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Frazee's "Christian Churches of the Eastern Mediterranean"

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students’ expectations towards the higher educational institutions of the region (Révay 2010), their consumption of time and plans for the future (Bocsi 2010), their extracurricular activities (Németh 2010), as well as their attitude to academic integrity (Barta 2010) and to moral issues (Smolitz et al. 2010).

The importance of this book lies in the fact that it has made the first step in focusing on the necessity that church-related and private institutions should be treated separately. The book also points out that in the post-communist area religion has different historical background with varying types of structure and social function, thus we cannot use Western-type of standards in examining the role of religious culture in higher education. Strengths of this work also include the usefulness of the information, the detailed analyses, and the various samples of institutions surveyed by the authors who have rich experience in this special field.

As the title indicates, this volume attempts to provide a concise picture of religion and higher education in Central and Eastern Europe dealing with the general topic of faith-based higher education in various ways and from different perspectives. The papers wish to explore whether the social context dominated by religious youth and the personal religious identity or practice have an effect on general moral questions, attitude to academic integrity and expectations towards the higher educational institutions of the region. As Santiago Sia states in his introduction the challenges that education has faced recently are relevant to faith-based higher education and this is an issue that needs to be focused on (Sia 2010).

This volume explores its topic from various angles through the writing of authors who present their results in this book. Nearly all post-communist countries are represented by a study showing “the country-based interpretations of the investigated type of higher education to offer a chance to understand the speciality and the common features of faith-based institutions in this region.” (Pusztai 2010: 30) Due to the fact that the studies are written in English, a wider public may read, for the first time, the findings of an international team.

This book will be particularly helpful to those wishing to study the place for religious cultures in higher education after the change of the political system in post-communist countries. These studies also give useful analyses and explanations for readers eager to understand the transformations that took place in central and eastern European education policy. Furthermore, these writings can stimulate foster reflections and researches.

It is worth mentioning that editor Pusztai has recently published a book exploring the same topic. (Pusztai 2008.) Examining the academic career of students coming from different types of (state or church-related) secondary schools, her book reveals that even underprivileged students who studied in religious institutions achieve better results in higher education than their counterparts from state schools. Their faith has a significant effect on their social context in higher education as well as on their attitude towards work (Pusztai 2009).

Reviewed by Professor Mária Farkas, University of Debrecen, Hungary.


Charles Frazee’s Christian Churches of the Eastern Mediterranean adds to the growing body of historical scholarship oriented toward a recovery of the significance of eastern Christianity. His work, aimed at both the academic and layperson alike, demonstrates that non-western spheres of influence were especially crucial in the early centuries of the history of Christianity. Frazee desires
to connect these churches back to the New Testament past and forward to the twenty-first century present. While each section of Christian Churches of the Eastern Mediterranean contains its own chronology, Frazee organizes the book thematically around geographical centers such as Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, the church of the East between “southeastern Turkey and modern Iraq” (242), and Armenia. Frazee’s book is less about breaking new interpretive ground or establishing an innovative, provocative thesis than it is about providing a general introduction to Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean region. Frazee succeeds in his task despite the considerable scope, and at times the hurried pacing, of his account.

“The story of the eastern Christians begins at Pentecost” (vii), Frazee notes in an introduction that provides a historical—and theological—origins story for the eastern Mediterranean church that incorporates the life of Jesus, the book of Acts, and the spread of Christianity into the Roman Empire and Mediterranean world. Given Frazee’s intent to relate the eastern Mediterranean church to the New Testament period, the structure becomes slightly awkward when the first chapter begins with fourth century Constantinople while subsequent sections revert back to the first century. Frazee demonstrates, however, the ecclesiastical and political preeminence of Constantinople for eastern Christianity and therefore gives it the most extensive coverage of all his locales. The conversion and rule of Constantine, early church councils, the rule of Justinian, the Crusades and the fall of Constantinople are among the familiar topics woven into a larger tapestry that carries the story into the “the Age of Nationalism” from 1789 to the present. The value of this approach, evident in later chapters as well, is found in the panoramic perspective it offers regarding the changes and continuity of eastern Christianity throughout various historical periods. It does mean that some subjects are left deserving of more attention—for example, 878 years of Egyptian religious history (“Copts and Caliphs, 639-1517”) are condensed to 11 pages—but Frazee nevertheless intends and delivers a general and useful introduction.

Frazee’s broad canvas allows the reader to see many critical issues and themes of church history played out in various locales. Similar themes such as the changing fortunes of Christianity in the Roman Empire, theological controversies and church councils, the rise of Islam, the Crusades and Western imperialism appear and reappear throughout the book, but Frazee effectively draws out the unique particularities of each place. Examples include Coptic Christianity of Alexandria, the increasingly ecumenical relationship between Catholic and Orthodox Christians in Syria, the lingering legacy of Christianity’s birthplace in Jerusalem, the long history of martyrdom in the Church of the East, and the intimate intermingling of religious and national identity within Armenian Christianity.

A brief review cannot do justice to the range of issues raised and events covered in Christian Churches of the Eastern Mediterranean. Frazee’s breadth of knowledge is on display, though one wishes that he would attempt more of the synthesis between the sections of the books as is hinted at in a brief two-page conclusion. Nevertheless, he succeeds in producing a work that will serve as a valuable reference for understanding the exceptional nature of eastern Christianity. But beyond a work of scholarship, Frazee clearly hopes that his self-published work will contain lessons for the faithful as they seek “to keep the Christian message alive and relevant” (290) given the challenges of the present.

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