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Religion, politics and nation-building in post-communist countries

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BOOK REVIEW

Religion, politics and nation-building in post-communist countries, edited by Greg Simons and David Westerlund, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, 220 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781472449696

This book tells us about how the interaction of religion and politics was formed, developed, and organized in former Communist states, what now constitutes a challenge to these relations, and how these challenges can be addressed. Questions addressing the resurgence of religion in the public sphere of the former Communist states have regained significant scholarly attention since the early 1990s. To no small extent inspired by Samuel Huntington (1993), religious resurgence was hypothesized as being a “clear-cut case of de-secularization” given that it developed as a reaction to forced secularization under Communism (Karpov 2010). Other prominent scholars asserted a correlation between the fall of Communism and religious revival, with the latter filling the ideological vacuum left by the former. See, for example Steven Batalden’s *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia* (1993), Michael Bourdeaux’s *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (1995), or Rogers Brubaker’s *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Questions in the New Europe* (1996). The failure of state institutions or malicious practices established by political elites were deemed as other explanatory factors for religious revival on the political scene in some parts of former Communist Eastern Europe (Borowik and Tomka 2001). As the argument went, when secular governments failed to deliver economic and social prosperity, the crisis of legitimacy created a power vacuum that religions craftily filled. See in this regard Jonathan Fox: *An Introduction to Religion and Politics Theory and Practice* (2013), and Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart: *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (2004). The book examines the “secularization debate” by providing examples from post-Communist Eastern Europe about the relationship between religion, state, and nation.

Chapter 1 examines how “religious diplomacy” works in the cases of Christian Orthodox churches in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. After reviewing formal legal and constitutional agreements, newspaper articles, and interviews, the chapter concludes that churches “have a lot of potential” (40) to influence political actors involved in conflict. Examples of the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches’ mediating between their respective states after the Russo-Georgian war are given. In Ukraine, a schism in the organizational structure of the Orthodox Church, between pro-Western and pro-Russian camps, complicates its role as a mediating agency in the state’s foreign policy. The chapter also refers to opinion polls conducted in Russia and Georgia on the level of trust in religious organizations. Here one would wish that the polls be better interpreted. Who is conducting these polls and surveys? How do these polls measure the religious situation? What is the level of trust toward the polls in the three countries in the query?

Chapter 2 explores the meanings and uses of the religious ritual of winter-bathing, performed on the day of Epiphany in Russia. The author scrutinizes the culture-generating

power of the ritual and motifs behind it and its religious and traditional interpretations. It also attempts to trace the shifting trajectory of the meaning that is ascribed to this tradition in folk culture, art, literature, poetry, and political context. The chapter is rich with visual materials which graphically illustrate the Epiphany, and with reflections on the writings of Anton Chekhov, Ivan Shmeliov, and Marina Tsvetaeva. The section on “Winter-Bathing in Modern Politics” reflects wittily on contemporary interpretations of the ritual in Putin’s Russia, followed by a brief discussion of the ritual in media. Indeed the story about the meaning of the ritual (Epiphany) as a manifestation of faith and national identity throughout Russian history is of immense interest, but one would wish to read more about the contemporary rather than historical context for the chapter to fully fit into the overall theme of the book.

Chapter 3 focuses on the politization of religion and its implication for the development of religious nationalism. The chapter navigates through detailed background information and elaborates on the ontology of the slogan “Orthodoxy or Death,” studying the contexts under which it is used in different countries, and compares the context to the Russian situation. Furthermore, the chapter problematizes the legal framework often used by the Kremlin for political repression. As its argument goes, religion is at times used as a shield for political decisions to justify the restriction of freedom of speech when the latter “incites hatred against a social group” (as in the Russian Criminal Code). Despite an engaging discussion, one wishes the author would elaborate on the concept of “counter-cultural Orthodoxy,” which is mentioned in passing but needs at least a working definition.

Chapter 4 brings the reader to the problem of ethnic identity construction in North Russia. The chapter examines whether and to what extent Shamanism was used by the indigenous population as an instrument for “ethnos-building.” The author provides evidence on how the colonized native groups (the Sakha, Tuvians, Buryats, Khakassians, and others) developed senses of belonging, and how they, as minorities within the Russian Federation, maintained religious traditions in their own geographical spaces. By referring to the contemporary expressions of shamanism in different Russian republics, the chapter notes the revival of indigenous cultures and practices (e.g. dances, construction of temples, feasts, and rituals). The author concludes by questioning the extent to which Shamanism can be a unifying factor for “ethnos-building” because of its low adherence, non-inclusive nature, conflicts between smaller indigenous populations and larger ones, and lack of mutual interest between the indigenous and Western practitioners of shamanism.

Chapter 5 continues the theme of religions in Russia, shifting the point of inquiry to Islam. The author attempts to examine how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in contemporary Russian media and in public political discussions. It focuses on four main themes: tradition, ethnicity, religion versus politics, and loyalty to the Russian state. The reader will not be surprised to find out that, even though Islam is acknowledged as a legal minority religion, the equation of Islam with radicalism and terrorism still persists in parts of Russian society and in the media. The division between nontraditional and traditional, radical and moderate, in addition to the image of minorities as unable or unwilling to adapt to the Russian way of life, divides public attitudes toward Islam. As the chapter argues, Russian Muslim organizations face a challenge of legitimacy from the state: whether and how to avoid certain labeling (e.g. accusations of disloyalty, terrorism, radicalism, etc.) and to continue functioning. This struggle for finding legitimacy puts the reputation of Muslim organizations in the eyes of ordinary Russian Muslims under question, whereas an inconsistency of the state authorities in treating Muslims according to the political costs and benefits (mainly judged by loyalty to the regime; attempts to support

traditional tolerant Islam against radical politicized Islam) creates a disadvantaged position for the former while empowering the latter.

Chapter 6 is a continuation of the theme of Islam in the former Soviet states and focuses on the interaction of law and religion with political action in contemporary Azerbaijan. It further examines the challenges of a state that, in the author's own words, attempts to "promote religion as an important part of national ideology and freedom of religion as a constitutional cornerstone" (138). How the Azerbaijani state depicts some Islamic symbols (for example, the hijab), how it interprets foreign threats (e.g. externally funded religious organizations), and why it categorizes "right versus wrong" Islam are the questions addressed in this chapter. Drawing on data gathered through interviews with clerics and political actors, the author guides the reader through the internal struggles of Muslim communities which refuse to accept state religious policies.

Chapters 7 and 8 shift the focus to formerly Communist Estonia and Poland. Chapter 7 attempts to understand the role of the Lutheran church in the making of the Estonian nation. The author reflects on the role that the Lutheran church and clergy played in the modernization of Estonian society, the awakening of a national movement, and the role of religious clerics in anti-Tsarist mobilization. Chapter 8 focuses on the role of radio station Mary in mobilizing conservative forces and generating religious nationalism since 1991. Unlike in Poland, Estonia constitutes the case where the shifting attitudes of the people toward the Lutheran Church are observed throughout its history. If the newly independent Estonian Republic (after the October Revolution in 1917) changed its attitude toward religion from being the "people's church" to collective ambivalence toward it, religion steadily maintained a highly important status in both public and private life in Poland. Interestingly, certain parallels can be drawn between Estonia and Poland. In Estonia the Lutheran Church constituted "a form of cultural resistance and counterculture" (149) to Soviet Communism, while in Poland although to a different degree and divergent manifestation to that of the Lutheran church, the Catholic Church was a pillar of nationalist mobilization against Communism.

Chapter 9 attempts to understand the different manifestations of religious pluralism in Orthodox Christianity-dominated Romania by focusing on field observations in the village of Țigănești. Furthermore, the author tries to show that despite being hegemonic on a macro-level, the Romanian Orthodox Church can barely compete with a minority religion when it comes to religious practice on the grass-root level. The chapter also provides an interesting historical context on how Romanian national identity became intertwined with Orthodox Christian identity and how the Orthodox Church maintained a position of power throughout history. Then this thought-provoking introduction which aimed "to fill the theoretical void that exists in the understanding of Romanian religiosity at the grass-root level" (182) moves in a peculiar theoretical direction. Contextualizing the secularization debate within the Weberian thesis on the "Protestant ethic and capitalism," and categorizing Adventists operating in Țigănești into Weberian ideal-types show the author's general knowledge but do little to the chapter's theoretical framework. How he applies rational-choice theory also complicates the theoretical argument. To what extent the religious situation in Țigănești could be hypothesized as an example of a pluralistic religious economy remains not fully explained either. Furthermore, the "secularization debate" is addressed in a couple of sentences in the final section of the chapter, without any reference to its relevance to and rationale for the case study. The choice of language remains categorical and phrases such as "obvious facts," "virtually impossible not to bring into the discussion," and "a series of facts that practically begged for rational choice theory" give the reader a sense of the author's enthusiasm about the subject of research, but little beyond.

Overall, the book indeed gives an interesting interdisciplinary insight into the religious and political situation in the former Communist countries.

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