

Go Forth and Set the World on Fire

Brian J. Grim

Brian Grim, Ph.D., is founding president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation and lives at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, where his wife Julia Beth coordinates study abroad for the midshipmen. Brian was previously a senior researcher in religion and world affairs at the Pew Research Center. He and Julia Beth have lived and worked in China, the former USSR, Europe and the Middle East. They have four grown children and 13 grandchildren. Faith has mattered to them at every place and time.

Major disruptions – such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, 9/11 and the coronavirus pandemic – often highlight the importance of the spiritual side of life. These epochs might be marked in ways as dramatic as the president of a new country declaring that religious freedom shall be given to all, or as subtle as a sergeant leading prayer for the command staff. The challenge of St. Ignatius “to find God in all things” opens our eyes to such possibilities.

Back in the USSR – A Door is Opened

Before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, portraits of the Soviet Union's founder Vladimir Ilyich Lenin adorned all government offices, businesses and schools. It was easy in those days to tell who was important versus who wasn't by the size and quality of the artwork.

After being escorted by an aide through the anteroom and series of doors leading into the paneled office, the Deputy Education Minister of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic received me warmly with a robust handshake. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves occupied one wall, and tall windows with drawn-back velvet curtains occupied another. Out the windows were snowy pines. As I was taking all this in, he seated me under the room's larger-than-life original oil on canvas Lenin.

Then he took his chair at the head of the long, polished table, which was the other standard power fixture in Soviet Bureaucracy. I was there to explore educational cooperation, including introducing for the first time, business education. The Minister was immediately interested.

As he slightly rotated in his leather chair, his poised posture and polished charisma were disarming. His ready smile, quick wit and genuine affability were not what I had expected.

It wasn't long before he picked up that I was instinctively comparing the Soviets with Chinese communists. I had become accustomed to Big Brother's rigidity after working for nearly a decade across the border sitting under portraits of Mao.

He contemplatively leaned back in his chair. Looking slightly above my head at Vladimir, he thought aloud, “The truth is, we Soviets have a lot to learn. Our walls have kept out too much.” His eyes moved down to engage mine. “You know, the greatest philosopher and thinker of all time was,” and he paused, “Jesus Christ. Our people really need to study his thoughts.”

That was the first of many trips to the Kazakh SSR. On a subsequent trip, I walked through the Wall on the very day it fell. Yes, I have a piece. That day, my West German colleague and I were the only ones heading out of West Berlin towards the USSR.

My wife, our four kids and I eventually moved from Germany into the dacha compound of the Prime Minister of the Kazakh SSR, up the mountain in an apple orchard, above what was then the capital, Alma-Ata.

One day in the winter of 1990, as the Prime Minister's compound was covered with Doctor Zhivago-esque snow, it was suddenly overrun one night by ZIL limos flying flags that I'd never seen before. Our regular Soviet army gate guards were replaced by guys with black coats and machine guns. When my driver arrived the next morning to take the kids and me down the mountain for school and work, we had to wait for the ZILs to file out first.

Who were they? What were they here for? Where were they headed? No way to google the flags – google wasn't even a word in 1990/91.

To my surprise, the ZILs delivered their passengers to the building where my NGO had its office. They headed into the first-floor conference room and spread out around the big round table.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. A few weeks earlier, I'd sat behind one of the ZIL limo occupants, one with swaggering white hair. It wasn't a publicized visit. He and Nazarbaev, the First Party Secretary of the Kazakh SSR, attended a social benefit concert that my Soviet joint venture partner was putting on. What I didn't realize about his visit to Alma-Ata was that the white-haired VIP — Boris Yeltsin — and Nazarbaev were putting in motion a meeting to officially end the USSR and make Mikhail Gorbachev redundant, as the Brits would say.

Thus, the ZIL occupants took over my office building. In an instant, they went from being “communist First Party Secretaries to being democratic Presidents,” as Igor Romanov, Nazarbaev's press secretary, told me a few weeks later at a meeting with US Secretary of State James Baker. Baker was in the region to officially recognize the new countries with the heretofore unknown flags.

At the meeting, when Nazarbaev was asked whether he would give religious freedom to the new country, Kazakhstan. He replied, “Of course, to the Muslims,” pointing to an imam in the room, “to the Orthodox Christians,” pointing to a priest, “and to the Baptists too,” pointing to me. In those days I was Baptist.

That same week, President Nazarbaev asked me to help them convert the country's communist party training school for cadres into its first western-style business school. To my knowledge, that was the first such school in the land that was the Soviet Union. And so, the disruption of the USSR's fall brought religious freedom and business to Kazakhstan.

9/11 in the Arabian Desert – My Faith Found a Welcome

Around us were an estimate 20,000 Afghani and potential Taliban sympathizers living and working, as a new era was ushered in on September 11, 2001. They had mounted uprisings in the past, so the situation was tense, fluid and unpredictable. I was coordinating academics at the United Arab Emirates' military academy, their equivalent of America's West Point. The general called senior staff into his command center to make immediate plans for the care and protection of the 30 or so international faculty and their families.

As we discussed rendezvous points and escape routes, the Muslim call to prayer sounded from nearby minarets. The general looked over to the sergeant who'd till then been serving tea, and said, "You're better at this, you lead us." And at the same time he welcomed me, a Catholic, to join if I wished. They stopped to pray in the midst of the crisis right in the command center – a workplace.

It was my third year working in the country. Having my faith welcomed and acknowledged by my boss and colleagues profoundly impacted my relationships in this workplace. The invitation built trust in a way that never existed in my previous workplace just across the border in Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi, my faith was not only illegal, but I could face severe punishment if I mentioned or acted upon it in public or in the workplace. The UAE sat on essentially the same piece of sand. But on one side, the ruler gave land for our church and welcomed my faith. On the other side of the line, all churches were (and are) forbidden. On one side, I counted the hours until my contract was up and we could escape. On the other, I was motivated to work, even to write a book of poetry for use in UAE classrooms.

In an atmosphere where my faith had been welcomed, there was a level of trust that made the disruptions caused by 9/11 navigable, even in the middle of the Arabian desert. Happily, the uprising never materialized. And that year, our four children were confirmed and received into the Catholic Church in the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia.

Why Catholic?

If you have ever attended a Catholic mass, you may have noticed that there's a part in the liturgy where we proclaim, usually in song, the mystery of faith. In the mass this is referring to the truth and mystery of salvation through Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, which is made present in the celebration of the Eucharist. But for me, just the word *mystery* is one of the most beautiful moments in the mass because it indicates that there is still so much more to learn of God and his ways.

There is a whole doctrine built around the mystery of faith, and many could explain it in theological terms, but for me, the mystery of faith involves recognizing the importance of seeing God in everything, and not just through my own particular lens. And the mystery has implications for how I work with people of other faiths.

Embracing the mystery of faith opens up many new possibilities. It provides a way of approaching problems, opportunities, goals and objectives. It's not that I didn't embrace mystery before I became Catholic, but mass after mass this reminder reinforces a humble approach to life.

Faith impacts everything I do and have done. When I was four years old, as clear as could be, the face of Jesus came to me and said "Brian, be a missionary." As dramatic and impactful as that was, it is mysterious (μυστήριον in Greek, cf. 1 Timothy 3:16). And in that I continue to find my mission. I know that being able to bring the deepest recesses of faith to bear on life and work sets us free to do mysteriously wonderful things. I call that religious freedom. Join me in advancing this mission. Or, echoing how St. Ignatius ended his letters, *ite, inflammate omnia*, go forth and set the world on fire.