

Christian Conversation with an Ex-Marxist

Colleagues,

Eleven years ago today, the day before Luther's birthday, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. Makes me think of the semester-long stint that Marie and I did thereafter in Lithuania, one of the countries of the former Soviet bloc. We're still in e-mail connection with folks we met there in the city of Klaipeda, one of whom is Alexei. A twenties-something young man Alexei was the one techie we found—possibly in all of Lithuania—who knew how to repair Macintosh laptops. But Alexei is not Lithuanian. He's a Russian, as are many now living in all three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), a consequence of Kremlin policy of settling their own in the territories they occupied.

We became good friends, learned of his broken marriage and his affection for his young son, for whom he had shared custody. We had meals together and faith/unfaith talk together. Though raised atheist, Alexei was atheist no longer, he said. He'd had some god-experience, linked, as we understood him, to some miraculous rescue from the jaws of death—maybe more than once. He detested the church, wasn't sure about Jesus, but was sure about God.

We're still in contact with Alexei. He recently sent us an e-photo of son Sasha and himself at the new McDonalds in Klaipeda! We also continue the faith/unfaith conversation—sporadically—via cyberspace. ThTh 126 gives you a sample of that from earlier this fall.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Dear Alexei,

Some time has passed since we received your last e-mail. In that message you were talking about "heavy stuff," God, church, faith, and such. I take courage from your last line in that communication, where you say: "I'll be happy if you would let me know your opinion." You may no longer remember the many things you said in that previous posting. Then again you may have it saved somewhere. To focus my own response I'll list some of the things you said.

- 1. One major theme was your critique of church-institutions, no matter what their confessional heritage is. You have experienced them to be the same as other social clubs—united around a particular interest, "a labour union, a women's organization, or a political party (the best example probably), that serves the needs of the people. When it comes to bookkeeping, secretaries, uniform, ranks, special education, it becomes a monster."*
- 2. Another item was: atheism. You said: "In Soviet union times, when I was a kid it was like: Atheist = anti-God. In this case I'm not one. But if Atheist = anti-Church, I am one."*
- 3. Toward the end—after this information about what you do not believe, you come to your own statements about your faith and about God. "I don't belong to any confession, and I don't need any in my way of understanding of God. I don't need a mediator. I could consider You – Marie and Ed and the people like You, I meet from time to time, are the Church for me. Such a people never direct me, they just give me their suggestions (not even advices), so I have an opportunity to recognize the things I need to think about. There are no dogmas in this Church. I'm absolutely sure, this is the Church of God. And I'm also sure, I'm not the only one who thinks in this way."*

OK, I'll pick up on the "suggestion" term (which you approve of) and add that to your telling us that you'd "be happy if you would let me know your opinion."

1. My opinion is that much of your critique about church organizations is true. Yet I'm convinced that humans were created/destined/evolved to live in community. So it is not impossible to imagine a Robinson Crusoe existence of total solitude, but in real life it's not that way. Communities of some sort are inescapable for us humans. Even marriage and family is already a mini-community. Like all human communities none of them is ever perfect—I don't have to tell you that—and contributing to the imperfection is not just "them," but "me" too. So the bad stuff, the flaws, in all communities have a similar component in me too. If that is so, what to do? Some thoughts—

A. In many (most?) cases we don't choose the communities we are in. I didn't choose to be born in the Schroeder family (of German heritage), didn't choose to be white, didn't choose to be male, didn't choose to be American, didn't choose to be in a capitalist economic system, didn't choose to spend most of my life in the 20th century, didn't even choose to be baptized as a child in the Lutheran religious community. Marriage is one community I did choose to put myself into. And maybe one or two more. But most of the communities that have shaped my life, made me what I am, are communities I didn't choose but that were given to me, even "pushed" upon me.

B. Well, then... If they are inescapable in principle, then you make the best you can of the communities

where you are a member. Where possible you seek to make them better. Sometimes even create new communities that will be better for human welfare than the one(s) presently there. But not getting caught on the utopian notion that "WE" could create the perfect community. For I carry within myself a selfish-ego that doesn't disappear even in the "good" communities I help create to replace old "bad" ones. [Theology note: What I've just mentioned in the last sentence above is what Christians call "sin." "Sin" is not "doing bad stuff to other people." Doing such bad stuff is a SYMPTOM of sin, a consequence of it. Sin itself is the Biblical term for human self-centeredness, which never totally disappears in even the best of people. And it has consequences for my God-connection and for my people-connections. In specific Christian terms: If the "direction of my life" regularly curves back into myself, then that "direction" will not be fully devoted to God, the source of my existence, nor to my fellow humans, the community members I'm destined to serve. These sentences do not explain why this is so. Instead they describe what constantly happens. A friend of mine once said: If you meet someone who doesn't believe in sin (as described here), tell them: "Just have children."]

C. So the same with churchy-communities. Some of us got "born" into such communities. Some of us (you, for example) got born into a non-church community. But since you believe in God, you no longer belong to the old Marxist anti-god Russian community. You propose to continue your life of faith without community, if I understand you correctly. I know that such a point of view is not impossible, but

this much, at least, I'd "suggest": being in a good religious/churchy community is a lot more fun! I've been in religious-community since the early days of my life. But in the 1970s it was no "fun" at all. Finally I was kicked out of that Lutheran church community where I grew up, because I was a "heretic." Well, a number of others were also kicked out at that time. So what happened? We exiles gathered together and formed another churchy community: The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Our group eventually merged with other Lutherans in the USA, and that is our community now. It too is not perfect, there are many things to critique, but it is "more fun" to be inside this community than to be outside of it. In fact, part of the "fun" is that I'm allowed to critique the "bad" stuff in my church and NOT get kicked out. In fact, I even have fellow critics who make up a sub-community in this larger national church community.

D. On the business of "god."

I was helped years ago by reading a few paragraphs by Martin Luther concerning the first of the Ten Commandments. The Biblical text of that commandment (the God of Israel speaking) says: "You shall have no other gods besides me." Luther begins by thinking about the words "have a god." To have a god, he says, is not to believe in a supernatural power, some being "up there" in the stratosphere. No, the place to look for where gods are is inside human hearts. The focus is on "verbs of the heart" to find out who people's gods are. Even if they do, or do not, believe in the existence of a spiritual power, a being "up there" somewhere. These "verbs of the heart" are "fear, love, and trust." What is

your heart, your life at its center, fearing or loving or trusting. That is who your actual god is, no matter what you believe or don't believe about spiritual or supernatural beings. Luther uses the folksy phrase, "whatever you hang your heart on," for this. Whatever you hang your heart on is your real god. And most folks probably have several such gods most of the time. Having gods is a practical daily-life reality; it is not what you think or believe in your head. From our conversations in the past I have a hunch about what some of your gods might be. But I won't mention my guesses until I hear from you what you yourself see that your heart is hanging on. And it is interesting that Luther does not only use "positive" verbs of the heart, "love and trust," but also the negative one, "fear." If/when fear (about anything whatsoever) dominates the human heart, then that "negative-god" is the god my heart is hanging on—even if in terror.

In this sense full-fledged Marxists of the Soviet era, despite their official atheism, were theists. They had gods, things their hearts were hanging on. At least there was one official god, the classless society. And the way many of the leaders actually practiced their Marxism showed that they had other gods as well—the dacha in the forest, along with other things that they "loved and trusted." And there also were the gods they "feared" and consequently sought to eliminate.

If this "suggestion" for a line of thinking interests you, I can send the full text of Luther's thoughts on this to you. You could also find them

in Klaipeda at the library of the seminary where I taught back in 1997. It is Luther's explanation of the first commandment in his Large (not the Small) Catechism.

E. With communities, religious ones too, as I proposed above, it is often wise to change to a better one when you find yourself in a bad one. So it is with the gods we hang our hearts on too. Some are downright destructive—not just of others, but of their devotees as well. And even among the “good” ones, some are better than others. Christians “suggest” that the Jesus story in the Bible points to the best God they’ve encountered so far. The God whom Jesus himself “feared, loved, and trusted” is the God he commends to his followers. Christians are people who follow Jesus in hanging their hearts on the same God. Of course, Jesus is not simply recommending a specific God, as a car salesman who urges you to buy his BMW “because it’s the best.” Jesus himself (his life and work on earth as one of us) is woven into the God he recommends, and eventually when you hang your heart on the God whom Jesus recommends, Jesus too is part of the package. In Christian language: Jesus is the “way” to get to this God.

When first century Christians were asked: “Who is YOUR God?” their answer was: “Whoever it was that sent Jesus and later raised him from the dead, THAT one is our God.” That is the God they hung their hearts on. [So it’s no surprise that Christmas and Easter are at the core of Christian “God-talk” and that Christians celebrate these events.] When Marie and I were with you 3 years ago, we were commending

this God to you. We still do.

*Peace & Joy to you, to Sasha, to Sasha's mother too!
Marie & Ed*