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Leustean's "Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW


Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91 examines how the Orthodox (and Greek Catholic and Oriental Orthodox) churches lived through the period of Communist domination. While most of the focus is appropriately on the churches of Russia and Eastern Europe, which existentially endured the greatest pressures of the Cold War period, the treatment also covers not only the diaspora churches from these regions but also the various Orthodox communions elsewhere in the world. This makes for a fascinating, up-to-date consideration of how Eastern Christianity fared during the second half of the twentieth century.

As is well known, Orthodoxy has historically preferred to work out of the symphonia ideal, in which civil government and the Orthodox Church operate hand-in-glove to lead the nation. With the coming to power, first in the Russian Empire and then after World War II in Eastern Europe, of civil governments avowedly committed to atheism and the extirpation of religion, this close relationship came under excruciating pressure. Not surprisingly, this issued into grave difficulties, numerous problems, and extensive criticism (especially by diaspora Orthodox) as Orthodox leaders in Russia and then in Eastern Europe tried to make their way through the nearly pitch-dark political landscape stretched out before them. This book reports on the steps and stumbles the respective Orthodox churches took as they navigated this uncharted terrain.

With the collapse two decades ago now of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, government archives in most of the formerly Communist countries have become open for inspection. However, as the researchers in this volume point out, some countries have decided to restrict access to several sensitive archives; this inhibited some of the scholars who write in this volume from as thorough an investigation as some of the other writers could undertake. Even in cases where archival access was somewhat restricted, though, the researchers could explore materials unavailable to scholars in preceding decades. What they found and reported in this book makes for some intriguing and insightful reading, as the authors here build on, challenge, and add to previous assessments of church-state relationships during the Communist era.

The treatment of the largest of Orthodox churches, that in Russia, demands the first place in the volume’s treatment. The painstaking exploration of archives and elucidation of the options and pressures faced by Russian church leadership offer fruitful assessment of what actually transpired in Russia during the various changes of governmental policy toward religion during the 70 years of internal Babylonian Captivity in the USSR. Both in this chapter and in the others, in which the authors necessarily relate what transpired elsewhere in Eastern Europe with what Russian Orthodoxy was doing at the time, the Russian Orthodox Church comes in for fair criticism of how readily it accommodated its stance toward the world scene and its relationships with other Christian churches to what would comport with the Kremlin’s expectations. While no wholesale blame is uncritically or unsympathetically directed at the Russian Orthodox leadership in this regard, no cheap excuses are offered, either.

Some readers may be surprised to discover how much the experience of the Orthodox churches in other Communist countries in Eastern Europe contrasted with what transpired in the USSR. Orthodoxy in Bulgaria experienced intense pressures similar in many ways to what happened in Russia, but Romanian Orthodoxy had quite a different path. While the Communist authorities could hardly be accused of making it easy for the church there, nonetheless Romanian
Orthodoxy found governmental authority much less obstreperous and not necessarily uniformly opposed. Indeed, attendance and participation in worship services in Romania throughout the Communist period saw only a minimal decrease, and virtually no significant inhibitions were imposed by governmental authorities on those who practiced their Orthodoxy faithfully. Beyond all this, the treatments of the Communist bloc countries in which the Orthodox Church was a minority figure in the religious landscape (as in Poland and Czechoslovakia) present intriguing insights into how the Communist authorities viewed and tried to use the Orthodox communion there, and how the Orthodox leadership and faithful responded.

The second section of the book, "Eastern Christianity beyond the Iron Curtain," includes treatments of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Greek Orthodox patriarchates in the Middle East, and the Orthodox churches elsewhere in the world – not only in Greece, Cyprus, and Finland, but also in China, Japan, India, Great Britain, Australia, and the Americas. Oriental Orthodox churches also receive coverage. All the treatments conclude with a list of the archival resources utilized and available, publications from the church, and statistics on population and congregations, as well as the religious and civic leaders during the period. Extensive notes for each chapter offer abundant material for further investigation.

This is a volume which offers much to anyone interested, for whatever reason, in how Eastern Christianity fared during the Cold War. With its extensive reliance on recently opened archives, this book unquestionably offers genuine advances on previous studies. It is a volume which should be added to the libraries of many seminaries and any university offering undergraduate courses or graduate programs in Eastern European studies. At its high price, though, only the most interested individual scholars will likely purchase a personal copy. Even so, the book is warmly recommended for its valuable treatment of a complicated and fascinating congeries of interrelated questions on how Orthodoxy managed the Cold War.

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