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Filo's "Christian World Community and the Cold War: International Christian Conference in Bratislava on 5-8 September 2001" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS


It is not standard practice to review a book in which one’s own chapter appeared but among the extenuating circumstances is that my paper was also published in REE, Vol. XXXI, No. 4 (Nov. 2011) and the editor’s paper is being published in this issue (Július Filo, “The Lutheran Church and Society in Slovakia during the Cold War”) so that the readers are able to make their own judgments about these two contributions. In line with the focus of REE only chapters relevant to Eastern Europe will be reviewed here. Eight of the 17 papers delivered in Bratislava dealt primarily with the impact of the Cold War on the Churches in Eastern Europe.

The entire volume contains the first printed material emerging from an international research project broadly entitled “Christian World Community and the Cold War” initiated in 2009 whose interim coordinator is Prof. Risto Lehtonen of Finland, and supported by an International Coordination Committee composed of church leaders and scholars. Several meetings have taken place in Slovakia, Germany, Sweden, and the USA with the aim of finding resource persons and scholars who could shed light from a variety of perspectives about the mutual impact of the Cold War and the churches not only in the East and the West but around the world, as the East-West rivalry impacted Christian communities on all continents. Unsurprisingly, one of the greatest challenges is to find the financial means by which the project can be carried out. A grant by the “International Visegradfund” made possible the publication of the September 5-8, 2011, conference papers delivered in Bratislava.

The availability of state archival material in many of the former Communist countries allow scholars a clearer picture into situations that were occasionally made evident from other sources but sometimes remained hidden until now. This was particularly manifest by the two papers dealing with Bulgaria. The first is Momchil Metodiev’s “The Ecumenical Activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Reasons, Motivations, Consequences.” The harsh oppression of all churches in Bulgaria was well known. What was less well known is to what degree the Communist government penetrated and manipulated the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Metodiev, basing his conclusions on the documents of the State Committee for Church Affairs and the even more sinister and determinative Sixth Department of the State Security Service, discloses the close cooperation between the Soviet Government’s cooperation with the Bulgarian and other Eastern European government to spy upon and penetrate the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical agencies hoping to turn them into propaganda advantages for the Socialist Bloc. He was able to discover and divulge the code names given by the Secret Services to some of the bishops and theology professors who played important roles in Geneva. Some of them, such as the lay theologian Todor Sabev, who was trusted by many in the WCC, was for decades in the continued service of the spy agency. Metodiev maintains that one should interpret the Bulgarian Orthodox Church’s schism in the 1990s and the Church’s withdrawal from the ecumenical movement in 1998 as a reaction to these disclosures making many believe that ecumenism is a Communist plot.

Velislav Altanov authored “Religious Revitalization Among Bulgarians During and After

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2 We tentatively plan to publish additional papers from this book in future issues.
Communist Time.” The short piece is devoted to a quick survey of the impact of Protestant (mostly American) missionaries in the 19th Century and the Bulgarian Communist government’s attempt to annihilate this movement. However, among the least institutionalized Pentecostal population a veritable revival began forming in the 1980s of which particularly successful were the “Tinchevist” movement and the Bulgarian Church of God which proliferated in home churches and among the youth so that subsequently they were able to draw huge crowds of thirty and forty thousand people at their rallies.

The chapter on Hungary was written by András Korányi, entitled “The Church Between Socialist Isolation and the Global Context of Cold War World.” His is a difficult piece to read in which he focuses on the Lutheran Church of Hungary between 1956 and 1986. The author does not make it clear why he skipped the Stalinist period up to the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolt but he picks up on the complexities of the relationship between the international ecumenical movement and particularly the Lutheran World Federation and the brutal removal of the reinstated and world-popular Lutheran Bishop Lajos Ordáss and the dictatorial policies of János Kádár whose government engineered the second removal of Ordáss and the appointment of Zoltán Káldy as Ordáss’ successor. Both Hungary and the Lutheran Church of Hungary under Káldy gradually emerged from isolation to a point when the LWF held its Assembly in 1984 in Budapest and Káldy was elected president of LWF, much to the displeasure of many dissidents (REE published several articles about it in the 1980s). However, what seemed as coup for churches under socialism turned out to be a prelude to the impending collapse of the Communist system, to which the Hungarians contributed significantly.

Two chapters deal with the former German Democratic Republic. Katharina Kunter, a scholar from the western part of Germany wrote “Between Active Opposition, Dialogue and Loyalty: Churches in the German Democratic Republic 1970-1989/90” in which she describes a deteriorating economic situation that increased the population’s dissatisfaction and led to increased migration to the West, a state-church relationship which she calls détente that gradually led to tensions which created a new role for the majority Protestant Churches to provide shelter for the rising youth opposition seeking peace, ecological protection, and democratization. Hers is a succinct and insightful analysis of the last decade or two of the crumbling East German Communist state and the positive role that the Protestant Churches played in that process.

The second, a longer paper entitled “The Evangelical Churches in the GDR and Their Participation in East-West Cooperation” was written by Christa Grengel, a church leader from the former GDR, who provided an insider’s view of the effort of East German Protestants to maintain a sense of unity with their sister churches in West Germany, and play a reconciling role between East and West through the ecumenical movement. The time span of the entire Cold War is covered in her chapter in which she stresses the desire for cooperation and German unity through the various stages of the political developments in the GDR The value of her scholarly paper is enhanced by having been an active participant in the ecumenical activities of her church. The footnotes in both papers are a testimony of the amount of publishing activity in the German language on various aspects of the struggle of the German churches for Christian identity, reconciliation, and reunion.

“The International Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church during the Cold War: The Results and Future Prospects of Study” we co-authored by Nadezda Belyakova and Aleksej Beglov. The paper was delivered by Belyakova in Bratislava in a German translation that was almost incoherent, obviously a poor translation from its Russian original, but in this book it is more competently translated into English, although with some problems such as a sentence half in
English and half in Russian and the last sentence of the conclusion being an incomplete phrase. Nevertheless the findings of the authors are clear enough. They point out that the only archival material available currently are those of the Council on Church Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR while Church archives are unavailable for research. Since nearly all ROC activities had to be reported to the government one can get a fair picture of what transpired in state-church relations. The authors trace the change from the Communist intention to obliterate all religious activity after the Bolshevik Revolution by way of several stages to the decision for them to exploit church representatives to advance the Soviet foreign policy interests. The controversial role of Metropolitan Nikodim is at the center of the authors’ analysis. They also point out that after a certain time the church representatives who were permitted to represent the Russian Orthodox Church in its dealings with churches abroad for the purpose of the “struggle for peace” learned how to derive benefits for the Church and even mildly influence state policies. While there is not much in this article of what Western scholars were not aware regarding this topic, the value is that most of these suspicions and indirectly learned insights are now explicitly confirmed by governmental documents. Simply put, every day church representatives had to write reports to their government of their experiences abroad and at least some of them shared the broad aspirations of Soviet policies.

John Arnold’s “Cold War, Dissidence and the Ecumenical Movement” is a mostly first person account of his and other British church people’s attempt to shed light on the complexities of East-West church relationships which were so effectively presented in their publication Discretion and Valour. Arnold provides some captivating even entertaining accounts of contacts both with officialdom as well as with dissidents. Dianne Kirby’s “The Church of England and the Early Cold War” provides a rather different perspective on how the Church of England was increasingly maneuvered by its own government into an anti-Communist Cold War stance, isolating and marginalizing those of its clergy that were for a more appreciative and cooperative attitude toward the Communist countries.

A number of other chapters also shed very helpful information regarding the church situation in socialist countries. Of these the most detailed is a lengthy chapter by Risto Lehtonen, perhaps the major facilitator of this project and a longtime officer of the Lutheran World Federation, entitled “The Lutheran World Federation under the Cold War.” Being both a scholar and a major church leader Lehtonen’s work is of exceptional importance. He traces the developments in the LWF from the Lund Assembly in 1947 just prior to the hardening of the division in Europe that was called by westerners “The Iron Curtain,” to the 7th Assembly in 1984 held in Budapest. I regard it as one of the finest analyses both of public and behind the scene maneuvering that characterized this controversial gathering. Some were scandalized by it and interpreted it as a caving in to Marxist manipulation, others saw it as an opportunity for a worldwide Church to witness under all socio-economic systems and circumstances. The election of Bishop Zoltán Káldy as the president of the LWF may have seemed to anti-Communists as caving in to Communist pressure but for this reviewer it seems that the losers were those hardline Communists of Hungary who were already imperceptibly being brushed away by the great broom of history.

Leaving out of this review chapters by other contributors by no means is meant to undervalue their contribution; their focus is simply less intently directed toward the religious situation in Eastern Europe.

Copies of the book can be ordered directly from Dr. Filo by emailing filo@fevth.uniba.sk,

Rusmir Mahmutčehajić explores the symbolism and “sacred geography” of the traditional Bosnian town of Stolac. The book lovingly recounts its beauty, the tragic story of its destruction, and the hope and possibilities engendered by its reconstruction and renewal.

*Maintaining the Sacred Center* is a lyrical work, and in many ways a personal one, deeply rooted in the author’s knowledge of Islamic mysticism, his first-hand knowledge of Stolac (his family’s home), and the historical realities of Bosnia. Focusing on the čaršija or town center, Rusmir Mahmutčehajić draws upon the language of symbolism and the perennial philosophy to illuminate Stolac as a sacred city and to throw light on human nature—our human relationships to society, to one another, to the natural world, and to the transcendental. In short, this is a book that has something to offer all readers with an interest in the deeper meanings of the sacred, and in what it means to truly be human.

*Maintaining the Sacred Center* is, in a sense, an extended exploration of the relationship between the inner self and the outer world, both of which, ultimately, form a greater unity. As many traditional philosophers have realized, the larger cosmos and human self are co-implicated in the quest for knowledge and understanding. As Mahmutčehajić writes, “We cannot orient ourselves as human beings, without taking into account existence as a whole and every aspect of our own selves” (xxii). In order to know ourselves, we must understand the world and the greater order from which we have emerged. In this sense, cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, and spirituality cannot be separated.

Traditionally, these relationships engaged the attention of the greatest scientists, who were also philosophers. But in recent times, the role of science has become limited to a far more narrow pursuit, based on the reductionistic premises of positivism: that only what can be measured is real. At the same time, scientific positivism and instrumental reason—carrying with it the assumption that human beings exist with the primary purpose of manipulating the world and nature—has become enshrined as the primary valid way of envisioning the world. This has led to a kind of reductionism, and a severe flattening of our rich, multidimensional, and pluralistic human nature. In short, for some centuries now, the human soul, and what is required for soulful living, have become increasingly marginalized. What we are left with is mere instrumental knowledge and techniques for the manipulation of nature (and other people); and what is lost is a satisfying vision of human fulfillment. We are thus left with the situation, aptly described in one prophetic utterance: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18).

*Maintaining the Sacred Center* is a welcome contribution to the project of rediscovering meaning, depth, and spirituality in the fabric of what has become a disenchanted world and landscape. In this work, Dr. Mahmutčehajić turns to the deepest and most beautiful insights of the Islamic tradition, which teaches that all human beings are “created from one soul” (Qur’an 7:189) and which instructs its followers to “make no distinction between any of His prophets” (Qur’an 2:285). This is the generous, inclusive vision of Islam, overflowing with a divine mercy that sent no less than 124,000 prophets to humanity, so that “there does not exist a people or language which has not received its Book” (61)—a generous vision that promises salvation to all people, to all “People of the Book,” who surrender their hearts to the divine. In this way, Mahmutčehajić...