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Book Review: András Máté-Tóth, Freiheit und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa

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BOOK REVIEWS

András Máté-Tóth, *Freiheit und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa* [Freedom and Populism: Wounded Identities in East Central Europe]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS, 2019. xv, 314 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-3-658-25484-1.

Reviewed by Paul Crego, Ph.D., Library of Congress (retired)

András Máté-Tóth, a professor in the study of religions at the University of Szeged, in Szeged, Hungary, has written an excellent study of the interaction of religion and national identities among the various nation of East Central Europe, called *Freiheit und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa*. He draws on a wide range of resources about the national identities of this geographical territory, as well as theoretical works about the developing identities of people around the world. He also draws upon works covering religious identities in relation to ethnic and national identity and discusses religious communities in the area under discussion.

His first task is to establish the parameters of the metageographical term of the title, “Ostmitteleuropa.”¹ Máté-Tóth discusses this issue in the context of the historical events associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union. He concludes that he will examine, for the most part, the countries that were under Soviet control, but only those that were not part of the Soviet Union itself. This also includes now the many nations that have been spun out of the former Yugoslavia.

Máté-Tóth makes some attempts to bring together the nations under some sort of common definitions but finds it difficult and different after the “*Wende*” [turn/change] to do so. There are varieties of governments, as well as the reclamation of various religions by which some of the countries have defined some of their national identity. Language is also a factor in the attempt to reconstruct some sort of common post-Communist identity.

After a theological discussion about the meaning of religion in the new post-Communist political setting, Máté-Tóth turns to a discussion of what will be a main theme of his discussion,

¹ I have chosen “East Central Europe” rather than “East Middle Europe,” and already this expands the problems of this regional metageography.

i.e. the problem of “wounded identities” among the states of Ostmitteleuropa and how this concept has made for a jumble of competing claims.

For Máté-Tóth, one of the most commonly utilized identities, or parts of identities, is described by the “wounded” nature of a nation or an ethnic group. It is one of the self-perceptions that is widely held in Ostmitteleuropa, although for the most part it is a matter of self-identity and almost never a sense that such an identity might be held in common across several nationalities and made a basis for a notion of shared community in the area. There is also little allowance that there are any time limits, as to how far back the “woundedness” might be located in history. This allows for all nations to cite their own issues and, unfortunately, can be a source of enmity against perceived and named offending nations; e.g. the memory of Serbs and their violent persecution at the hands of Croats in World War II. In general, the “wounded” concept has been one fraught with many dangers, especially in the successor nations that arose from the fission of the former Yugoslavia.

Toward the end of his discussion on wounded nationalities, and while discussing the work of Judith Butler and other, Máté-Tóth makes this summary statement (84):

Die stabile kollektive Identität dieser Nationen und Staaten ist ein historischer Wunsch und eine politische Zielsetzung, eine permanente Fiktion, die in der Geschichte dieser Gesellschafter eher selten und eher für kürzere Perioden zur Verwirklichung gelangten.

The third part of the book is taken up with the issues of populism, both political and religious and takes these concept across the three decades that have followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political changes that have used this fall as a metaphor for their own historical changes.

Máté-Tóth works on a definition for populism, beginning with the notion that it often is used to describe a conflict between the people and the elite of a nation or society. He acknowledges the many uses of the term. Some use populism as a way of obtaining power that utilizes democratic norms in order to achieve a more authoritarian regime. It is rarely used to describe a state that is tolerant of a variety of political ideas, but more often to describe a tyranny of the majority.

Máté-Tóth also works toward a definition of populist religion. In a sense, this is more difficult than a political definition. The religious variety in Ostmitteleuropa has changed significantly in the three decades under Máté-Tóth’s consideration. There are the historical churches that experienced various levels of persecution during the Communist period. These have

been restored to some degree and seek to claim their historical precedent. Máté-Tóth expresses a desire that the theology, especially of the historical religious communities, not be confined to a “reprint theology,” but rather towards the development of new and vibrant ideas.

This has been made more complicated by the proliferation of religions and Christian denominations. This territory is also notable for being on the borders between Islam and Christianity.

Máté-Tóth ends the book with the desire that the discussion of the wounded identities of nations will be one that is ongoing in the general search toward a way forward in the development of this region.

This reviewer recommends Máté-Tóth’s book for the author’s ability to marshal a great variety of data over the three decades in question. The extensive bibliography reveals the many sources that he has drawn from for his discussion. It is an important book in the context of studying how the people and nations of Ostmitteleuropa have attempted to move into the new reality of their existence. The academic German in which the text is written is accessible and certainly easier than most philosophical versions of German.