's promises. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, also refers to a new way of thinking: one no longer concentrates solely on one's own interests, but opens one's eyes to the needs of other people and lives a responsible life that will foster the coming of the Kingdom of God. A Christian who understands that his or her faith in God is not merely a private matter, but that it also has important implications for the way in which he or she participates in politics, in the economy and the community, will act in a responsible manner that offers a moral vision to other members of the community. The ideal of the good society then comes a step closer to realisation; but it can remain nothing but an unrealistic dream as long as there are not a substantial number of people who are committed to acting in a responsible way.

It is precisely this kind of personal commitment to the building of a more humane society that was seriously undermined by the former communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The fact that the process of socio-political decision-making was restricted to the party elite created a sense of fatalism and powerlessness among the vast majority of the population. They soon realised that their opinions and protests were not taken seriously by the state – on the contrary, they were aggressively discouraged. A paralysis of consciousness ensued: citizens were convinced that any personal attempt to alter the course pursued by the state was futile.¹⁴ One consequence of this paralysis of consciousness was that the emphasis gradually shifted from the question, 'what contribution can I make to society?', to the question, 'what can I get out of the local or national government?' This is an attitude that not only hampers the building of a democracy and the shaping of a just and good society, but also undermines the transition to a more market-orientated economy. This is true, with variations in intensity, of all Eastern European countries as well as of the former Soviet Union. Christianity in general, and Christians in particular, therefore have a very special task in these countries: to restore to individuals in society a sense of personal responsibility and commitment.

Eradicating Injustice

No society that is built on injustice can hope to enjoy security and stability in the long run, for people who are treated in an unjust or inhumane manner always tend eventually to retaliate or protest. Just political and economic frameworks are of course essential, but cannot of themselves promote positive qualities such as sympathy and respect among members of a community. The latter can only be

achieved when people commit themselves to moral values that not only emphasise the necessity of eradicating injustice but positively stress the human dignity of every individual. Christianity can once again be a source for the enhancement of such moral values.

In the Old Testament God presents himself as the God of the widows and the orphans. By explicitly identifying himself with such people, he indicates that faith in God necessarily implies a commitment to the cause of those who are without rights and downtrodden. This commitment to the marginalised in society is much more than just a dispositional ethics. It entails a very concrete involvement and sacrifice from those who have committed themselves to the God of the widows and the orphans. This fact is demonstrated in the Old Testament in the tradition of the Sabbath Year and the Year of the Jubilee, in which a redistribution of land, remission of debts and the emancipation of slaves took place. When Jesus announced his mission in the New Testament he also identified with this tradition (Luke 4: 18–19). Once again, more than a dispositional ethics towards the downtrodden is implied. Jesus identified himself to such an extent with those who are despised by society that he was accused of being the friend of whores, wine-bibbers and the outcasts of society. He was not offended by this accusation, but on the contrary insisted that it was precisely to these people that he had come to bring hope. More than once he made it clear that those who are not willing to follow in his footsteps in this regard are not fit to be called his disciples.

Moltmann asserts that only when this form of divine justice finds its way into the arena of secular politics will lasting peace become possible. Otherwise the communities of the deprived will remain as sources of political turmoil, criminality and unrest.¹⁵ Christians therefore have a responsibility to propagate a moral commitment to the cause of the homeless, unemployed and other deprived groups in society. Without such a commitment in a given society, there is no hope that the gap between the just and the good society can be closed. This issue has become very relevant in the post-communist era. Citizens of Eastern European countries do not deny that their living conditions were relatively poor during the communist era. On the other hand, there is a widespread view that the old system gave them more social security and stability than they are experiencing now in the transfer to a democratic market-orientated society. This situation could lead, and indeed has already led, to widespread discontent and resentment among ordinary citizens. The unsuccessful Moscow coup of 1991 was mounted on the expectation that the discontented citizenry would sympathise with its aims.

Christians have at least a threefold task in this area. In the first place, they must make personal contributions to alleviate the plight of the socially disadvantaged. Secondly, they must appeal to the authorities to give constant consideration to those individuals or communities who cannot cope with the pressures and demands of the market economy. Thirdly, Christians and the church should stress the responsibility of business in this regard. Governments as well as individual citizens in these countries usually have limited financial and material resource at their disposal. Business enterprises therefore have to make a contribution by fulfilling a plan of social responsibility towards the societies in which they operate. Besides striving for profits, which of course is the lifeline of any business, they also have an obligation to enhance the quality of life of their employees and their families. This is particularly necessary in Eastern Europe today.

An Antidote to Aggressive Nationalism

One of the areas in which Christians can make a vital contribution to the transformation of former communist countries is in helping to moderate nationalism. The former communist regimes handled the problem of nationalism by suppressing it. With the fall of communism, this suppression also came to an end. The subsequent process of liberation has entailed bloodshed and civil war in some parts of the former Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia¹⁶ and an increase in ethnic and national tension in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other states. Unfortunately, religion has often been used to fuel these nationalist struggles.

I do not wish to imply that nationalism should be totally extirpated or that religion should be enlisted in a struggle against nationalism. Nationalism can perform a valuable role in motivating individuals in the process of rebuilding the nation, a process that is of vital importance in most Eastern European countries. I certainly would not wish to deny, for example, the validity of the secession of the Baltic states from the Soviet Union. However, extreme nationalism can become a devastating force which can contribute to undermining the stability of a society, and can thus prevent a society from developing from a just to a good society. This is especially true when nationalism is justified in purely ethnic terms. The role religion can play in this context is to moderate and relativise nationalism. Religion can, and should, subordinate nationalism to other values, in order to ensure that it does not become an end in itself. The Biblical notion of the people of God demonstrates this quite clearly. In the Old Testament, the concept 'people of God' referred to the descendants of Abraham, as well as to those foreigners who willingly became part of the covenant God had made with Abraham. In the New Testament, however, ethnic considerations play no role whatsoever in this context. What is important is no longer the blood in one's veins, but whether one has been redeemed by the blood of Christ. When the New Testament refers to 'the people of God' it emphasises the fundamental unity and equality of all Christians before God. The 'new people of God' will be strangers and refugees in this world (1 Peter 2: 11). This does not mean that they will withdraw from this world and its political structures. What it does mean is that they will transcend any commitment to work only for their own empires and kingdoms, and that they will focus their energy on building the kingdom of God. In short, as people of God the essence of their status as 'strangers' will be their unity and love which transcends all boundaries. This vision shows up the error of any religious or political leader who uses religion to foster nationalist sentiments that threaten to undermine the fundamental and essential unity of all children of God. Christianity should be seen as the guard that accompanies each and every appearance of nationalism in order to prevent abuses against humanity.

The Question of the Meaning of Life

Another significant contribution Christianity can make towards creating the good society is to keep debate on the question of the meaning of life alive. A society in which this question has become irrelevant is destined to a grim future. Since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, there is a tendency, especially among the young, to idealise and even idolise western culture,¹⁷ to think that all problems will be solved merely by introducing western standards to Eastern Europe. There is a reluctance to acknowledge the negative aspects of western culture.¹⁸ The tendency is to equate prosperity with well-being.

It is reasonable to expect that the culture of Western Europe will become increasingly influential in Eastern Europe. What is crucially important in this process, however, is that the people of Eastern Europe should adopt what is best while resisting what is bad. This can hardly be done by the state. It is above all the responsibility of the individual and small communities. In order to do this in a responsible way, people must have a notion of what a truly meaningful life is. Unfortunately, the experience of the citizens of these former communist countries over the past four decades has not equipped them well for this challenge. The official line was that a new political and economic order was all that was needed in order to build a just and good society. The result was that citizens were actively discouraged from committing themselves to a vision of a better and more humane future.¹⁹ Fortunately, there were individuals in most of these countries who sensed the destructive potential here and declared that such a low level of spiritual and moral development could only have an adverse effect on the future of those societies. They therefore tried to revive the quest for the meaning of life in their respective communities. Machovec's book *Von Sinn des menschlichen Lebens* and the Christian–Marxist dialogues in a number of Eastern European countries are good examples of this kind of endeavour.

Individuals are not born with the moral values that are necessary to transform a society into a good society. These values have to be developed by each individual, and the most effective way for him or her to do this is to engage in the quest for a qualitatively better future. This quest is intimately linked with the question of the meaning of life, because a 'better future' necessarily involves people experiencing their lives and their contributions to society as meaningful.

Christianity has two very important contributions to make in promoting this quest. First of all, the Christian faith involves the individual in a threefold operation: self-analysis; confession of guilt; and commitment to a better future (hope). It is precisely this threefold operation that Eastern European citizens need to activate in order to cope on the one hand with the sins and guilt of the past and on the other with the rising tide of western culture in their societies. The second contribution Christianity can make is to keep discussion on the meaning of life alive. As long as debate on the meaning of life continues, the possibility exists that more and more people will commit themselves to the vision of a better future and will conduct themselves in a more responsible manner in their respective societies. Debate on the meaning of life has always been central to Christianity. The Christian faith therefore provides a forum ideally suited to fostering the continuing development of a vision of the good society.

Notes and References

- ¹ Michael Walzer, 'Justice here and now', in F. S. Lucash (ed.), *Justice and Equality Here and Now* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1986), p. 148.
- ² SACP, *The Path to Power* (1989), p. 34.
- ³ Mikhail Gorbachev, article in *Time* (11 December 1989), p. 13.
- ⁴ John Rawls, 'The priority of Right and the ideas of the Good', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 17 (1988), pp. 251–76, here p. 252.
- ⁵ Michael Walzer, 'The communitarian critique of liberalism', *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1990), pp. 6–23, here p. 15.
- ⁶ Gorbachev, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London, 1981), pp. 6–8.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 50–1.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

- ¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future* (SCM, London, 1989), p. 3.
- ¹¹ Waltzer, 'The communitarian critique of liberalism', p. 16.
- ¹² R. L. Stanger, 'Vaclav Havel: heir to a spiritual legacy', *The Christian Century*, vol. 107 (11 April 1990), pp. 368–70. Compare the words of the prominent Czech Protestant theologian Jakub S. Trojan: 'In order to have a pluralistic society established on democratic principles, it is tremendously important to have a public which is aware of its responsibilities. It cannot ever be achieved by professional politicians alone.'
- ¹³ Paul Mojzes, *Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe* (Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1981), p. 116; H. G. Pöhlmann, 'Geleitwort', in M. Machovec, *Marxisten und Christen-Brüder oder Gegner?* (Gütersloh Verlaghaus, Gütersloh, 1978), pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁴ The effect of this paralysis is particularly obvious among the older generation in post-communist Eastern Europe. The consciousness of the younger generation was, happily, not contaminated to the same extent by totalitarianism. The average age of political activists in post-communist Eastern Europe is remarkably low.
- ¹⁵ Moltmann, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- ¹⁶ For an analysis of the conflict in Yugoslavia see Paul Mojzes, 'The despair that is Yugoslavia', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XI, no. 4 (1991), pp. 45–9.
- ¹⁷ S. Popov, 'Perestroika without Christ: an Eastern Orthodox perspective', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XI, no. 5 (1991), pp. 8–17, here p. 15.
- ¹⁸ W. Chrostowski, 'Poland: pluralism after the experience of the desert. A Roman Catholic perspective', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XI, no. 5 (1991), pp. 18–24, here p. 21.
- ¹⁹ G. J. Rossouw, 'Marxism and Christianity: theoretical conditions for non-aggressive interaction', DPhil dissertation, University of Stellenbosch (1989), p. 45.