

Common humanity links East, West

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

It is now clear that political liberals and ecclesiastical conservatives alike were wrong about their hopes and expectations for Eastern Europe following communism's collapse and the Cold War's end.

Political liberals had assumed, on the one hand, that Eastern Europeans, when given the choice, would in every instance choose democracy's path. They were wrong.

Anti-democratic forces remain exceedingly virulent, for example, throughout the republics of the former Soviet Union, while in a number of other countries Communist leaders have been restored to power by citizens apparently more concerned about social and economic stability than about civil rights.

Ecclesiastical conservatives had assumed, on the other hand, that the faithful of Eastern Europe, in their turn, would always choose the path of obedience and loyalty to "the Church" (equals hierarchy). They, too, were wrong.

Newly liberated Catholics have not rushed to embrace the moral directives and political initiatives of their bishops. And nowhere has this been more evident than in overwhelmingly Catholic Poland, to which I shall return in next week's column.

The faithful, weary of interference in their personal lives, are not disposed now to trade one system of personal and social constraints for another.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

But the political liberals and the ecclesiastical conservatives had miscalculated in an even more fundamental way about a post-Cold War Eastern Europe.

They neglected the most rudimentary force of all at work in that region of the world: nationalism.

Nationalism has shown itself a far more reliable indicator of political and religious behavior in Eastern Europe than either the passion for democracy or a type of Christian spirituality.

One has only to contemplate the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia-Herzegovina where at least nominally Orthodox Serbs, at least nominally Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosnians are at one another's throats, or the longstanding rivalries between Czechs and Slovaks that led to the breakup of Czechoslovakia, or

the political and social pressures against ethnic minorities all over the region, for example, against Hungarians in Romania, the former Yugoslavia, and Slovakia, and against Ukrainians in Poland.

It should now be clear to everyone that it was oppressive communist rule that had kept these national enmities in check for decades. Once the Soviet empire collapsed, so, too, did the enforced peace among the disparate ethnic groups.

In the post-Cold War era nationalism has brought social fragmentation, military brutality, and political chaos to Eastern Europe.

Where, one asks, is that mighty stream of spirituality that ecclesiastical conservatives had assured us (and themselves) would generate a wholesale transformation of all Europe and the world?

Perhaps it's not there. At least not to the extent we had been told.

In the end, the ecclesiastical conservatives romanticized their Eastern European blood brothers and sisters, and at the same time demonized the West.

But whatever its many and historic faults, the West has given the world a legacy of religious, political, economic, and social freedom — respect for human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, equal protection under the law, limited government, separation of powers, the consent of the governed, the accountability of government officials, due process, the right to confront one's accusers, and a regard for

truth in speaking of others with whom there is disagreement.

And in spite of our enormous material advantages over the rest of the world community, the people of the West — especially here in the United States — have demonstrated an extraordinary, one might say historically unprecedented, attachment to religious and spiritual values.

There is widespread belief in God, and in an after-life, and in the basic moral precepts of Christianity and Judaism. Church attendance is higher here than almost anywhere else in the world. Even in U.S. colleges and universities, where the secularist and rationalist ethos is supposed to dominate, only 30 percent tell pollsters that they have "no religion" or "no religious preference," while just 8 percent of the public answers that way.

Secularist critics have been burying religion in the West for decades, but it never seems to stay underground. Instead, it continues to grow and flourish.

If ecclesiastical conservatives, in the Vatican and elsewhere, wish to chastise the West for its materialism, let them do it. There is much to criticize, and much to reform.

But that criticism should be even-handed and realistic.

If the criticism is even-handed, it will not demonize the West.

And if the criticism is realistic, it will not romanticize the East.

In the end, we're all human — mired in sin and renewed by grace. It's at that point — our common humanity — where East meets West.

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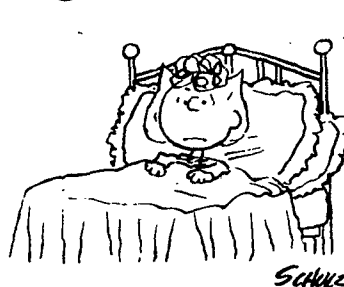
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