Beyer's "Recovering Solidarity: Lessons From Poland's Unfinished Revolution" - Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 31: Iss. 1, Article 7.
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faced by religious communities in Eastern Europe during the Communist era. Fresh as the studies in the volume under review are, they had significant predecessors: Trevor Beeson, Paul Oestreicher, Paul Možes, and Thomas Bremer (to name no others) offered significant scholarly studies; articles in Glaube in der zweiten Welt or Religion in Eastern Europe might well have been cited; and the Marxist-Christian dialogues held during the Cold War deserved acknowledgment.

Even so, the introduction rightly points out that the options faced by Christians in the region during the Communist era were more diverse than the alternatives of persecution or craven accommodation — a simplistic assessment too often assumed in popular discussions of ecclesiastical existence in Communist Europe. Porter-Szücs also points out the several new interpretive frameworks utilized by various of the contributing authors. This all resulted, as he points out, in considerable and significant contributions to scholarship on Christianity in Eastern Europe.

A brief review cannot mention all of them. Even so, a few can be noted. Martin Putna offers a stimulating evaluation of Czech Catholicism’s endeavors to find a Christian socio-economic pathway distinct from liberalism, Communism, and fascism. Anca Şincan’s study considers what was involved in actually building churches in Communist Romania: much more construction was permitted than might be expected in a state ostensibly committed to eliminating religion, but she points out that governmental permission could serve Communist purposes in various ways (similar, mutatis mutandis, to what transpired in post-Trianon Romania before the advent of Communism, it could have been noted). Katharina Kunter’s chapter contrasts insightfully the ways Czech and German Protestants articulated their position on the controverted concept of human rights. Natalia Shlikhta looks carefully at what was intended by the Soviet leadership, the Russian Orthodox hierarchs, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic clergy and faithful in the various endeavors associated with the “return” of Ukrainian Greek Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy. Carefully analyzing the evidence from discrete areas of Poland, James Bjork demonstrates considerable regional diversity in actual adherence to and practice of Catholicism. Patrick Hyder Patterson offers a thoughtful rumination on what Europe as a whole could learn from Eastern Europe’s experience with Islam. The concluding chapter by Bruce R. Berglund offers challenging and provocative suggestions toward a “historical geography of East European Christianity.”

This volume is a worthy and welcome addition, enriched by ready access to archives closed to virtually all previous scholars, to the literature on religion in Eastern Europe. The various chapters end up together offering treatment of most of the nations in the region. There is much here which will be of interest to readers of this journal.

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Reviewed by John T. Pawlikowski.

Gerald Beyer comes to this study with a twofold background. Trained in social ethics at Boston College he is able to place the Polish social revolution within the broader setting of Catholic social teaching. As a resident of Poland for several years during Poland’s transition from socialism to a capitalist democracy he is well equipped to reflect on this transition from within the context of actual life in Poland during this period. His extensive notes and bibliography show a broad acquaintance of documentary materials and secondary literature both in Polish and in English. This gives the book a strength beyond what an outside evaluator could provide.

Beyer’s work represents a long overdue incorporation of the central and eastern European
experience into contemporary discussions about the integration of ethical perspectives into the institutions of contemporary society. While the specific setting of the book is Poland over the past two decades it carries implications for broader questions of ethics within the current global economic system now heavily dominated by neoliberalism. The central/eastern European geographic area has largely been ignored by present-day religious social ethicists. Beyer’s book represents one of the first penetrations of the recent central/eastern European experience of nation building.

Beyer’s principal focus in this volume is on the notion of solidarity which the late Pope John Paul II elevated to the status of a virtue. He sets his analysis within the history of the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s as it sought (and in his judgment basically failed) to maintain this core value of solidarity during the process of the social and political transformation of the country. As Poland rapidly moved into a capitalist economic framework solidarity as a basic value lost its appeal and serious gaps began to emerge within its social fabric. The question remains for Beyer whether any capitalist country can truly embrace solidarity in practice, which he regards as a core element in Catholic social thought.

Beyer attributes the rapid decline of the Solidarity movement’s initial ideals to the embrace of neo-liberal economics by key Polish governmental officials, particularly those dealing with the financial sector. He comes down especially hard on Leszek Balcerowicz whom many regard as the principal architect of the post-communist economy in Poland. Beyer argues that Balcerowicz’s shock therapy on the Polish economy resulted in considerable pain and suffering for many of the most vulnerable elements of the Polish population and laid the groundwork for the creation of a two-tier economic reality in contemporary Poland which some label as “Poland A” (the prosperous” - mostly in the major cities) and “Poland B” (the rural regions and more remote areas in eastern Poland where economic deprivation has become the norm). Beyer marshals an impressive array of official governmental figures to prove the existence of this growing gap in Polish society which has undermined the basic spirit of the Solidarity movement.

Beyer’s attack on Balcerowicz and his strong emphasis on the festering economic gap in Poland is without question the most controversial aspect of his analysis. For many would credit Balcerowicz for transforming Poland into a virtual economic miracle in central Europe, a nation whose economy has withstood the current global economic crisis far better than most countries in western Europe. In fact, at the recent World’s Fair in Shanghai, China, a sign within the Polish pavilion claimed that Poland would soon become one of the twenty richest countries in the world. Unfortunately most of the governmental reports cited by Beyer are now rather dated. While the descriptions of Poland today by a number of commentators, both within Poland as well as outside observers, speak of Poland A/Poland B as continuing realities, this claim needs to be undergirded by more recent governmental statistics to be fully credible. And Beyer will have to mount a somewhat stronger argument for his contention that Balcerowicz’s shock therapy was as disastrous for Poland as he seems to claim given Poland’s economic surge of late. I believe an argument can still be mounted along this line, but it will have to pursue argumentation rooted in basic Christian ethical values, particularly those emerging from Catholic social teaching, rather than one which implies a certain failure of the Balcerowicz approach in the more limited economic sphere. The economy may indeed be thriving in contemporary Poland if one measures success on the basis of narrow economic criteria. But what price has this success exacted in terms of social cohesion in the country and in terms of the dignity and well-being of a not insignificant portion of the population? This question remains quite valid in terms of Beyer’s original analysis even though the concrete economics needs updating.

It is interesting to note one omission in Beyer’s description of the neoliberal takeover of the
post-communist Polish economy. He ignores the role played by some American neoliberal advocates such as Michael Novak in bringing their perspective to bear on the transformation of the Polish economy. These American neoliberals wholeheartedly championed the neoliberal economic model during the period of Poland’s economic transformation. And they did this with considerable direct involvement and not merely as spectators on the sidelines. So it is a bit surprising that Beyer does not go into their important role in supporting the Balcerowicz effort.

Beyer is also rather critical of the Polish Episcopal Conference during the era of economic redesign in their country. With only a few exceptions the bishops did not raise any moral questions about what was happening to these people who fell into Poland B. For Beyer this silence represented a significant moral failure on the part of the Polish bishops as a whole. They seemingly were unprepared to take up economic issues in the country despite the teachings of Pope John Paul II who weighed in so strongly and so often on fundamental economic justice in his three social encyclicals as well as in numerous speeches during his quite extensive travels.

Overall, despite the dated data, this volume is a very valuable contribution to the study of societal development in central/eastern Europe after the fall of Communism. It also is an important analysis of the difficulties in implementing Catholic social teaching in any context from a part of the world that rarely gets a hearing in such discussions. In the end Beyer believes that the tide is turning against neoliberal economics and implies that the Poland economy built by Balcerowicz may face considerable challenges in the future despite the rave reviews it is receiving presently in many quarters.

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