

Pentecostal Theology of Freedom for the Postcommunist Era

Dony K. Donev

*“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith
Christ hath made us free” for “if the Son therefore
shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed”*

This paper is intended as a part of larger research entitled *Theology of the Persecuted Church*. It focuses on the way freedom is understood by the underground church and its successor, the postcommunist church after the fall of the Communist regime. In this sense, the research presents the theological view of freedom from the time of postmodern transition in Eastern Europe in retrospect with the times of underground worship and in dialogue with the major modern theologians. The main purpose is to construct an authentic view of freedom in the major areas of the life and ministry of the postcommunist Pentecostal church.

Postcommunist Europe

On his first official visit to West Germany in May 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev informed Chancellor Kohl that the Brezhnev doctrine had been abandoned and Moscow was no longer willing to use force to prevent democratic transformation of its satellite states. At 6:53 p.m. on November 9, 1989, a member of the new East German government gave a press conference to inform that the new East German travel law would be implemented immediately. At the East Berlin Bornholmer Strasse, the people

demanded to open the border. At 10:30 p.m. the border was opened.¹ That meant the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

The unification of one Germany brought the clash of two political extremes within one nation. It brought together two Europes kept apart for half-a-century, a dynamic which introduced the continent to a new set of opportunities among which was the vision for a unified Europe and its realization.

A new set of dilemmas was introduced as well. Among all economical, political, social, cultural and simply human points of diversity, religion remained central for the process through which the European Union was emerging. The official “United in Diversity” (reminding of the American E Pluribus Unum) claimed unification, without mentioning God. The new European constitution announced that Europe draws “inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe.”²

For us who lived in the last days of Communist Bulgarian, the fall of the wall was a miracle which the world witnessed. Coming out from the severe Communist persecution and surrounded by the Balkan religious wars, suddenly the country of Bulgaria experienced a time of liberation which gave the start of spiritual revival mobilizing Bulgarian Protestants. In the midst of extreme poverty, due to prolonged economical crisis, this revival became an answer for many. It also provided a sense of liberation, but not in the Western political understanding of democracy and freedom, but rather liberation toward the realization of the Kingdom, a world much higher, much better and in way more realistic than any human ideality. The liberation from sin then

¹ The Fall of the Berlin Wall, <http://www.dailysoft.com/berlinwall/history/fall-of-berlinwall.htm> June 29, 2004; also Jeremy Isaacs and Taylor Downing, *The Cold War*, Thomas Fleming, *The Berlin Wall* and Wolfgang Schneider, *Leipziger Demotagebuch*.

² Ed Johnson, Associated Press, June 19, 2004 and David E. Anderson, “European Union Debate on Religion in Constitution Continues” May 26, 2004.

turns not only into a social movement, but as a theological conception it provides an alternative to the existing culture thus becoming a reaction against the surrounding context and proposing a new theological model and a new paradigm for life itself based on substantive faith and belief.

Freedom of Will

Even when approached theologically, in the Eastern European postcommunist context today, the term freedom of will carries a strong political nuance. For many Eastern European Protestants, freedom characterizes the struggle against the communism regime and the divine motivation to endure it as a calling of faith for the individual and the community.

The years before communist era were characterized with opposition against the historical monopoly of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In this context, the protestant movement in Bulgaria also struggled against spiritual dominion defending the cause of religious freedom and the right of each individual and community to believe and express beliefs.

The hundred years of Bulgarian Protestantism have been accompanied with constant struggle against oppression of conscience and will thus creating a general acceptance of free human will. This has coincided with the theology of the largest and fastest growing Evangelical movements in Bulgaria. In this context, even evangelical churches, like the Baptists, have grown to accept and practice the doctrine of free will.

Based on the political, socioeconomic and purely ecclesial factors, in postcommunist Eastern Europe, the Calvinistic paradigm of predestination and election as practiced in a Western sense are not successful. This is based partially on their new

doctrinal presence within the Bulgarian reality and their untested effectiveness through under persecution. It is also natural that they are often qualified in parallel with political and religious oppression, and therefore rejected as divine attributes or actions. If human regimes are oppressive through limiting freedom and consciences, how is God to identify with such regimes and practice the same type of “horrible decree?” On the contrary, in Eastern European Protestant theology, God is seen as a Liberator of human consciences and a desire for freedom.

By no means, is this tension to be confused with a denial of the total authority of God. God remains the *electing* God in Jesus Christ, but how?³ Is it through a “horrible decree” or through a personal life-changing experience defined by the Bible? Is it through an oppressive act of lawful but unconditional predetermination which God by His nature is omnipotent to implement, or through an act of supernatural transformation of humanity through divine self-sacrifice? And does this election barricade every possible human choice? No, as it is obvious in the denial of Peter; but also as seen in his restoration, that every choice of human will is answered by God through unconditional divine love.

Therefore, we experience “the secret of predestination to blessedness,” not in a cause and effect paradigm as Augustine and the Reformers, but rather through preserving its significance by experiencing the love of God.⁴ Thus, the human will is freed by the love of God to receive salvation for eternity. The human freedom then is not ignored or oppressed, but on the contrary it is “placed in the context of cosmic drama” where the real bondage is not the one by God, but the one by sin which oppresses the human will and distances it to death. The Gospel, however, proclaims the victory of Christ over these

³ Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 184.

⁴ Karl Barth, (tr. E.C. Hoskyns), *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: n/a), 324.

oppressors thus liberating human will to its initial creation state as a gift from God.⁵ This theology comes from a concrete experience of God in real life, and the quest to serve and follow God. As theology shows that the truth about God and the truth about ourselves always go together, the experience of God is a constant tension and a dynamic process, rather than blind servanthood to rigid principles that can never fully encompass the divine will. And through this experience of liberation of the human will in order that one may be free to choose salvation through Christ, God establishes His “testament of freedom.”⁶

Freedom from Oppression

As God liberates humanity from sin, He liberates it from sin’s moral and social consequences. Thus, forgiveness of sin presupposes not only the quest for sanctification and perfection after the image of God, but also the struggle against oppression and establishment of social balance. As the above shows, the postcommunist revival in Eastern Europe cannot be explored apart from the contextual political and socioeconomic dynamics. The reason for this is that the Spirit with value before God is a social spirit that makes the expression of the divine liberation the very purpose of the existence of the church.⁷ The practice of this expression challenges the relationship between theology and practice as it questions theology’s epistemological and praxis relationship to the oppressed with whom Christ is crucified.⁸

As in such context, theology is challenged to identify with action, the church must choose between contextualizing and enforcing theology. To choose contextualization is

⁵ Stanley J. Grentz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 437.

⁶ Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing House, 1995).

⁷ Green, 106.

⁸ David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 369.

to attempt to relate it to the existing culture thus creating a state of relativism. Such approach is observed in some Asian and Black theology. The danger is to go beyond the boundary pass which theology ceases being theology in action and becomes simply a nominal religious culture. In Eastern Europe, such approach has been long-practiced by the Eastern Orthodox and has unquestionably resulted in nominal religion. The nominality of its expression has been a factor preventing the experience of God, thus denouncing the very reason for the church's existence. Attempts to restore the Eastern Orthodox "symphony" between church and state have altered the existence of the independent synods which claim the succession of the same historical religious institution.

The second direction, to move toward enforcement of theology after the paradigm proposed by Liberation theology, is quite a dangerous approach often resulting in armed conflicts. Keeping in mind the historical tension on the Balkans and Bulgaria's success in undergoing the postcommunist transition without an armed civil conflict, this approach is virtually inapplicable. Therefore, an alternative must be proposed before history itself become oppression.

In this context, a move toward a theology of freedom seems most reasonable. It must purpose to prevent political and socioeconomic oppressions which are already present in various legal and illegal forms in Bulgaria. Such paradigm must also be concerned with intrachurch oppressive tensions which are present both among and within religious denominations, striving especially against such oppressive modes that come from the desire of an oppressed mentality to oppress others.

Such working model of social transformation is presented in Paul's Epistle to Philemon. An older interpretation of the book explains that Onesimus, a runaway slave, meets Paul in prison, becomes a Christian and is sent by Paul back to his master. A more cotemporary interpretation claims that Onesimus is a slave sent by Philemon to help care for Paul in prison where he converts to Christianity and desires to stay with Paul as a missionary associate.

Regardless of the interpretation of the story plot, the epistle carefully presents a more in-depth set of problems that deal with persecution, imperialism, slavery, mastership, classes, ownership, imprisonment and above all justice. It further makes a more aggressive mood and places the church, represented in the text not merely by masses, but by the very divine appointment of apostolic authority.

The theme of imprisonment as a direct result of persecution is clearly present through the epistle's plot and more specifically verses 1, 9, 13 where Paul uses the expression "prisoner of Christ" to describe his present status. The expression "prisoner of Christ" carries a sense of belongingness making the phrase different than the sometimes rendered "prisoner for Christ." While the latter wrong rendering moves the focus toward the purpose of Paul's imprisonment, the Greek genitive in the phrase "prisoner of Christ" denotes ownership. Although imprisoned in a Roman prison and kept by a Roman guard, Paul denies the Roman Empire ownership of himself, thus claiming that he is owned by Christ alone. This is also a denial of the Roman citizenship that has led to this oppressive state of persecution and the recognition of a citizenship in the divine reality of liberation.

Paul's negation goes a step further, proposing that while the Roman Empire may be authoritative in the temporal context, by no means it is authoritative in the spiritual

eternal reality. Having established the temporality of Rome and the eternity of God, Paul denies to the Roman Empire the right to pronounce judgment over social injustice and to establish social status or world order, proposing that no one but the Christian church is the agent divinely designed and supernaturally equipped for these functions. The social injustice of persecution and wrongful imprisonment, the social tensions between classes, the problems within the church and every dilemma presented in the epistle are to be judged by no one but God through his elect. The reality of the situation is that the church is experiencing severe persecuting because the Roman Empire is denying the church social space. Paul, however, denies the reality of such oppressive human system and claims that the church is the one that must deny social space for oppressive structures as the Roman Empire.

The text calls for revolution; not merely, a revolution in the physical violent sense, but a revolution of the mind where human existence and mentality are liberated through Biblical paradigm combined with divine supernatural power to participate in a new spiritual social reality where justice is set by the standard of God. Such a move calls for a new paradigm and for a theology of freedom which creates an anti-culture and an alternative culture to the existing oppressive system. Such idea challenges the church with the claim that Christianity is and should be a scandal and an offence to the world, and not merely a religion but the belief that “Jesus is the most hazardous of all hazards.”⁹

Feast of Freedom or the Bulgarian Easter

Amidst political and socioeconomic crises since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bulgaria has experienced a rebirth of Bulgarian spirituality. Many observers have

⁹ Barth, 99.

referred to this restoration process as the rebirth of the Bulgarian Easter, and even which historically has been connected with the unity and power of the Bulgarian nation.

Bulgaria accepted a Christian country in 864 AD under the reign of Kniaz Boris I. A millennium later, in the middle of the 19th century, Bulgaria found itself occupied by the Ottoman Empire and religiously restricted by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy which dictated the religious expression of the Bulgarian church.

On April 3, 1860, during Easter Sunday service in Constantinople, the Bulgarian bishop Illarion of Makriopol expressed the will of the Bulgarian people by solemnly proclaiming the separation of the Bulgarian church from the patriarchal in Constantinople. The day commemorating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ coincided with the resuscitation of the Bulgarian people. Although, the struggle continued for another decade, under the influence of Russia, Turkey was forced to legally recognize the independence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. In 1870 a firman of the sultan decreed the establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian church institution.

The connection between the historical Bulgarian Easter and the contemporary rebirth of Bulgarian spirituality has been used in many aspects of the Bulgarian politics and culture at the beginning of the 21st century. As part of the Eastern Church, Bulgarian orthodox theology pays much more attention to the resurrection rather than to the birth of Christ thus placing its eschatological hope in a future experience rather than a past one. Such dynamic is natural, as the acceptance of Christianity in Bulgaria purposes to bring hope in national politics and communal life. Thus, in an almost historical tradition, the Bulgarian Easter represents the Bulgarian eschatological hope for a supernatural national

revival. It also communicates with the sense of liberation from political, economical and religious oppression and a longing for the freedom to live life.

The Bulgarian Easter then provides an alternative to the present moment of tension and straggle in the crucifixion. Similar to Moltmann's view of the resurrection of Christ, the Bulgarian hope foresees the resurrection of the Bulgarian nation as a divine act of protest against oppression and injustice and as recognition of God's passion for life.¹⁰ Thus, the resurrection is an alternative not only to the present world, but also to the reality of eternal death.

Death is therefore seen not only as an agent of eternity, but also as an agent of fear, suffering and oppression in the present reality which affects life in all its economical, political, social and even religious aspects. As death diminishes the value of life, the liberating power from Easter often remains ignored. But in order for the church to continue being a church, it must speak as a witness of the resurrection which is impossible without participating in God's divine liberation which recreates the world to its original state of creation. Thus, the hope of Easter means rebirth of the living hope.

The resurrection hope is an influential factor which directs the life dynamics of the church beyond its walls. Being liberated from sin, the believer desires the liberation of others and claims the right to serve. But true Biblical servanthood cannot exist and therefore does not tolerate oppression, thus becoming a social transformation factor in the midst of oppressive cultures. The resurrected church rebels against the destruction of life and the denial of the right of every human to live. But different than other human systems, the church does not feed off its resistance against oppression. Its source of power is the eschatological hope for the full restoration of life and its eternal continuation in eternity.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless*, (Norwich: SCM Press Ltd., 1983).

A final question must be raised about the pessimistic character of such hope, as traditional evangelical eschatology in Bulgaria has been premillennial and due to its Pentecostal majority clearly pretribulation. Such eschatological views, at large, have been considered to be pessimistic and escapist in nature due to their strong focus on the future. Yet, such determinative presupposition seems inaccurate and much limited in its observation when applied within the postcommunist context where Protestant churches have been greatly involved in the struggle against oppressive regimes and constraining politics even to the point of martyrdom.

It is then natural, that in the underground context of persecution it is unthinkable for the church to identify with the regime in anyway. Actually, such identification is viewed by the believers as spiritual treason and cooperation with authority is viewed as backsliding. By no means, however, is such a premillennial eschatological view in this context pessimistic for the church. Neither does the church remain unconcerned with the present reality. On the contrary, through its very act of negation of the right of an oppressive system to dictate reality, the church establishes an alternative culture which is the Kingdom of God. Thus in the midst of persecution and oppression, the church remains in its Biblical boundaries as an agent of the Kingdom of God by providing eschatological hope.

Yes, this eschatological view is escapist, as it promotes eternal separation from the oppressive reality. What other alternative can a persecuted and underground church find to survive and relate to the Biblical image of the ecclesia and at the same time it is clearly concerned with the transformation of the present world as shown above? For while its pessimism concerns the oppressive system of the world, its optimism declares

the church as an already-reality in which freedom of sin, death and oppression and eternity with God is celebrated. Therefore, the church itself remains an optimistic reality and optimistic eschatological hope. For, without this hope the tension of life toward future and even life it self will vanish.¹¹ Without hope for the beyond, we remain in the now for eternity.

Epilogue

Due to its relational and reactional role to historical process, Eastern European postcommunist theology is a new historical and theological event. Yet, as theology of freedom, it relates to other theological approaches internationally. This similarity is enforced by the approaching postmodern era which the Bulgarian nation seems unprepared to understand. In such context, the church and its theology become the agents providing answers to social tensions.

Postcommunist theology provides a point of departure from the oppressive system of the communist regime toward a new social and ecclesial alternative. Such dynamic is by no means new to the Protestant movement in Bulgaria, which has dealt successfully with these same issues even in more severe context of underground existence and persecution. Therefore, the church has proved its commitment to identify with the oppressed through addressing and engaging its experience through the experience of God and its adequate and substantive theological interpretation. Such approach provides an alternative to oppressive system and structures, unquestionably critiques their tools and methods, and rebukes the agents who represent and practice them, thus denying them place in history.

¹¹ Mark K. Taylor, *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries* (London: Collins, 1987), 325.

A further concern for developing strategies for social transformation is also strongly present including education, law, politics and economics. These dynamics employ Christians in a common task and motivate the church for further development and implementation in order to connect theology with practice and thus to fulfill the divine calling for church's role in the processes of restoration of justice and social transformation, both now and eschatologically.

Bibliography

- Anderson, David E. "European Union Debate on Religion in Constitution Continues"
May 26, 2004.
- Barth, Karl (tr. E.C. Hoskyns), *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: n/a).
- Ford, David F. ed., *The Modern Theologians* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
- Geffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing House, 1995).
- Green, Clifford. *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).
- Johnson, Ed. Associated Press, June 19, 2004.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Power of the Powerless*, (Norwich: SCM Press Ltd., 1983).
- Taylor, Mark K. *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries* (London: Collins, 1987).