

DAVE REITER

New U.S.S.R. needs new values

Recent events in the Soviet Union raise important political and economic questions about who will gain control over what.

Although such questions are certainly important, another is worthy of discussion. Whatever the new Soviet Union turns out to be, what will replace Communist ideology and provide the core values of the new Soviet Union?

In a sense, this question does not have the same urgency as the economic and political questions, which may determine whether people survive the winter. Questions of economics and politics also are particularly timely because the collapse is brand new, while the moral or value structure of the Soviet Union seemingly collapsed a long time ago.

In a 1978 address at Harvard University, author Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "In our Eastern countries, communism has suffered a complete ideological defeat; it is zero and less than zero."

Although the moral question remains unanswered, it is important.

Someone might respond to questions of future morality by saying we should not assume a society must have a set of core values. It might be suggested that if a society is democratic — surely desirable for the new Soviet Union — it doesn't need such values. In fact, some may insist that in a democracy a set of shared values is undesirable.

But democracy itself requires certain minimal core values. In "Dictatorships and Double Standards," Jeane Kirkpatrick points out that democratic elections can occur only if all parties agree "to settle the contest with ballots rather than bullets."

A democratic form of government



If democracy is not disciplined by core values, nothing prevents it from degenerating into just a neat way for the numerical majority to oppress the minority.

may be desirable, but it is not at all clear that a "mere democracy" is desirable. If democracy is not disciplined by core values, nothing prevents it from degenerating into just a neat way for the majority to oppress the minority.

Americans should not be too surprised if religious values play a significant role in the new Soviet Union. Some Soviets already have explored religious values under President Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of increased religious freedom.

In 1990, sociologist Mikhail Matskovsky invited four U.S. scholars to Moscow to help develop a two-year study to test 10,000 Soviets about their understanding of the 10 Commandments.

This summer, the International Center for All-Human Values in

Moscow sponsored a conference, "Religion and Values in the Development of Law, Democracy, and Human Rights." It drew U.S. and Soviet scholars.

Gennady Denisovsky, department chief of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology, reported that polls from the past three years indicate that the church is one of the two most trusted institutions in the country. The army is the other.

Solzhenitsyn argued in his Harvard address that both the East and West are suffering from a lack of spiritual sustenance. Both worlds are committed to human autonomy, he said, defining it as "the proclaimed and practiced autonomy of man from any higher force above him."

Solzhenitsyn said the main difference between the two worlds is that in the West, the commitment to humanism is a kind of intellectual heritage, while in the East it comes in the form of Communist indoctrination.

But Solzhenitsyn also said that, from a spiritual standpoint, his people were better off than we were in the West.

"Through deep suffering, people in our country have now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive," he said.

If Solzhenitsyn's analysis of the world is correct, the events of the past two weeks raise another interesting question: If the people in the Eastern countries were better off spiritually than we, even while under the iron rule of Communism, how much better off can they become now?

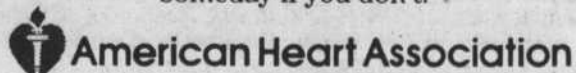
Reiter is a graduate student in philosophy and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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