Nielsen's "Christianity after Communism: Social, Political, and Cultural Struggle in Russia" - Book Review

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In a seminal essay entitled "Russia's Spiritual Wilderness," Barbara von der Heydt emphasized the point that freedom cannot take root in Russia without moral reform. She concluded her essay with this observation:

As daunting as the economic and political tasks are, reforming the character of the nation's soul is far harder yet. But in the absence of such moral transformation, there can be no lasting economic or political reform. The destruction of the Russian soul was so devastating that it will take years for the country to find its compass. A free and stable Russia cannot emerge immediately. In deed, it may take more than a generation." (Policy Review, Fall 1994).

The connection between spiritual renewal and reform of political and economic life in Russia is often missed by Western journalists and scholars who track developments in the former Soviet Union. Books on political and economic life in post-Communist societies are pouring off the presses in the West, but studies of religious and cultural life in Russia and the other republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States are hard to find. Christianity after Communism, edited by Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., helps to fill this gap in the literature and is an important contribution for those interested in religious and cultural developments in Russia.

The volume consists largely of presentations given at a conference on "Religion in Eastern Europe after Communism," held in Houston, Texas, in April 1993. The focus of the book is: What has happened to religion since the demise of Communism in the former Soviet Union? The twelve chapters, together with Nielsen's Introduction, offer helpful insights into the religious life of Russia.

One central theme that is addressed from different perspectives is what role religion will play in the new civil order emerging in Russia. The greatest persecution of religion since the end of the Roman Empire has abruptly come to an end. Now the question is will religion be allowed to flourish in an environment where freedom of conscience is allowed or will religion become allied with nationalism to form an intolerant ideology replacing a simplistic atheistic one? While most of the authors document the signs of spiritual revival in Russia, none are willing to state with confidence the degree of conversion from the Soviet mentality which has occurred or to predict what lies ahead for Russia.
One of the strengths of this book is the diversity of perspectives by the authors who represent different religious traditions, academic backgrounds, and personal involvements. Dennis J. Dunn’s essay argues that religion, not economics and politics alone, is very significant and is likely to be the basis for the new order that emerges in Russia. He concludes his analysis with the observation that Russia will reorganize on the basis of Russian Orthodoxy, but it will, hopefully be a reformed Orthodoxy that supports limited government, the rule of law, and religious freedom. Vladimir Ivanov’s essay briefly describes encouraging recent developments affecting the Russian Orthodox Church and noted the parliament in 1993 hopefully taught the Church to distinguish the sphere of its own life from the political interests of the state. Whether or not the Russian Orthodox Church decides to distance itself from these powers struggles is yet to be seen.

The emergence of Christian Democrats in Russia since 1989 is carefully traced by Paul D. Stevens; the helpful role played by the new religious press in the search for a new post-Communist identity in Russia is thoughtfully summarized by Wallace Daniel. A helpful complementary essay by Alexander Zaichenko describes how Russian religious opposition, labeled "sectarians," developed communities which were socially and economically dynamic. These communities, Zaichenko argues, are the bearers of democratic social precepts and progressive economic relations. It is in these sectarian communities that hope for a democratic future can be found, in his opinion.

Surveys of recent developments in the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church are also included in this volume. Philip Walter’s essay is a carefully balanced study of the paradoxical position of the Orthodox Church, a church which finds itself in a position that is both triumphant and defensive. While surviving decades of militant atheism, it is also suffering disorientation from challenges it has not had to face for seventy years. Janusz A. Ihnatowicz’s essay on the Roman Catholic Church in Russia also presents helpful insights and concludes with the hopeful observation that "Russia may become the place where a new modus vivendi develops between the two Sister Churches."

Jerry G. Pankhurst’s sociological analysis of religion in post-Communist times stresses the links between religious developments and the general social changes in society. He perceives that churches and parachurch organizations are increasingly run like businesses, he argues that they promote the values and self-conceptions that facilitate economic development and will dominate Russian culture in the future, although "muddling through" may in fact be the best description of what lies ahead for Russia in the near term. Walter Sawatsky’s description of "Visions in Conflict" also has fresh insights about how the various religious communities in Russia are developing different leadership training programs, yet he concludes his essay with the hope that Protestants and Orthodox believers can discover each other and work together to rebuild Russia.

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Two essays by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksi II and Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg add little to this conference and were drawn from Russian newspapers. Patriarch Aleksi's contrast, Metropolitan Ioann cites the fraudulent "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" as proof of the conspiracy of Jews and their allies in the West to undermine Russia. While the two essays do demonstrate the diversity of views within Russian Orthodoxy, they do not contribute substantially to this volume and are of inferior quality in comparison to the other essays.

The concluding essay by Paul Mojzes, which describes the role of religious communities in the war in the former Yugoslavia, is a sober reminder that religion can be a major contributing factor to the outbreak of violence in Eastern Europe and Russia. Persecution of religious believers has largely ended after seventy years, but will religion be a constructive force in shaping the new civil order in post-Communist society or will it become an ally with nationalism and usher in endless ethno-religious conflicts? While this book offers some hope, it also provides a sober analysis which warns of the potential dangers ahead.

Christianity after Communism makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature on religion and cultural change in post-Communist Russia. It deserves to be carefully read by both scholars and policymakers in the West.

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