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Todorovi's "Evangelization Conversion Proselytism" - Book Review

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Book Reviews

Dragan Todorović, ed., *Evangelization Conversion Proselytism* (Niš, Serbia: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 2004). 101pp. paperback. - reviewed by Paul Mojzes.

Junir (Jugoslovensko udruženje za naučno istraživanje religije - Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion) is spearheaded by Prof. Dragoljub Djordjević, a sociologist at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering of the University of Niš in southern Serbia. Along with his colleagues Prof. Djordjević is probably the most prolific social scientist in Serbia promoting the scholarly study of religion. Most often this is done by scholarly conferences. This book is a collection of papers delivered at such a conference that seems to have taken place in the first half of 2004 judging from information contained in one of the footnotes but not explicitly stated in the book.

The basic premise of the book is that Balkan societies are now in transition facing religious pluralism. In addition to majority religions there are also minority religions as well as religious diversity resulting from the increasing impact of globalism and greater freedom of religion in post-socialist societies. Majority churches have often reacted with great alarm at the activities of other, usually small indigenous or imported religious communities, that resulted in their numerical growth. Hence *Junir* undertook a scholarly study of the phenomena of evangelization, conversion, and proselytism.

The editor, Dragan Todorović, provides the introductory chapter with a study of the three concepts. He begins with an exhaustive exploration of how terms such as “missionaring,” evangelization, conversion, and proselytism are described in a rather large number of sources. Then he provided a brief general overview of Christianity and Islam followed by an equally succinct review of the religious communities (Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, and New Religious Movements) in the Balkans, especially in the former Yugoslavia. The brevity of the survey leads to some factual errors such as describing the Protestant Reformation almost entirely in Calvinist terms because of the author’s over dependence on Max

Weber's analysis of the influence of Protestantism on the rise of capitalism. Todorović explains the interest in the Western-based Protestant free churches and new religious communities by contrasting the theologically complex symbolism of traditional churches with the more spontaneous, understandable, and participatory activities of these imports. He considers the response to these groups as being expressions of dissatisfaction with modern society. The author concluded with the basic premise of the book, and that is that evangelization is the spreading of a religion among unbelievers who are spiritually hungry after decades of communist anti-religiosity, conversion is a change from nominal adherence of one religion to an engaged adherence of another - both viewed positively - and proselytism, viewed negatively, as the "hunting of souls" by changing an engaged member of a religious community into an adherent of another.

Danijela Gavrilović in her "Religious Conflicts in Modern Society" provides a good theoretical treatment of modernity and globalism vs. fundamentalism, the latter she interprets as a reaction and opposition to rapid change. According to Gavrilović fundamentalism is harder to control when religion is insufficiently separated from the state or secular domains (p. 32).

Ivan Cvitković, a sociologist from Sarajevo, in a chapter entitled "Relations between Christians and Muslims" in the Balkans explores how Christians and Muslims regarded each other as enemies in the areas where the religions encountered each other. Despite the fact that the adherents of these religions lived next to each other they knew very little about each other, though Islam tended to be more tolerant toward the older religions. Religiously heterogeneous societies, according to Cvitković, provide more conditions for conflicts especially where exclusiveness prevails, extremists cause alarm among members of their own faith about the dangers from the other, and theories of conspiracies abound.

Three papers were written specifically about a single religious community, Ivica Živković (an Orthodox theologian), "Evangelization and Proselytism in Orthodox Christian Theology", Mirko Vid Mlakar on the "Roman Catholics of the Byzantine Rite" on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and Zorica Kuburić on

“Christian (Seventh-Day) Adventists Church in Serbia”. The latter two are accurate but unremarkable. The first is simply too defensive. Živković attempts to show how Christ-like Orthodox evangelization is, saying that it simply fulfills God’s plan of salvation, proclaiming God’s love for the world directed toward the eschatological fulfillment of God’s kingdom. Had he left it at that it could be an inspiring insight into Orthodox theology but the author insists on numerous comparisons with other approaches, Catholic and Protestant and even other Orthodox views different from his own, and, of course, finds them deficient.

Bojan Aleksov, a Ph.D. candidate at the Central European University in Budapest, provides the most daring and creative paper of the collection. His is a brilliant critique of Serbian historiography’s mythologized and distorted presentation of the religious conversion to Islam in order to bring unification of Serbs in the 19th and 20th century. He sees the picturing of the Turks as the political archenemy of the Serbs and the religious conversion of the so-called Bosnian Bogumils attributing them mostly to coercion or self-interest as being an un-empirical and un-historical way of justifying Serbian expansionism to provide the basis for the expectation of re-converting the Muslims to Orthodoxy. Aleksov’s is a sharp critique of Serbian scholarship of the process of conversion to Islam. I hope that he will be one of those who will provide a more scholarly basis for future Serbian historiography.

Dragoljub Djordjević has become one of the foremost analysts of the religion of the Romas (Gypsies) in southern Serbia. In his essay “Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism: Example of Romas’ Protestantization” and other recent writings he explored the process of the spread of Protestantism among South Serbian Romas and on the whole judges it positively, though it results in a double marginalization for the Romas - namely the socially marginalized Romas changing from their previous marginal membership in majority religions such as Islam and Orthodoxy to a marginalized Pentecostalism. But he regards this conversion of having a salutary impact on the well-being of Roma converts. While he criticizes cases of proselytism, he judges cases of evangelization and conversion as being positive in their impact.

Ružica Cacanovska, a sociologist from Skopje, Macedonia, applies similar categories to the study of Romas in Macedonia but her essay is strictly descriptive, providing statistical data about Roma membership among Protestant churches in Macedonia. A much more detailed, but often highly confusing and tedious is the study by Magdalena Slavkova, a Bulgarian sociologist who studied the change in identity of Protestant converts among “Turkish Gypsies,” a complex ethno-religious minority group in Bulgaria.

All in all, it is highly commendable that the group of scholars assembled around *Junir* and the journal *Teme*, most of whom are on the faculty of the University of Niš, continue their efforts to assemble scholars from the region and beyond to explore various religious phenomena in a scholarly manner and that they have translated the collection into English so that it becomes useful to a wider readership. The translation into English is quite inconsistent. Some articles, like Aleksov’s, are extremely well translated, while some other’s are not (phrases like Lord’s Dinner or God’s Supper are examples of infelicitous translations), but actually all of them are readable. They would benefit from editorial assistance by a native English speaker, but we commend them for their effort even in the absence of such help.

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Jane Leftwich Curry and Joan Barth Urban. eds. ***The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies: The Cases of East-Central Europe, Russia, and Ukraine.*** Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. 284 p. - reviewed by Boyka Stefanova.

The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies offers a carefully researched and well-written comparative examination of the strategic adaptation of the post-communist parties in representative states of East-Central Europe (Hungary, former East Germany, Lithuania, Poland), Russia, and the Ukraine. The volume consists of an introduction, six individual case studies, and a concluding chapter revisiting the divergent trajectories and shared legacies of the post-communist left. The case studies explore the relative success of the post-communist transformation of