

Julia Gerlach and Jochen Töpfer (eds)

The Role of Religion in Eastern Europe Today

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REVIEWED BY Alar Kilp, University of Tartu

This volume studies the political role of religion in Eastern Europe. The book consists of seven studies by eight authors (representing the disciplines of political science, sociology, law, architecture and literature studies), plus an introduction and a conclusion written by the editors. The structure of this interdisciplinary book follows a symposium held in St. Petersburg in September 2012, where the papers were first presented.

The editors assume that societies in Eastern Europe share a similar historic experience of socialist regimes. Not all socialist regimes were equally close to the ideal of “banning religion from the public sphere” (Communist Albania was the closest), but the ideal of society without religion nevertheless resulted in similar patterns of state, society and economy (p. 11). Although similarities did exist among socialist societies of Europe, it is questionable whether this assumption increases our understanding of the relations between state and religion in the Communist period. Pedro Ramet (1987) has demonstrated that Communist religious policies were highly heterogeneous and factional both in and between countries, where each side (or faction) had “particularised dealings with factions on the other side” (p. ix). In this study, the assumption that all Socialist societies were following the same ideal does not explain why, for example, autocephaly was granted to the Macedonian Orthodox Church *during* the socialist regime (p. 41), because the actual relations of religion and state were empirically more complex and multivocal.

The editors approach the contemporary role of religion in Eastern Europe on the basis of the modernisation theory, which expects modern societies “not to promote a single collective national, ethnic, or religious identity of people” and to be “characterized by plurality (including that of religion) on the macro level, and by the acceptance of multiple identities of people on the micro level” (p. 13). In this view, politics that promotes “an exclusive vision of a single religious, ethnic, or national group” is “unable (and often not sufficiently stable) to foster long-term societal modernization – neither culturally, politically, nor economically” (p. 14). Accordingly, the editors argue that “the contributions show that the societies of Eastern Europe in general are ambivalent toward the issue of modernization”, primarily because the states have granted privileged status and access to government to specific religious organisations (p. 14). In their conclusion, the editors argue that East European societies are witnessing a “paradox of hybrid modernization”, in which societies are modernising technically and economically but attempt to construct and preserve a traditional religion-based social conservatism (p. 193).

The seven studies in this volume focus on the relations between religion and state in the Russian Federation (including Tatarstan), Macedonia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Germany. Germany is the only case outside the post-Communist region. Only in the case of Slovenia, is a strong cleavage found to exist between the conservative positions of the religious elite and the predominantly secular perspectives of the political elite (pp. 25, 40). According to Jochen Töpfer, this type of religious-political cleavage has been typical in Catholic European societies historically, where tensions between religious actors and modernisation resulted in widespread social religious indifference (p. 22). In this volume, Slovenia is the exceptional case by being a predominantly Catholic society and the country which has achieved the highest level of economic modernisation (with the exception of Germany, if economic modernisation is assessed according to the ranking of the country in the Human Development Index).

At several instances, the studies highlight similarities that exist in Eastern and Western Europe, as far as the relations of religion and state are concerned. The chapters by Jochen Töpfer ("Concepts of Religion and the State: An Application to South-Eastern Europe") and Sabine Riedel ("The Role of Democratic State in Inter-Religious Relations: Theoretical and Historical Considerations in Respect of Countries in Transition") observe that the way the relations of religion and state are organised (pp. 22–24) and the type of social integration policy that is used (pp. 73, 74) vary among East European countries as they do among West European countries. The second pattern that seems to be similar for Eastern and Western Europe is the magnifying impact of ethno-religious diversity. In the case of ethno-religiously plural Macedonia, Töpfer observes the division of ethno-religious alliances as having been translated to politics (p. 22). Nadir Kinossian's ("Resurrection of the Temple. The Role of the State in Shaping Regional Political Identity") analysis of the reconstruction and opening of Christian and Muslim sacred monuments – a Sunni mosque and an Orthodox Church – in Kazan (the capital of the traditionally Islamic region of Tatarstan), also illustrates the interplay of religion and politics in a diverse ethno-religious context where regional authorities are attempting to find a way to substantiate regional claims for sovereignty and to strengthen regional ethnic and religious identities (pp. 155, 156), while retaining religious sites which symbolise the authority of the central government and the federal state.

Are courts in Eastern Europe dealing with similar or different cases, which proscribe or extend the role of religion in public and political life? Courts in both Germany and the Russian Federation deal with religion-related cases, but they do it with a different focus and purpose. The chapter by Burkhard Breig ("Law and Religion in Germany: The Case of Circumcision of Boys") offers important insights about the legal debates triggered by a single case, where German courts had to decide whether the boy's right to physical integrity had to be weighed against the parents' right to bring up their children and to practice their religion. The studies by Damir Gainutdinov ("Russian Practice: Persecution for Criticism or Punishment for Blasphemy"), and Inga Pylypchuk and Heike Winkel ("Strong Emotions, Weak Subjects. On the Role of Hurt Feelings in the Trial against Pussy Riot") deal with recent laws and court cases in the Russian Federation. They highlight the instrumental use of concepts such as "hurt religious feelings", incitement of religious hatred, and "desecration of articles, marks and emblems symbolizing religion" (pp. 96, 171), which in practice tend not to defend the feelings of believers, but to protect the Russian Orthodox Church and public authorities from criticism (pp. 99, 169).

What similarities were found in the studies of East European post-Communist societies? The studies find an organised religion that has attained a new visibility throughout the region (p. 12), the empirical relations of religion and state being contextualised and moulded by ethnic identities and nationalist policies (p. 109). Churches representing the cultural majority operate as a source and a pillar of legitimisation of the state (p. 51), which unite individuals among

themselves and with the state (pp. 103, 111) by means of *emotional* ties based on religious feelings (p. 170).

About half of the book deals with the Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church. How should the case of Russia be understood comparatively? Is Russia a trend-setter, regionally the “most representative” case, or an exceptional case? Several answers to these questions can be found in Julia Gerlach’s chapter (“Religion and State Identity – Building in the New Russia”). She observes that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the vitality of religion in Russian society has grown almost linearly – the percentages of regular attendance in religious services and of Orthodox believers has been growing, whereas the proportion of convinced atheists has decreased from 35 to 5 percent (pp. 121–123). While increasing religious vitality is regionally not specific to Russia, Gerlach argues that the “religious turn” of the Russian state demonstrates the regime’s strategic reaction to a bottom-up trend of increasing religious vitality and the relevance of religion (pp. 106, 120). To put it differently, it is strategically rational for the regime to rely on the Orthodox Church in building up its legitimacy, because the latter has been trusted as stable and reliable over time as no other public actor in Russian society (p. 126). Gerlach reminds us, however, that the rising levels of religiosity in Russian society have been paralleled by *decreasing* non-acceptance of abortion, euthanasia, divorce, and homosexuality (p. 123), which means that the “conservative turn” manifested in Russian legislation has proceeded “from above”. The relationship of religion and state in Russia seems regionally exceptional because of the ethnically diverse members of the Russian Orthodox Church (p. 117) and the political functions of the church, which extend beyond specific ethno-linguistic identities (p. 123).

In conclusion, this study of religion in East European societies highlights the political functions of religion and the reasons for the growing political importance of religion (pp. 191, 192), which are valid in other regions of the world as well. The valuable insights regarding regional, intra-regional and country-specific patterns and trends mostly come from Orthodox countries, Russia in particular. The volume would have been more coherent if the case-selection had included only post-Communist Orthodox-majority societies or if the editors had explained in more detail the comparative insights attained by the studies of religion in German legal practice and in Slovenian politics.

REFERENCES

- RAMET, Pedro. 1987. *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.