

## The Gospel in Post-Marxist Societies: How People in Post-Marxist Societies are Coming to Trust in our Lord as the Center of their Lives

**Stanislaus Pietak**

In 1999 we observed the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, but today the nations of Europe's post-totalitarian cultures are still contending with the consequences of long-term atheism. Karl Marx originally taught that religious faith, as a leftover of social relationships subject to false kinds of power, would die out by itself. This did not happen. Consequently Marx's adherents became more and more unsettled and impatient. They concluded that they had to help the church die, and so, the persecution began.

The churches were placed under the strict control of political police. Representatives of the state with titles like "church secretary" made decisions in regard to all the personnel and property concerns of the church. They often took direct control of spiritual matters so that it was not possible for the church to grow. They granted official permission to those who could study theology and to those who were to conduct worship services. They placed pastors in congregations and promoted individuals to various offices in the church. They monitored the activities of members of congregational church councils and kept records of participants in conferences of the church. These "secretaries" themselves, participated in pastoral conferences. In general, together with the secret police they exercised complete control over the church.

For those who openly confessed their faith, it was practically impossible to study at the university. Therefore, among schoolteachers, physicians, psychologists, sociologists, historians, lawyers, reporters, and other professionals, there remained only a very small percentage of Christians. Naturally, the opportunity to pursue mission outreach with the Gospel is very limited in such a secularized environment.

The Communists promised wealth and prosperity, and thus, deceived the entire society. People were captivated by these false promises. Gradually the people recognized that they had to reformulate their goals. The desire for change grew; the idea became ever stronger that the abolition of the old system, held in place by the police, would also

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change everything. A widespread hope developed that Europe would receive the victims of Communism with open arms. Thus, they would be better off and would become better people, with better relationships to others. It did not happen that way! Why?

1. The tenets of a philosophy of humanistic love do not effect change. President Vaclav Havel, of the Czech Republic, gave prisoners amnesty in the hope that freedom would change their consciences. The opposite was true. Soon they were back in prison. From the time of the Velvet Revolution (the overthrow of the Communist system) crime continued to increase. Michail Gorbachev, before casting his ballot in the first (and last) free election in the former Soviet Union, said, "If people do not change themselves in this land, then nothing in it will change at all." He was right. Who can change human beings unless it is with the power of God?

2. The educational system has not been able to effect change. Many educated people were used to abusing others. The Famous Czech educational theorist, Jan Amos Komensky (Comenius) (1592-1670) wrote in his well-known work, *The Great Didactic*, that to properly teach someone means to bring that person "to true education, noble ways, and heartfelt devotion." It is ironic that in almost every Czech school there is a statue, bust, or picture of Comenius, but from the perspective of spiritual education the official educational system simply has not departed from its dialectical-materialistic predecessors. This lack of change can be seen in the work of theorists such as B. Blizkovskz and others. The interest of young people in spiritual matters, so high ten years ago, has disappeared in the midst of stormy changes. From the time of the Revolution in 1989 until 1992 that interest grew but thereafter decreased.

In contrast with the average country in the European Union (EU), surveys show that the religious preferences of the largest groups of youth in the Czech Republic are atheist (38%) and undecided (35%). Youth from the EU most often agree with the phrase, "I believe and practice religion." In the Czech Republic's neighbors, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, the religious attitude of youth is more sharply divided. The Czech Republic has the highest percentage of unbelievers among the post-Soviet countries. This attitude has a profound negative effect on morality; according to the media the situation is alarming. Over the last ten years, the number of crimes committed by children has risen dramatically. Since 1989 the number of children sentenced for criminal action has gone up 250%. The international research service, ESPAD, revealed that the number of Czech sixteen year olds, who are experimenting with certain drugs, has more than doubled since 1995.

3. Economic prosperity has not been able to effect change. Alongside honest business people, many swindlers are using freedom in order to take advantage of the new legal system. The visible apex of the problem lies in the banks. Embezzlement has been a severe problem. Many speak of outright corruption. The impression is given that those who seek success must deceive others because honest work does not pay off.

4. This vicious circle leads many to the conviction that there must be a better system. Some think that failure is the fault of the minorities (Jews, Gypsies, and others). Liberals have offered the opinion that development for the better is marked with, unstable, painful

searching: without any specific goal. However, according to writer Sylvie Richterova, a fearful experience of evil leads to a drift into a relativistic ideology without one's really thinking seriously about it. "It is remarkable how much success there was in the Czech environment in the 1990's. For years there was the popular philosophical hypothesis that no truth existed. Suddenly, it was taking hold after half a century of mishappen communistic institutionalized 'truth,' at a time when the hidden reality was finding its way into the light." This relativistic view of truth created doubt regarding the spiritual roots of the nation and with it an uncertain view of the future.

Is there any hope for change for the better? Many spiritual movements from the East and from the West have come rushing into our country to promise improvement. Small groups of Moslems, Buddhists, and adherents of other religions are beginning to make their presence felt. They introduce themselves as "healers" but they deceive and disappoint the trust of those who follow them. Thus, after these few years of freedom it is difficult to invite anyone to any kind of public church meeting. Therefore, the Czech Republic remains the most atheistic nation in Central Europe.

What can be done?

1. Barriers between those outside the church and those of the Christian faith are broken down only through love and sacrificial service. The church is more involved than ever before in service to the needy with its language of unselfish love. In this way the church is enabled to reach the elderly, the physically and mentally handicapped, the homeless, prisoners, soldiers, and of course, also to the families of these people. Under Communist rule these activities were not possible. The church, in a post-communist land, is entering into a new mission field at home and in the East (Ukraine, Russia, Belarus) by means of humanitarian aid.

2. Personal and public evangelism are of the highest priority and must be a permanent part of the program of the church. Work in small groups has far greater success in spreading the Gospel than do large-scale evangelistic meetings, though it is still possible through this means to address unbelievers. There is great interest in the evangelistic youth camp. For example, guest presenters who gave stimulating studies from God's Word at such a youth camp in Tosanovice on July 14-21, 2000, experienced enthusiastic response from the young people. At the camp, Pastor Tim Hinrichs and Vicar Rick Blythe, two Lutherans from the United States, assisted the local pastors.

3. Work with children offers great hope. Earlier, this kind of activity by the church was harshly suppressed and outlawed. Now we can and will freely expand it. Besides confirmation classes, the church can lead Bible study clubs in residential areas, teach religion in public school for those who are interested, and instruct Christian children in Sunday school. The church has also opened its own schools, which, because of their higher standards, are more attractive. In the city of Trnava, there is even a public school in which one third of its students have elected to attend the Christian track of classes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of Dr. Gary Bertels of Concordia University, River Forest, together with the department of Christian Education of Ostrava University, research was conducted at the school on "Children's

4. Society needs the clear message of the Gospel. The leader of the historical committee of the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic, Dr. F. Holecek, has challenged Lutherans to establish working groups dedicated to the study of the theology of Dr. Martin Luther. He is convinced that the Reformation heritage of this country was wasted. Through the help of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Martin Luther Bund, basic Reformation writings in Czech are being prepared for publication. Naturally, this activity serves, first of all, the Lutherans themselves who are living in a pluralistic society and need to see again the clear way of salvation, which God revealed in His Word through His Son Jesus Christ.

5. We need to appreciate and publicize Lutheran history in Central and Eastern Europe. Among all the churches in Poland during the Second World War, the only bishop to suffer martyrdom was from the Lutheran church, Bishop J. Bursche. Lutherans in the Czech Republic can claim the largest percentage of martyrs, among Czech churches, during the Second World War. During the time of Communism, the Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession had a strong underground movement with its own clear-cut spiritual program. Recently a monograph was prepared about the leader of this movement, Pastor Vladislav Santarius. There is ample evidence, which testifies to the blessed influence of Lutheranism in Central and Eastern Europe. This story should be made known so that the believers in the Gospel of Christ would know their identity, and furthermore, so the society in which they live could see in them how deeply they are rooted in the tradition of the nation.

We believe that God's grace in Christ is the instrument of strength for spreading the Gospel in which are revealed the glory and power of God (2 Tim. 2:1-2). Eastern Europe truly needs this saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ. We pray for it and believe in the power of God's Word. We are grateful to all who are helping to proclaim the Gospel in the churches that, recently, were still suffering under persecution. I am convinced that the Lutheran approach to work in Central Europe, with its emphasis on the Christian education of children and the youth, is much needed. In fact, it is critically important for the support and the growth of Christ's church.

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Concepts of God.” In its educational program, the Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession is greatly inspired by and supported by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. In addition to providing the Christian track in the public schools and the Christian Education Department of Ostrava University, the church helps expand Christian education in homes in those areas where it is not yet possible to provide a Christian school. This pioneering work is very difficult. Without professional and financial help from American Lutherans, there would be little success.