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The Vocation I Choose to Follow

Ines Angeli Murzaku

Introduction

At the opening of the Exhibit on the World's Religions at Santa Clara University in 2005, the renowned Swiss theologian Hans Küng observed that if you want to see divine providence in your life, you do not have to look ahead; instead, you have to look backwards and then you can see a certain order in your life.¹ Probably, Küng is right in his assumption. When I look back into my life's journey I notice a certain orderliness that has led me to who I am and the vocation I choose to follow: a church historian, researcher and teacher.

Education, life experiences, and background have made me interested in the study of Byzantine history, Eastern monasticism, and the interactions between the two halves of the once united Christendom, East and West. I was born in the East, trained in the East and the West, and my vocation led me beyond the East and the West, across the Atlantic Ocean, to America. I was born in Albania- a self-proclaimed godless country- at the height of Communism and Communist persecution of religion. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that, since the Diocletian persecution of the Christian Church, there has never been such a concerted, determined, and ruthless attempt to sweep all religion from the face of the earth.²

In 1990 I sailed from the Communist controlled country of Albania for Rome. Ostensibly, I was going to study history in Rome, but in reality I was going to study church history at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental studies, part of the Gregorian University consortium. Little did I know what was in store for me, but I was full of hope. Having the privilege to study church history in Rome, at a Pontifical Jesuit University, at a time when Albania was still under the Communist rule and religion was outlawed and persecuted, was quite remarkable.

Moreover, studying at the University of Calabria, which is located at the heart of Magna Graecia, was quite significant as well. Calabria is home to an unequalled presence of two parallel, millennia-old religious traditions, the Latin and the Byzantine traditions. They make the area's history even more involved and exceptionally interesting to the scholar of Byzantine history, as well as to the ecumenist. Calabria is the meeting place of East and West, home of the Greek ascetic movement and Greek monasticism. At the University of Calabria I was trained in the source languages, which became key to my future research and study of the religions of the region. Calabria provided me with the exposure so necessary for a church historian to understand and live religion from within.

During the years I was pursuing graduate studies in Rome, I had another extraordinary opportunity: to work for the Vatican Radio International Program. This event certainly made me wonder, *why me?*, at a time when my country of origin was still under Communist dictatorship, and the clergy- Christian and Muslim alike- and the faithful -whose only crime was their belief in God- were serving sentences in the "re-education" camps. Certainly, one's opportunities are not coincidental. One year after Mehmet Ali Agca shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square, the Pope said that in the designs of providence, there are no mere coincidences. George Weigel, the renowned Catholic theologian, reflecting on the Pope's attempted assassination, wrote that that is the truth about vocation, obedience, and abandonment. Chance is for card games while God does not work that way.³

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what sprang out of my educational background and training, in pursuit of my personal vocation as a church historian. What exactly made me the scholar and teacher I chose to be? The first part of the chapter will look at the Communist-Marxist and the Jesuit-Catholic educational systems. It will explore the incongruity among these educational systems, and how these systems in their unique ways, woke and preserved the sense of vocation in me. The second part of the chapter will explore what personal vocation means to me and how I am furthering my intellectual vocation.

My Educational Journey

Certainly, personal vocation includes education and training. It is perfectly legitimate for individuals to set objectives and aspire to personal and professional fulfillment. Indeed, studying and receiving adequate qualifications is part and parcel of self-fulfillment. Therefore, every effort at self-development and self-fulfillment through education should be undertaken and carried out as part of one's vocation.⁴ Pope Paul VI, in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* observed:

Endowed with intellect and free will, each man is responsible for his self-fulfillment even as he is for his salvation. He is helped, and sometimes hindered, by his teachers and those around him; yet whatever be the outside influences exerted on him, he is the chief architect of his own success or failure. Utilizing only his talent and willpower, each man can grow in humanity, enhance his personal worth, and perfect himself.⁵

I have navigated through three contrasting educational systems. I completed my first undergraduate university education in the Communist Albania with a BA in history and philology; earned a master's degree from the University of Calabria in Italy in languages and literatures; and a licentiate and doctorate in ecclesiastical history from the Pontifical Jesuit Oriental Institute (*Orientalis*), part of the Pontifical Gregorian University consortium. At first appearance, this combination might seem an inconceivable path for an individual to have pursued. While essentially different in their approaches and methodologies, these incongruent systems provided ample exposure to major areas of knowledge and, in an accurate and persuasive fashion, this discrepancy of approaches inculcated in me a perennial desire to quest in the field of history, and then discern and pursue my scholarly vocation.

While my Jesuit education followed the typical Anselmian motto, *fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding"), the Communist system followed its own set of moral, philosophical and ideological tenets, its own creed. These were fed to the whole population, but particularly to university students, who are the most praised, feared, and vibrant force of a Communist society. What better way to influence students than to substitute faith in God with faith in Communist ideals and morals, or the Communist Decalogue! After all, Communism proved to be a religion, a system of beliefs, with its own creed, prophets, martyrs, excommunications, as well as its own universality.

Although profoundly different in substance and methodology, these educational systems, i.e., the Communist and the Jesuit-Pontifical, had something in common. Both systems were dogmatic, because as G. K. Chesterton observed: "Dogma is actually the only thing that cannot be separated from education. It is education."⁶ Moreover, educators in both systems were dogmatic, and to use Chesterton's paradigm they were really teaching because: "A teacher who is not dogmatic is simply a teacher who is

not teaching.”⁷ A calling to immerse myself in historical research began exactly from the love of history that my teachers in both systems awoke in me. As the late Pope John Paul II explained, it is the bond of love that unites all things, and it is exactly this love that unites human beings with their different vocations in life.⁸

The Communist-Marxist Higher Education

The years of Communism brought about an imperious education to Albanian citizens. Communism instituted a system of a proficient higher education. It established a state university system, eradicated illiteracy among its people, and expanded the country’s school system so that one out of every four citizens was engaged in some form of educational pursuit.⁹ High priority was given to the education of women. In 1989, compared to 1964, the number of Albanian women with a college degree had increased to 47%.¹⁰

Upon taking power in 1944, the Albanian communist regime gave precedence to the opening of schools and to masterminding the educational system to resonate Communist ideology. In 1950, the Albanian school system was given an exclusively Soviet orientation. Institutes of higher education were all patterned on Soviet paradigms. In fact, teams of Soviet educators laid the structural, curricular, and ideological foundations of the University of Tiranë.

I was raised on the teaching of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Enver Hoxha, and during the Albanian version of the Cultural Revolution, on the teachings of Mao. As Anchee Min in her classic *Red Azalea* explained, history was the history of the class struggle, how the proletarians won over the reactionaries, while Western history was nothing but a history of capitalist exploitation.¹¹ I was born and raised under the rule of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, as Mathew Spinka observed, is a misnomer for the dictatorship of the communist over the proletariat.¹²

The university curriculum clearly targeted the education of the whole human person. Marxist-Leninist philosophy (which included dialectic and historic materialism and atheism, studied as opposites to idealism and religion), military science, productive labor, and foreign languages were part of the core curriculum across all specialties. In the humanities, philosophy, domestic and world history, national and world literature, and the grammar and history of language were given high priority in the core curriculum requirements and were initially taught by highly qualified Soviet instructors. The core curriculum gave students a broad and deep acquaintance with the main study areas. In fact, the exposure was so effective that it often made dissidents out of indoctrinated young minds, as in my case. Originally trained in Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism and atheism, I would make my life’s vocation the study of the until-then-forbidden ecclesiastical history, with special focus on the history of Eastern Christianity, Greek monasticism and inter-religious dialogue.

Additionally, the tenets of communist education stressed the primacy of the collective over the interests of the individual. In the socialist society, the individual human being did not belong to himself, but to the society. Consequently, the state refused to entrust the education of the children to their parents. The future of education belonged uniquely to social education.¹³ So, private institutions or schools funded or sponsored by charitable or religious institutions were nonexistent in Albania until 1992. All education was carried out by agencies of the government or the party, which guaranteed a dogmatic ideological purity within the school and an absolute protection from being mentally “poisoned.”¹⁴

A distinctive feature of the socialist school system was that the curricula and teaching methods were integrated with other aspects of the society, such as politics, culture, and the economy. Thus, the focus of education was that every educated citizen became acquainted with the elements of all crafts during his/her university training so that the most brilliant man of science would also be skilled in manual labor. As a result, undergraduates at the Albanian higher education system spent one month in productive labor and one month in military training each academic year. Both components were part and parcel of the curriculum and fulfilled the requirements of the revolutionary triangle: scholarship, productive labor, and physical education.

Although the Soviet system was inefficient by economic standards, it managed to raise the country's educational level to among the world's highest. Soviet elementary and secondary schools, despite their relatively guarded style, remained an outstanding example of egalitarianism, social accessibility, and high achievement. I learned discipline and resilience, under the constant strain of the hammer and the sickle of the Communist educational system, a regimen which has helped me throughout my life.

However, the worst features of the Soviet-Communist-Albanian educational system were its totalitarianism and inflexibility. How was history studied in former Eastern block countries? The significance of the Marxist view of history is concentrated on the economic changes which are affecting modern society.¹⁵ The Communist system taught that the basic premise of historical materialism is that the ultimate source of human development is the development of the productive forces. This premise can permit a scientific conception of history. In fact it was Marx who viewed history as a series of class struggles, as humanity evolved through five basic stages of development, i.e., primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist. Edward Hallett Carr in his classic *What is History?* commented on what exactly history was for Marx. In Marx's final synthesis history meant three things, Carr observed: the motion of events in accordance with objective and primarily economic laws; the corresponding development of thought through a dialectical process; and corresponding action in the form of the class struggle which reconciles and unites the theory and practice of the revolution.¹⁶

Consequently, history books written in East European countries conformed to the latest version of communist Orthodoxy,¹⁷ and were dominated by Marxist-Leninist interpretations of historical events. Old national mythology was recycled and re-invented to quench the thirst for communist-national identity. In Romania, for example, historical figures like Decebal, the king of Dacians and a powerful enemy of the Roman Empire, medieval kings and princes including Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, Vlad the Impaler, known as Dracula, were all presented and re-invented as precursors of Nicolae Ceausescu.¹⁸

However, Marxist doctrine and Marxist synthesis of history is essentially apocalyptic. It is a denunciation of judgment against the existing social order and a message of salvation to the poor and oppressed who, after the social revolution, will attain a classless society.¹⁹ In fact, Communism passionately affirms the belief of the earliest Christian communities that the Kingdom of God is at hand, which for them is the classless society, in which all economic injustice shall be no more.²⁰

Pontifical-Catholic-Jesuit Higher Education

George Bernard Shaw thought that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. So did Indro Montanelli, the renowned Italian journalist and historian, who applied the same terminology: an Italian university is a contradiction in terms. At the heart of the argument is the meaning of "Catholic" and "university." Shaw viewed the church as a closed society²¹ and a possessor of dogmatic beliefs, and

the university as an open, vibrant society representative of intellectual freedom and speculation. As a consequence, according to Shaw, an educated person cannot be religious and an intellectual simultaneously, as these two are in eternal contradiction. The confusion between “Catholic” and “university” is worsened by the prevalent enthusiasm for diversity and multiculturalism in higher education. However, the words “Catholic” and “university” have the same root meaning:²² *catholicus* from the Latin, meaning general, universal and university; *universitas*, from *universus*, meaning all together and, literally, turned into one. Additionally, Catholic Christianity founded universities and fostered them out of its deepest beliefs.²³ Such was the case with the University of Bologna. Thus it was Catholic medieval Italy that welcomed the first university of the western world.

What is so distinctive about *Orientale* that differentiates it from the Universities of Tiranë and Calabria? *Orientale* is a truly Catholic institution, established in conformity with the apostolic constitution *Sapientia Christiana*, an institution which represents not just one aspect, but the fullness of Catholic tradition, both West and East. It is an institution of higher learning where Orthodox theology is studied from within, with sympathy, reverence, and love. Indeed, it is an institution that invented Eastern Spirituality as an academic discipline.²⁴ *Orientale* is an intellectual place where faith and scholarship fraternize, where ecumenical scholarship is explored as a new and specifically Christian way of studying Christian tradition, in order to reconcile and unite, rather than to confute and dominate.²⁵

Certainly, *Orientale* is faithful to the *magisterium*, but is not the *magisterium*. What struck me was how the Jesuit educators understood Catholicity in the deepest meaning of the word. *Orientale* is a place of scholarly inquiry, seeking the relevance of the Christian message to contemporary problems that the Catholic Church is facing. The Jesuit faculty is dedicated to the spirit of inquiry and intellectual competence. Old answers could not satisfy the new religious situation in which the Catholic Church found itself, after the fall of Communism and the regained freedom of religion in Eastern block countries. That was the critical situation that needed a new way of theological thinking. Wasn't that a perfect example of *fides quarens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding in the university community, an expression of belief that would be relevant to the modern questions? As Cardinal Newman explains, the university “educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth and to grasp it.”²⁶ I was trained at *Orientale* in ecclesiastical history, to write *inter alia* of Catholic matters, but to do so, as Dermot Quinn explained, sympathetically, but without abandoning my critical faculty.²⁷ It is erroneous, then, to imagine Catholic history” as special pleading or the abrogation of critical judgment.²⁸ Quite the contrary, my previous training in the Communist system made me more critical in my understanding of church history.

In contrast to the Marxist view of history, the Jesuit-Pontifical system taught a different interpretation of history based on divine revelation, and divine intervention in the life of humankind.²⁹ Indeed, the doctrine of the Incarnation is central to the Christian interpretation of history, as an interpretation of time in terms of eternity, and of human events in the light of divine revelation. Christian history is framed in a chronological system which takes the year of Incarnation as its focal point of reference.³⁰ Thus, the Christian interpretation of history, as Christopher Dawson explains, finds its fullest expression in the primary documents of the Christian faith—the writings of the Hebrew prophets and in the New Testament itself.³¹ So, Christian history is apocalyptic. It is His-tory, the story of God at work in the world and though the world.³²

Why Me? Some Final Remarks

“I set off in search of the source of my vocation,” wrote Pope John Paul II at the beginning of his book *Rise, Let us Be on Our Way*, on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of his ordination as a

Bishop. The pope finds the source of his Episcopal vocation beating there in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, where the Last Supper took place.³³ In fact, John Paul II is the first pope in a long time to tell us that he had a hard time making a vocational decision to enter the priesthood.³⁴

What, then, is a personal vocation and how are individuals called to such commitments? As its name suggest, this type of calling is very personal. It is a proper course for every person's development to follow; a specific way in which the individual commits his/her whole life to the service of certain values.³⁵ Consequently, vocation embraces the person's strengths and weaknesses, talents and disabilities, existing commitments and obligations, and requires that personal choices be made in the light of such calling;³⁶ in fact, it embraces the whole person and his/her most inward being or identity. Personal vocation, as such, is not a job or a career path which individuals might take to earn a living. It is a specific life-time goal, and it gives a unique meaning and purpose to one's life.³⁷ It is a commitment of love, a type of love fixed on particular life goals.

Looking back on my life's journey, there is certainly orderliness. The intellectual vocation of church historian and teacher that I am pursuing is the vocation that I have discovered, and I have discovered it accurately.³⁸

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