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Reflections on Faith and Freedom in Romania and Russia

Derek H. Davis

As I stood to speak to the overflow crowd of 800 people attending the November 14 morning worship service at the First Baptist Church of Resita, Romania, I was overcome with admiration for this faithful group of believers. The Apostle Paul's words from 2 Corinthians 12:9 suddenly took on an entirely new meaning for me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Those in attendance represented almost the entire membership of this church, the larger of two Baptist churches in this city of more than 100,000 people. There were few members' cars outside; almost everyone had walked, many several miles, to be in church that morning. They had not come to hear me speak; I don't think they even knew there would be a guest speaker that day. They came faithfully every Sunday, I was told later—to be renewed, refreshed, encouraged, and to worship God. As 87% of the Romanian population belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church, it is not popular to be affiliated with any other faith tradition, and it is certainly not popular to be a Baptist. I was encouraged by the thought that these people were making sacrifices just to be in church that morning.

As I scanned the audience, it was obvious that no one had been to Neiman Marcus that week to buy a new suit or dress. I suspect most of the men were wearing the only suit they owned, and that most of the women were wearing perhaps the same dress they had worn the previous Sunday, and the one before that, and the one before that. I noticed lots of scuffed shoes, tattered coats, weather-beaten skin, yet many smiles. They were glad to be there, and I sensed that for many of these Christians, attending church on Sunday was the highlight of their week. As the average salary in Resita is about \$100 per month, these people had nothing, yet they had everything. They understood, in a way that I never had, that God's grace truly is sufficient, and that weakness is a form of power.

I felt completely ill equipped to speak to these people, whom I now looked upon as a special breed of saints. After all, I am not a preacher, and my life as an academic and lawyer, specializing in church-state relations and religious liberty, had seldom brought me into the company of such a gathering as this. And being an American accustomed to one-hour services, I was concerned about their stamina. As I rose to speak, they had already been in this service for two hours—praying, singing, hearing testimonies, and even hearing a mini-sermon by one of the pastors. And now they had to listen to me for forty minutes? And there would be more singing after I finished! Three hours of worship? I was amazed! This was standard, however, as they later told me. In any case, I proceeded to talk about the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. I talked mainly about Christian attitudes and responses in light of the attacks—about refusing to succumb to attitudes of hate, disdain, and revenge but instead adopting attitudes of love, compassion, and forgiveness, yet without forgetting

that there is in God's program a place for properly administered justice. As this was obviously a people who knew the meaning of suffering, I tried to relate the suffering of so many people as a result of the terrorist attacks, and how those who know Christ are finding that God's grace is indeed sufficient for them, just as it is for this group of Baptists in Resita who face their own brand of suffering every day. I hope they were helped by what I said.

I was in Resita at the invitation of Daniel Barnut, the 36-year-old co-pastor of this very special church. We had become acquaintances over the Internet earlier in the year. As part of my work as director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University, I planned in November to go to Bucharest, Romania to meet with some government officials, then to Russia for a religious liberty conference. When the Bucharest meeting was canceled, since I did not care to waste my plane ticket to Romania, I contacted Daniel about perhaps coming to meet him. He was enthusiastic about it and within days had arranged for me to spend three days in Romania speaking not only to his church, but also to a church in nearby Timisoara, universities in Resita and Timisoara, and some student groups. I knew immediately that this was a remarkable, get things done kind of person. After meeting Daniel and getting to know him and his wife, Dorina, and two sons, Emanuel and Filip, I was impressed beyond words. A graduate of the Baptist Seminary in Bucharest, Daniel has been pastoring this church for about five years. Under his guidance the church has grown considerably in numbers and has begun a number of outreach ministries. I was most impressed by their "Humanitas Pro Deo" program, which feeds lunch daily to about 100 children who live in poverty in Resita.

I was also impressed by the Christian Baptist High School the church started under Daniel's leadership. Among his many responsibilities he manages to find time to teach every day in the school. Daniel's dream for years has been to have a school for all ages, but there was always inadequate money and space to do it. One day the mayor of Resita came to Daniel and offered to let the church use rent-free a vacant 20,000 square foot building. The building was a hangout for gangs, thus the mayor, a member of the Orthodox Church, told Daniel that he was impressed with what he had done with the high school and wanted him to have the building to begin an all-grades school, even though it would be controversial in the community to extend such a favor to Baptists. While the church has virtually no money to renovate the building, church members are donating their time and talents to achieve a complete renovation. They do what they can with what they have, and they hope that God will supply enough money for them to renovate enough space that they can open the school sometime in 2002. For anyone looking for a good place to give some money, please pray about assisting this school. Just write Daniel at Barnut_d@cs.ro if you would like more information.

In my talks to university and student groups I focused on religious liberty, attempting to give them a sense of how much remains to be done globally before we can even begin to make the claim that religious liberty is recognized as a fundamental human right. This was a theme they were keenly interested in. As Romania is an emerging democracy, they are struggling with questions about the proper role of religion in their culture, but especially about the political role of religion. Romania has been largely an

Orthodox region since at least the fourth century, and its history is one of political support of Orthodoxy and active suppression of other religions. This pattern was interrupted, of course, during the Soviet occupation of Romania that began after WW II and lasted until 1989, a period of active hostility toward all religions, even Orthodoxy. The year 1989 is well known, of course, as the year in which communism was overthrown throughout most of the Soviet empire, and interestingly, that revolution actually began, by some accounts, at the city square in Timisoara, a mere stone's throw from where I gave one of my lectures. Since the revolution, Romania has been attempting to implement a democratic order, with free elections, free enterprise, and religious freedom. But old habits do not die easily. Presently, the Orthodox Church, perceived as the standard bearer of faith and morals in Romania, is still privileged over other religions in many ways. They receive substantial governmental support, financial and otherwise, although active persecution of other religions is now a thing of the past. I would like to see Romania move toward making all religions equal before the law, favoring none, thus giving maximum freedom to the people to choose their own religions free of governmental influence. This is the modern way, and if Romania is to become a part of the European Union and otherwise join the community of nations that uphold freedom and human rights, this is the course they should chart.

My three-day trip now at an end, I was ready to fly to Moscow where I would take part in an important religious liberty conference. I left Romania reluctantly, because I had grown fond of Resita and Timisoara and the people I met there. I consider Daniel a real friend, and I expect we will maintain communication for many years to come. Already I have on my desk a portion of the dissertation he is writing toward his doctoral degree, which I gladly will review per his request. I would be remiss not to mention Alexandru Neagoe, the pastor of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Timisoara, who hosted me while I was there. He is a marvelously effective and faithful pastor who shepherds a vibrant and committed congregation of about 1400 people. Daniel and Alex, themselves good friends and former seminary classmates, are highly talented individuals. They both could leave Romania for greener pastures and make more money and bigger names for themselves. But they are native Romanians, love their country despite its current economic and political difficulties, and intend to stay there to make a better Romania. I am sure they will be successful.

When I arrived at the Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, Misha Guskov, who works for the Institute of Religion and Law, met me. The Institute is mostly a group of lawyers, operating within a Christian framework, that work strenuously for religious freedom in the new Russia. They were co-sponsoring, with the Russian Academy of Sciences, a leading university and research center in Russia, a conference examining the progress of religious freedom in Russia since the demise of communism in 1990. I planned to present a paper at the conference dealing with President Bush's initiative to provide substantial government support to American churches and other faith-based institutions to administer social service programs. I wanted to explain the controversy surrounding this initiative, and try to suggest some ways in which the issues surrounding the initiative are relevant to Russia's current quest to map its own course for church-state relations and religious freedom.

In recent years I have taken a considerable interest in Russia because I consider it something of a laboratory in which we can investigate the feasibility of implementing a framework for protecting religious freedom that overcomes cultural prejudices and takes seriously individual freedom as a ruling tenet of political discourse and practice. Like Romania, Russia's past is dominated by Christian Orthodoxy. In 986, Vladimir, the "Grand Prince of Rus," invited missionaries from all over the world to come to Russia and present the merits of their own religions. Vladimir was searching for the religion that would best fit Russia and serve as the foundation for social order for the entire country. He chose the Byzantine form of Christianity (Eastern Orthodoxy), which served as the national faith until the Soviet era, and provided the social glue for Russia that Vladimir had hoped for. Until the 18th century it was commonplace for nations to adopt a single religion for their entire populations, believing that social solidarity depended upon a common faith. The United States was the first to formally break from this pattern and implement a system of separation of church and state. The American founding Fathers were astute readers of history and were convinced that separating religion and government would produce more freedom by permitting individuals to choose their own faith without fear of reprisal or repression by government. Like all nations of history, they believed that cultivating morality was essential to national success, but they decided to locate moral training in churches, families, and other private institutions rather than in government. They were convinced that government-sponsored religion did more harm than good, and the European history of inquisitions, persecution, pogroms, and religious wars was proof enough for them. The American tradition of religious pluralism and church-state separation has been successful in maximizing personal freedom, but many are wondering today if there is adequate cultivation of morality when the government is prohibited from using religion as a basis for moral training. Whether these critics are correct that perhaps we have gone too far in adopting Enlightenment principles of freedom is a question that today looms large in American discussions about the state's role in promoting morality.

Russia experienced no European Enlightenment, thus the older tradition of government-sponsored religion lasted until the Soviet era. Many in Russia today, including my friends at the Institute for Religion and Law, seek to transport Western ideas of church-state separation to Russia, but Russia has virtually no experience with widespread religious pluralism, thus it is difficult to implement because most Russians are more comfortable with reverting to the pre-Soviet era framework of official Orthodoxy as the national faith. The new Russian constitution (1993) and a comprehensive law regulating religion (1997) reveal an attempt to adopt both philosophies, which of course is impossible in practice. This kind of political schizophrenia is to be expected, given Russia's past and its efforts to vault itself into the modern world of democratic order. Exactly what Russia will do in terms of framing its relationship between religion and government is still uncertain, which makes it a very interesting place to observe and study for persons like myself.

But the university I represent wants to do more than just observe and study. We would like to make a contribution to Russia's future, thus we do what we can to inform

and work closely with Russian leaders. So, after leaving Russia, I returned two weeks later to give a series of university lectures and to attend another conference sponsored by the Institute of Law and Religion. This was a conference attended by lawyers from every part of Russia. They represented mostly minority religions, and were concerned with ongoing attempts by religious and political elites in Russia to limit religious freedom. I suggested in my own presentation that they should be creative in making legal arguments for religious freedom, drawing from Russian history and practice rather than always pointing to modern Western models. I tried to give some concrete examples of how this could be done based on my own understanding of Russian history. I was deeply impressed with the seriousness, intelligence, and commitment of the lawyers attending. With such people at the forefront of Russia's fight for religious freedom, their chance of success is greatly enhanced.

I should mention a few other ways in which the Russians have impressed me. I grew up during the Cold War era. My generation was taught that the Soviet empire was evil, anti-American, anti-God, and a threat to world peace and stability. This is a false picture of Soviet ideology, especially from the perspective of most Soviets. They were not evil, they were not particularly anti-American except to the extent they saw us a threat to the advance of universal truth, most of them never bought into atheism, and they saw themselves as the globe's greatest hope for peace. I was also taught that the Soviets stifled human freedom and sought to make everyone equal, with no ability for anyone to advance beyond his/her peers through effort, work, discipline, etc. Thus all Soviets worked for the state and everyone made approximately the same amount of money. We saw this as an oppressive system, but it did produce some human qualities that I find admirable. I find most Russians who grew up in this system to be very genuine, unpretentious, and down-to-earth people, unlike many Americans who grow up in our highly competitive culture that places excessive emphasis on popularity, prestige, and wealth. Moreover, I find that most Soviets did not become atheists (today, however, still 30% are) in spite of the official atheistic ideology. Many of them today remain quite open to spiritual matters, which is all the more reason that we should do what we can to encourage Russia to adopt a system of religious freedom that does not impose excessive restrictions on different religious groups in Russia. I have always believed that the Christian message, competing on equal terms with other faiths, will rise to the top. Thus, a church-state model of separation rather than preference will facilitate, I believe, the advance of Christianity in Russia.

Romania and Russia are newly emerging democracies seeking to recover from the ravaging effects of communism. Both nations are full of beautiful, caring people who are active in rebuilding their countries and improving the lives of their fellow citizens. We should pray that God would honor their efforts and also do what we can to help them.

Dr. Derek H. Davis is director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University and editor of *Journal of Church and State*.

