Barnes' "Catholicism in Postcommunist Europe" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

Timothy Barnes, Catholicism in Postcommunist Europe Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 192 pp., $27.95 Softcover, $72.00 Hardcover.
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To have peered through the yet unsettled dust of collapsed Communism over a dozen years ago would have been to witness the Catholic Church busy about many tasks. The list of priorities included the following: acquiring legal guarantees of its autonomous status within each state; recovering rights and assets through restoration or compensation that were necessary to resurrect the church’s temporal missions; laying the joists and erecting the trusses of stable and efficient administrative structures; adjusting diocesan and metropolitan borders to accommodate the area’s postcommunist political landscape; instilling and fortifying within the populates the moral and spiritual principles proper to the Catholic ethos through addresses, letters, instructions and exhortations issued by the Holy See.

Timothy Byrnes’ study describes the church’s response to the fall of Communism in Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Croatia – states within an area deemed “East Central Europe.” Through this work students of post-Cold War national politics and international relations are provided with a sure grasp of how the church accommodates itself to the radically new political circumstances that now obtain across that region. Also, insight is imparted regarding the degree to which the church’s postcommunist role is being shaped and directed by its own multilayered complexity. The focus on the church’s structural nature and internal relationships is predicated upon the explicitly stated, unassailable methodological assumption that the workings of the church in politics are inseparable from the dynamics of politics in the church.

The overarching concept for this work is Catholicism understood as the historical example and modern metaphor of a system of governance possessing a multilayered organizational structure that involves the interpenetration of the universally extended and the locally situated. (Byrnes acknowledges his indebtedness to John W. Meyer for this conceptualization.) Consequently, the author posits that the most accurate way to define the Roman Catholic Church in Poland (or Slovakia or Croatia) is to define it as both Roman and Polish (or Slovak or Croatian) at the same time.

In times past, the Polish high clergy shepherded the inseparability of Roman Catholicism and Polish national identity. Today, as Byrnes points out, the church in Poland retains its status as an important and organized interest that possesses historical standing, institutional weight and popularity. But, in the new situation, Catholic interests are in competition with many others interests that vie for the allegiance of the people. Not long ago the church’s arguments in defense of its role in Polish society were celebrated as clarion calls for national independence; within the new pluralism these same arguments seem to carry an inappropriately sectarian and even fundamentally anti-democratic ring to
them in the minds of a significant number of Poles. Nonetheless, it is concluded, the Polish case shows that it is still possible for a national institution to mount a national defense of a decidedly transnational agenda.

The author successfully makes the case that the church’s role in the Balkans is the clearest indication of the degree to which transnational Catholicism’s role in postcommunist Europe is mediated by the political and social structures of particular national settings. In Croatia the fires of nationalism were stoked more by the pew folk than the higher clergy, compromised as the latter were in that they often conformed to the international bent of the Hapsburg Empire. Byrnes portrays Pope John Paul II as a leader of a transnational church who is thoroughly responsive to the Croatian national, historical and political context.

To the question, “Can the transnational Catholic Church serve as a source of reconciliation in the ethnic conflicts that bedevil Slovakia and Romania?” Byrnes provides a “qualified ‘No’.” The connection between the Pope’s envisioning of a global, transnational Catholicity on one hand, and the attitudes and actions of bishops, priests, and laity within these particular social and political contexts on the other is described as being quite strained.

The Pope’s dealings with all the various Catholic communities of the Roman and Byzantine rite is depicted as being filtered through and, according to some, subordinated to, his hopes for closer ecumenical relations with the counterpart Orthodox churches. (This reviewer can attest to the fact that the same observation can be made with respect to the Ukrainian Eastern Catholic situation a bit further to the east regarding the attempt to have Rome acknowledge the title of “Patriarch” for the Ukrainian Major Archbishop.)

Any book with the term “Transnational” in its title could be expected to contain large ideas rendered with broad strokes on a relatively large canvas; yet this work closely approximates a bowl of fine cut diamonds as well. The extremely complex dynamics of the Hungarian Catholic-Slovak Catholic relationship in Slovakia and the Hungarian Roman Catholic-Romanian Orthodox-Romanian Greek Catholic set of relationships in Romania receive clear and concise explication.

Other such gems are the sober and balanced assessments of John Paul II’s pontificate and his perspective on the origins of state interests and the nature of global governance. For Byrnes, this Pope is not a structural realist who carefully calibrates the balance of power to preserve a fragile peace in the midst of a dangerous power vacuum that is the legacy of the end of the superpower stand off. Neither is he a champion of neoliberal institutionalism who is searching the new situation for opportunities to increase the instances of mutuality of interstate interests and shared prosperity. Rather, this Pope envisions the establishment of a modern Christian civilization (as opposed to the simple resurrection of the medieval papal Christendom) that transcends the artificial divisions of the Cold War. Of course, in this vision the ideals and values of Catholic Christianity constitute the indispensable ground of that new civilization. (Since the publication of this book, the European Convention of 2002-2003 became embroiled in the hotly contested issue of whether or not a reference to religion should be written into
the preamble of a proposed Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for the European Union. Pope John Paul II employed the intense energy of the debate as a booster rocket to send up his vision of just how Christian faith has played, and should continue to play, a foundational role as a source of European values.)

Other valuable treatments that attest to the richness of this work include short introductory background sketches of the church’s history in the particular state under study, explorations of the relationship between resurgent nationalism and Catholicism, and a clear explication the non-state, nonterritorial status of the Holy See in relation to the microstate of Vatican City.

Some other reviewers might judge that such a study that concentrates chiefly on the workings and influence of bishops and their national conferences reflects an overly narrow scope. The author’s argumentation for limiting the scope to the efforts of the Episcopal rank - the most straightforwardly transnational element of the Catholic Church that is at the same time the element most solidly wedded to the sense of particular local communities - seems very reasonable to this reviewer.

A book that takes the church’s structural nature and internal relationships as its prime focus should touch upon the role of the various Vatican Departments (also known as “Congregations” or “Dicasteries”) and of the extraordinary and ordinary Consistories (occasional convocations of cardinals). Who it is that gets to be recognized as a saint and why he or she is being sainted can be of tremendous political moment in any particular region, so it is to the book’s credit that the relationship between Pope John Paul and the Congregation for Causes of Saints regarding the beatification of Zagreb’s Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac was given due treatment. One would wish insight into the possible influence, or impotency, of other Congregations as well. (This reviewer has heard intimations that the momentum for establishing dioceses in Russia may have originated on the “departmental” level of the Curia.)

Only a few statements that need amending were noted. The following were excerpted from pages 15 and 129, respectively: “No such thing exists, in institutional terms, as a Polish Catholic Church or a Slovak Catholic Church, in the same way that there is a Russian Orthodox Church or a Romanian Orthodox Church,” and, “Unlike in the Orthodox faith, after all, there is no such thing, really, officially, as a national Catholic Church.” It is true that the identification of a particular Orthodox Church with a particular nation is common even among the Orthodox. But it is also true that ecclesiologically, and thus “officially,” the self-identity of Orthodox Christianity is as a body of intercommuning autocephalous and autonomous local churches, each under the pastorship of a bishop in a city of religio-historical significance - Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Moscow, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople/Istanbul, and so forth. In short, Orthodox Churches are in essence local particular churches, not national churches.

On page 50, one reads that specific structures and democratic formalisms within a pluralistic Poland such as parties, elections, and unions deeply affect the ways in which Pope John Paul II’s vision can be advanced in the Polish context. These structures are now requiring the Polish bishops to move
away from their traditional approach to politics and towards a more grass roots approach to the church’s role in society. The old top-down way of getting things done is yielding to the workings of the empowered laity who are finding their own voice. One may assert that this dynamic is evidence not only of democratic enthusiasm, but of the gradual embodiment of the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the Church as the whole People of God that acts in accordance with the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity as well.

The above minor critical observations notwithstanding, readers come away from this work thoroughly instructed on how the structure of the Catholic Church is a central determinant of the church’s participation in postcommunist East Central Europe.

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In 1920 the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople issued an encyclical “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere.” This landmark document, which urged cooperation between the Eastern Orthodox and other Christian communions, became one of the first building blocks of the Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century. The encyclical was prompted partly by the tragic consequences of the First World War and by the establishment of the League of Nations. It was proposed that various Christian denominations form a similar league with the possibilities of collaboration in education, charitable work and in other areas. After a period of initial formation, the World Council of Churches (WCC) emerged as a fusion of the three already existing ecumenical streams: Missionary, Life and Work, and Faith and Order movements. Most Orthodox Churches became members of the WCC since its first Assembly held in Amsterdam in 1948. From the beginning, the Roman Catholic Church refrained from becoming a full voting member of WCC, while maintaining involvement in several important commissions, including Faith and Order, as well as participating as a full member in some National councils.

At present, the WCC is comprised of 337 member churches with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox being represented by 23 members. As Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff point out in the introduction to Beyond the East-West Divide, since Protestant membership steadily increases this situation guaranties more and more pronounced “minority status” to the Orthodox churches within the Protestant-dominated WCC (p. 5).

While the clouds in relationships between the Protestant and Orthodox constituents of WCC have been gathering for a long time, the first clear sign of a storm appeared in 1997, when the Georgian Orthodox Church decided to withdraw its membership from the Council. This decision was made under pressure from the five influential monasteries in Georgia, which threatened to separate