

Global Connections Thinking Mission Forum
Post Communism and Neo-Capitalism: mission and the death of ideologies
4 March 2009

Published by Youth Specialties in Mike Yaconelli, gen. ed.
Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic
Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003, Ch. 13 (pp. 204-18, 233-4)
ISBN 0-310-25386-1, pbk

Faith That Matters in the Culture of Ghosts
Parush Parushev

I was born in Bulgaria shortly after the end of the World War 2, into a family of fanatic believers for several generations. As with many others of this kind, my father and grandfather were sent to the gulags and prisons because of their beliefs.

It happened to be that my family fanatically believed in the ideals of Communism. They committed their lives to it and were absolutely sure that what they were doing was right. In their understanding, this was the best way of life, both for a person and the society. They-and later I as well-were hoping for and working toward the coming of the "bright future," a future of the Communist society that would solve the problems of suffering and injustice for all people. They did not doubt for a second that the Ghost of Communism that Marx and Engels had envisioned in the Communist Manifesto was coming and indeed was already there. Their commitment to the vision was so consuming that they were ready to sacrifice their lives to bring that bright future closer.

Where is this bright future today? Its vision collapsed in the late 1980s, and, as in Matthew 7, the collapse was a great one.

For me the seemingly firm structure of my Communist convictions cracked and collapsed 10 years earlier, with a realization that there was another equally valuable viewpoint and equally fanatic people ready just the same to sacrifice their lives for their convictions. I had no doubts about the purpose of my life until I encountered a group of Christian believers. I didn't even think they still existed!

I met them, Roman Catholic believers, in Krakow, Poland, a country I happened to visit early in my career as a scientist. They brought to my attention a reality of faith. They lived their lives differently simply because they believed in God. These people forced me to think hard and to look back on my life and the moral shape of the Communist society. I had to admit they made better sense of their moral living. This was the beginning of where I am now, some 20 years later.

Going after a Ghost

Before going into some details of these 20 years, let me share a piece of witness that concerns a certain Orthodox priest, Father George Florovski. Those of us who come from the Orthodox communities know him, since he is one of the three most influential figures of 20th-century Orthodox theological thinking-together with Fathers Schmemmann and Meyendorff.¹ In a conversation at Harvard Divinity School in the late 1950s, a student asked Father Florovski about how he became a believer. He answered this way: "My father, also an Orthodox priest, initiated me, without compulsion, into the mysteries of faith."²

Two positive and one negative conditions surface in this short testimony that are illustrative of the formation of our convictions. First, one has to be initiated. Some give witness to their belief by the integrity of their life. For Father Florovski, the members of his family, by their lives, initiated him into faith.

Secondly, faith has a quality of mystery. It can't be expressed in words alone. Surely an intellectual dimension of certain concepts can be summarized, yet it can't be exhausted by concepts. Faith leaves open a wide range of mysterious expressions that aren't verbalized and can't be put into doctrines. Faith in Christ and new life in Christ are mysteries-tangible, yet mysteries.

As for the negative condition in the Father's testimony, faith does not come by compulsion or force. There is no such thing as a forced faith. No faith is an inherited faith. Much of the confusion today in Eastern Europe comes from the political arrangements of Christendom that require national identity and religious affiliation to coincide. For Father Florovski, however, to truly believe, you have to be free from compulsion. You have to experience the supernatural, to see it present and making a difference in the lives of others. Any faith has some objective roots. Unless something of the envisioned is present, nothing will lead your will into making a faith commitment.

Reading Father Florovski's testimony for the first time, I was struck by its similarity to my testimony as a Communist. I was initiated into Communism by my family. I became a Communist because I saw the integrity of the belief in the lives of two generations of Communists. Everyone in my family was a committed Communist. I was surrounded by good and caring people who initiated me into their faith in a way similar to Father Florovski's initiation into his. And this faith was equally mysterious. We believed in an immediately unforeseeable future that would be brighter than the present. We were led to that future by an invisible and mighty Party that demanded all our allegiance. I chose to become a Communist when I was 20 years old, convinced that this was the right way of life. I was not forced to do that; I came to the point of believing in the Communist ideals myself. What made my commitment even stronger was the fact that I could see and participate in the attempts to materialize the dream.

What is the difference, then, between the one raised in a Communist family and initiated into the Communist way of life by the parents who lived their lives with integrity, and the one brought into a Christian family, having witnessed the Christian lifestyle and having been initiated into the Christian faith? Do these two differ in any significant way? Does one form of religious belief essentially differ from all the others?

Existentially, I don't see much difference. Each of us has our hopes and beliefs; we don't differ much in the way we hold to one set of convictions or another. To determine the difference, you have to look further than yourself, your home, and your nuclear family. You have to look at the community holding the same beliefs-if there is such a community. Then you can compare the impact this community makes on the lives around it.

This is how, upon meeting those Polish believers, it occurred to me that something might be wrong with the beliefs of my family. Although two generations before me were ready to die for their beliefs, Communism still wasn't enough to regenerate the lives of others. In fact, the moral life of the socialist society I was living in was degenerating from year to year. This was when, for the first time, I realized that the community's witness matters as much as our personal witness-or even more. I thought that as Communists we possessed the right philosophy of life. We taught it in schools. We proclaimed it through the media. We had it published in doctrines and statements forced on everyone. But right teaching could not guarantee nor even launch right living in the community. Unfortunately, this sad lesson can be learned from the history of the Christian church too.

The more I think about the fateful days of December 1980, the more I value the inspiration and the vision of a community of people who dare to live them out. The contrast between the life of a community moving forward by their vision and another community sinking in desperation because of a faded vision, was striking. Verbalized concepts of their faith in God weren't what caught me. I don't even remember them talking about that. What fascinated me were the obvious signs of something elusive yet real that these people possessed and were bound together by-something I didn't have.

We can't help but respect a person with integrity of character, even if we may not agree with this person's beliefs. But what really impresses us and takes us by surprise is a community with integrity of character. This is what I experienced in my encounter with that local Polish Roman Catholic community. Their communal faithfulness put my beliefs to the test and later played a significant role in subverting the whole framework of the political system I believed in. Faced with the powerful witness of these people, I was forced to examine "unquestionable truths" I took for granted.

Slowly and painfully I realized that what I believed to be a well-grounded, logical, rational philosophy of life turned out to be a religion.³ As with any other religion, it was founded on the "uncontested truth" of the holy narratives of the founders: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and others. A caste of party secretaries was set aside to interpret the texts for the public. A set of true doctrines was derived from those texts. They were systematized and enforced as the only right teaching. Any rival religious group was condemned and suppressed. New party members were conducted into the privileged group through special rituals of initiation. The holy shrines, the icons, and the statues of the founders and saints of Communism were visited and venerated. Psalmodies of hymns were created to praise the achievements of the Party and the glorious future. Processions and pilgrimages of the faithful with banners of the saints past and present—the members of the Politburo—were periodically organized.

Human history records numerous attempts to fulfill the dream of Christendom—the Kingdom of God on earth. The Communist society was the last, and perhaps the most aggressive, attempt to realize the vision. This was the Kingdom that banned the King. Instead, an impersonal and almighty Party was demanding the allegiance of the Kingdom's subjects in the name of an earthly paradise. The incredible power of this vision was sustained partly by the perverse assurance of the supremacy of human reason and partly by the appeal to egalitarian sameness of each and every individual.

Watching that community of Polish believers, I had to admit that religious beliefs are expressed first and foremost in the moral life of its adherents. The real crisis for me came when I realized that the Communist religion corrupted, rather than improved, the morality it inherited from the Judeo-Christian culture. Communist ideology claimed to be a supreme expression of secularist and humanist rationality. Perhaps it was true; but it was also true that it was morally deficient on its own terms. This was my foremost concern, having observed the obvious degradation of communal moral values such as family, honesty, integrity, inclusion, and mutual care.

Nothing preoccupied the masterminds of the Communist ideology as much as the subversion of traditional values of kinship, communal relationships, and national identity. The eruptions of numerous bloody conflicts in the former countries of the Communist block are signs of the struggle to recover suppressed communal identity. Called to solve the dilemmas of alienation, Communist society alienated its subjects from each other to a disastrous degree. Almost as in the biblical narrative, allegiance had to be given completely and totally to the Party and its members. "Whoever...does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself..." (Luke 14:26, TNIV) The formative story of Communist faithfulness taught to the young generation of the "Soviet peoplehood" was the story of a young pioneer, Pavlik Morozov, who was praised for handing over his parents for death, in obedience to Party orders.

All these memories come to my mind to confirm two points. One is to say that fanatics can be found among any religious breed. Readiness to sacrifice one's life for one's religious beliefs may fascinate, but it rarely convinces. The other is that, whether you want it or not, the life of the community taken by a certain religious vision is the only discernable proof of the moral value of this religion.

Then which community? What religious beliefs?

Several years passed before I was able to sort out answers to those questions and these: Why is Christianity hated so much by my fellow Communist ideologists? Why isn't life in our Communist

societies disturbed much by the Orthodox church or Protestant communities, while the Polish Roman Catholics are visible, outspoken, and courageous? To be sure, I was perplexed and fearful of the rigid institutional structure of the Catholic Church that was mirrored too closely by the Communist party structures. At the same time I was impressed by the lives of the Roman Catholics, my colleagues and friends.

Even with these questions still in my mind, one thing was certain: for me Marx's ghost was a ghost indeed.

Finding the Ghost

In a peculiar way, I was disadvantaged in searching for religious meaning. For one thing, I was surrounded by Communists with integrity. In addition, my trained scientific mind appreciated the appealing rationality of secularist and humanist arrangements of the Communist ideology and was very suspicious of logically unsound truths. It required almost 10 years before I was able to come to terms with the profound depth and legitimate reality of religious experience. After the agonizing search was over, the emerging hope in the possibility of "a still more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31, NASB) was all the more exciting. This hope became visible through a community of people who shared their Christian vision and its promises with my wife, our family, and me.

By God's grace, my wife, also a scientist and party member, and I somehow made our way to the radical communities of the Baptists and Pentecostals. I'm still pondering this puzzle, but my guess is that in a desperate, secularist, fragmented society the most appealing communities are the ones that provide a warm, welcoming embrace and emotional fulfillment in which sharing in the lives of others is part of daily living. (Later I realized that much of the attraction to cults in the West is because of the promise to meet these needs for disillusioned individuals in an affluent culture.)

Something new entered our life. It began with a real conversion experience out of which came the sense that a new reality, not human made, was emerging. We encountered the presence of a Ghost who was real, the Holy Spirit of God himself. In the world around us-about to fall apart-that presence was bringing new meaning into our lives, with wholeness, joy, and fulfilling hope. We were reading the biblical stories into our lives. Taken by that vision, at that time we thought "the more excellent way" was without pitfalls. We still had to grasp that Christian faithfulness is a life of continuous conversion.

Conversion calls for commitment. It flowed naturally from our former convictions. I must give credit to the Communist emphasis on commitment and the demands they put on a persons' life: a faithful person was faithful by deeds, not by dreams. This conviction did not allow us to celebrate and rejoice in the solitude of a newly found meaning. We were eager to get involved in the practices of the church life. We soon found ourselves wholeheartedly engaged in the complexity of life in the emerging Baptist communities of our country. Our experience paralleled that of the prophet Isaiah (Isa ch. 6) and can be summarized in a sentence: whenever God finds you, God calls you, and whenever you respond to God, God sends you. It may sound like a cliché, but for us it is a way of life.

It was an invigorating period, a period of rapid development of local churches, with the flow of spiritually hungry, disillusioned people seeking the meaning of life as we did. They were drawn into the churches by the search for the presence of the Holy that all of us were missing for so long. However, I was sad to see so many of them stumbling over the almost illiterate, primitivist, legalistic pastoral teaching.

I had another lesson to learn: the faithful moral living was of utmost importance for the credibility of the Christian witness, and yet during the end of the 20th century, the intellectual credibility, the artistic, the dramatic, the beautiful, mattered no less. This was what set my wife and me on the track of theological education. For one thing, the gift of teaching, obviously invested in us by God

and already tested in our years of academic advancement, was discerned and appreciated by our community. But most importantly, at that very moment, education was one of the most acute needs of the church, and it had to be met.

Pursuing theological education, we were brought into close contact with Western Christianity. During my academic career, I had spent extensive time in the European West, yet the life of the Western church was totally new to me and my wife. North America is a magnet that attracts not only a multitude of immigrants, but also theologians from all over the world. Many of them, unfortunately, never get back to those who so desperately need them. This trend will last for a while, however good or bad that may be-but it's already beginning to change.

So we were among the many seeking theological education in the United States in the early 1990s. Back in school, these were amazing years for us. A new world of intense theological reflections, meaningful inquiries into the biblical texts, and the new multifaceted life of American churches completely filled our life. We were fortunate to be embraced again by a church community that called itself a family of faith. And it was that.

In these first years we experienced the blessings of belonging. All the advantages of being immersed in cherished academic activity and being loved and cared for so much turned out to be a disadvantage for us. We indiscriminately transferred our experience to all the Christian communities in the United States.

Being a curious case of converted Communists as well as two of the few international students in the seminary, we had the privilege of traveling to visit different churches and talk with various religious communities. It's difficult to summarize our experiences with them, but after some time passed, we realized that our community was in a sense exceptional. We saw big churches functioning much like a theater. Entertainment and emotional stimulation mattered more than fellowship and involvement. We went to small churches, which were completely preoccupied with doctrinal purity and internal fights and slowly dying. We heard confessions from pastors who were frustrated and depressed because they had purposely distanced themselves from church members out of fear of being too involved. They were acting as employed religious professionals rather than genuine members of the community. We didn't lose our confidence in the Spirit of God, but we began to wonder how ghostly the Spirit can be in a church.

Imparting the Ghost

For some time, we were blind to the undercurrents in our church's and seminary's denomination. When more than 90 percent of the seminary faculty left because of their unwillingness to compromise their integrity with the demands of the new power structure of the denomination, it took us by surprise. We were faced with the grim reality of power plays, dominance, and drives for public and political exposure similar to the ones we always associated with our Communist past.⁴ A fellow Russian student expressed his frustration: "We have run away from the Communist past to find that the Bolsheviks are already on the campus!"

At that time, I already knew that education was not knowledge alone. There is something much deeper in the whole idea of learning-first and foremost, trust and personal relationships. You may be taken in by someone's encyclopedic knowledge, but, in the long run, you will follow a teacher with integrity. And this is how I followed the exodus: people drew me to themselves with the integrity of their character. The next stop in my academic pilgrimage was a respected evangelical seminary in California.

Obviously, denominational leadership attempted to enforce ecclesial discipline on the academic community. I realized this was not a challenge faced specifically by this denomination. Something in the air was prompting a shift or division, something that I didn't understand at that moment. I was aware that something new was emerging in churches and among theologians. The catchword for it: postmodernity.

I didn't consciously set myself up to examine this new phenomenon, but it so happened that the seminary I was associated with was paying a very high premium for the freedom of academic inquiry. In addition, California happens to be one of those remarkable laboratories in today's world for generating and testing innovative ideas in one of the most challenging pluralistic cultures I have ever been a part of. The 1980s and '90s were the years of intense probing into the ethical, theological, and philosophical framework of the emerging Anglo-American postmodernity.⁵

Again, it wasn't the intellectual pursuit that was most appealing for me in this exercise, but deep personal relationships and friendships with profound thinkers and committed Christians. By God's grace, some of them were my mentors, helping me to conceptualize the irreversible shift of contemporary culture in society and in the church. Theology, like science, which has been a part of my life for more than 20 years, has the advantage of drawing concepts out of realities. Yet initially I couldn't relate the innovative ideas concerning the current shift and the academic probing into its communal nature to a distinct form of church life. The churches I was acquainted with were functioning as clubs or coping with the memories of the distant past.

As most armchair theologians do, I was looking for a form of church life organized around distinct postmodern principles and doctrines, which was obviously wrong. James McClendon helped me to realize that theology deals with matters much deeper than abstract principles and concepts. The beginning and the end of any meaningful theological reflection is the life of the believing community and its convictions.⁶ Yet if theology should necessarily start with the church, should it always be confined to the limits of the church? Glen Stassen guided me through the chemistry of the formation of the person's and community's convictions. This is how I became aware of the power of loyalties, interests, and cultural attachments in tuning our Christian convictions.⁷ Finally Nancy Murphy applied a philosophical touch to my intellectual inquiries. She opened my eyes to the epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical complexity of religious life, including the power of the moral tradition and the formative role of crises in the life of religious communities.⁸

The church's form of life can't be independent of the surrounding culture. It is a simple fact, but it took time for me to fully comprehend it. I began to wonder whether the current crises in Christian communities, both West and East, are necessarily only of dogmatic or doctrinal nature. Could they be seen as an instinctive reaction against the changes in the life of a larger society? Then the fundamentalist turn in the life of the churches, denominations, and seminary communities appeared to be an attempt to preserve intact a status quo formed under the culture of the past against the challenges of changing culture.

Two circumstances helped me sharpen these observations. One was my intimate involvement in the life of the Slavic immigrant communities of the United States. I saw their pain and agony as they tried to preserve, at any cost, the traditional form of life and worship in a completely different culture.

The other was a special event signaling an alternative stance. I recall the meeting of Terra Nova (now called Emergent) in Pasadena, California.⁹ A group of young ministers and practical theologians gathered for the purpose of making sense of the same challenges and questions I was struggling with. Well educated and easily conversing with both the church and academia, they were not merely interested in intellectual sophistication. Unlike many theologians and philosophers still trying to make up their minds about the existence of the phenomenon, they all were, in one way or another, already engaged with postmodernism. Together with other pilgrims, they were working to bring coherence to the life of the church in close proximity to the shifting culture.

My return to Europe about two years ago spurred some further reflection on the predicaments of church life in current culture. By God's strange providence, I was brought to a seminary community that is a stage for theological engagement with the life of 51 national Baptist bodies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. This opened up the many faces of postmodernity for me. Most

importantly, however, I got away from the North American context, which is largely a product of Enlightenment modernity, in which my confidence had been just shaken. I discovered that different currents have been subverting European modernity for at least 100 years through art, literature, music, and architecture, and which were recently recognized in philosophy and theology.

I also have to admit that Christianity is not the dominant culture of Europe anymore. The Enlightenment project succeeded at least in substituting Christian religion with the religions of secularism and humanism (although, to be sure, even they are Christianized). Post-Christian realities pose a great challenge to Christian formation. The Protestants, the Radicals, the Revivalists of the past had a prophetic say in the still-Christian culture. For something to be protested against, radicalized or revived, it must be there in the first place. Now in many parts of Europe the church has to learn to be a minority, witnessing to the culture that is increasingly secularist and aggressively antireligious.¹⁰ It is a situation yet to be faced by the North American churches.

Like the early Christian communities, the church has to learn the sign language of God's revelation of the newness in Christ in order to make her voice intelligible. In post-something realities, her language should be a holistic language of integrity and care that the cultures can first see and then understand. The best form of theology is theology that is deeply rooted in life itself. A meaningful theology is a practical theology that is engaged with the post-something context. I also see some new avenues for Christian witness. The deep roots of Christianity are still preserved in the beauty and richness of the cultural life of the Western civilization. Christian sentiments can still be recovered more easily through artistic forms than through intellectual artifacts.

These sentiments can catch the rationalistic minds by surprise and open them for dialogue. This dialogue can proceed successfully if the church is living a life that is faithful to her calling and relevant to the culture around her, imparting the Holy Ghost without succumbing to the culture's ghosts.

Questions

1. How effective is the process of being "initiated into faith"? What are some of the limitations and benefits of this process?
2. What other belief systems do we tend to inherit from our families and culture? Why are these so hard to overturn when we have personal revelation that calls us to a new place?
3. How has the presence of the Holy Ghost in your life caused you to confront some of your previous ideas? How has your life changed as a result?
4. What do you think about faithful moral living for the credibility of our Christian witness? How has that influence changed as the church has emerged?

¹ On John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann, and Gerges Florovsky as contemporary church Fathers of the Orthodox community see *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* by Bradley Nassif (ed) (Eerdmans, 1996), xvi.

² Recorded in "On Methods and Means in Theology" by Harold O. J. Brown in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer* edited by John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Zondervan, 1991), 147-69.

³ Coming from a completely different perspective Asen Ignatov - a well-known political scientist-comes to the same conclusion of the irrational nature of Communist system of beliefs in *Psychologie des Kommunismus* (Iohanes Bergmans Verlag, 1985).

⁴ On the danger of the abuse of power practices of the church see *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I* James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (Abingdon, 1996), 173-77.

⁵ "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies" by Nancey Murphy and James Wm McClendon, Jr. in *Modern Theology* 5:3 (April): 145-68.

⁶ *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith (Trinity Press, 1994).

⁷ *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* by Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Abingdon, 1996) and "A Social Theory Model for Religious Social Ethics" by Glen H. Stassen in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 5 (1977): 9-37.

⁸ *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* by Nancey Murphy (Westview Press, 1997) and "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" by Alasdair MacIntyre in *The Monist* 60 (1977): 453-72.

⁹ Thanks to Andrew Jones and Brian McLaren for the invitation, and to the participants in the Terra Nova Dialogue (January 08-10, 2001) for the encouragement and insights.

¹⁰ An excellent book on the subject is *New Baptist, New Agenda* by Nigel G. Wright (Paternoster, 2002).