

10-2021

Book Review: Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia

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Recommended Citation

Crego, Paul (2021) "Book Review: Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 7 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol41/iss7/8>

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Tornike Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia*. London and New York: Routledge. xii, 181 pages. ISBN: 978-0-367-42007-9 (hbk.)

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[These opinions are my own, and do not represent the Library of Congress.]

Tornike Metreveli, a native of the Republic of Georgia, Postdoctoral Researcher on Christianity, Nationalism, and Populism at Sweden's Lund University (at the time of the book's publication), is the author of *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia*. He is a sociologist of religion.

The book is focused on the period after the fall of the Soviet "Empire" in Eastern Europe and of the Soviet Union itself. This roughly three-decade period is covered in two main sections: "Churches and Political Traditions" and "Churches and Political Operations: Institutional and Grass Roots Accounts." It is a complex treatment of three nations emerging from Communist eras and although Orthodox Christianity is the predominant historical faith in each country, different outcomes have resulted as to how Orthodox Churches and their states have come to relate each other. The Orthodox Church in Serbia has come to have a much lower profile than Orthodox Churches in other countries. Part of the narrative of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is the jurisdictional problem. This pits the Moscow Patriarchate against those in Ukraine who are seeking a more national church and autocephaly vis-à-vis Moscow. The situation in Ukraine also became an area of conflict between Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Orthodox Church in Georgia remains an important player in society and in the political sphere.

The first part deals with some historical ideas about the origins of Orthodox Christianity. I find this section to have several weaknesses, even though Metreveli mainly relied on Orthodox authors as his source material. The historical section is a pastiche of curious assessments about the Orthodox Church, including the following:

"As a religion, Orthodox Christianity begins with scriptural revelations, whereas earthly churches originate with the missionary-evangelizing activities of the apostles of Christ." I would think it more accurate to speak of the primary work and person of Jesus of Nazareth (called the Christ) that is mediated through both the scriptures and the work and writings of the Apostles.

Another statement, with a reference to Geanakoplos (1984) asserts: "Unlike Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity did not encounter similar power struggles between the leadership of *imperium* and *sacerdotium*." But what indeed was the more than a century clash of

the iconoclast *imperium* and a largely iconodule *sacerdotium*? “Byzantine” Church history is also full of controversies, expressed in conflicts between Church and State, when the *imperium* attempted to impose doctrine. This often failed and the remains of these failures persist to this day in the remnants of the once vast Church of the East and what is called, for better and often for worse, the Oriental Orthodox Church. “The two branches of Christianity” (19) is a statement that does not accurately reflect the more complex reality of Christianity’s fissures.

Some of this historical discussion is narrated under the concept of *symphonia*, largely a Byzantine concept. While I have read about this concept among the writings of Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, I cannot help but think that in the current time such a concept is one only of nostalgic fantasy and not a contemporary solution to Church-State matters. As mentioned above, it did not work in Byzantium either.

In Chapter 2, “Communist past and post-communist present,” Metreveli gives an overview of the three lands under question and how their Orthodox Churches coped with the suppression of religion during Communist times. This chapter is much more to the point of the book and much more reliable information and opinions are given.

He begins with the plight of the Orthodox Church in Georgia during the early years of Soviet Union. The situation was quite dire for Orthodox Georgians and the hierarchy, especially in the persons of the Catholicos-Patriarch, was persecuted. Priests were executed and by World War II almost all churches were closed. It is only with looking for all methods of supporting the war effort that there is an ever so slight easing of restricting.

Metreveli repeats, without proper commentary, “Joseph Stalin, himself of Georgian origin and with a theological educational background from Tbilisi seminary, built a system that gradually evolved into an Orwellian state, where constant fear, paranoid suspicion, and massive insecurity became a norm, and large-scale human killing became a daily routine of the regime.”

Stalin’s theological education never led to any level of the priesthood and his “education” was likely more off the books, than on. While Stalin played up the idea that he was expelled for his revolutionary training and associations at the Tbilisi seminary, the implication that he received anything like a useful seminary training is stretched

Metreveli, at this point, weaves in the story of the Ukrainian Orthodox, a story not unlike the Georgian one during the Soviet period, with the issues magnified by the size of Ukraine and

the presence of large numbers of Ukrainian Catholics especially after annexations to Ukraine at the conclusion of World War II.

Before pressing on to post-Soviet history in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine the history of the Orthodox Church in Serbia under Communist rule and located within Yugoslavia, is given. Much is similar in terms of suppression in the early days of Communist rule under Tito, but gradually the worst of Soviet style Church-state relations was meliorated. It is also true that the Communist period is much foreshortened in Yugoslavia and lacked the crudest and most violent forms of suppression that were found in the Soviet Union during its first two decades.

The final part of this chapter gives a cursory summary to post-Soviet developments that occur in the context of much political upheaval in all three countries, as the USSR split into its constituent republics and Yugoslavia was violently shattered into its constituent parts.

In the second part of the book, “Churches and political operations: Institutional and grassroots accounts,” Metreveli proceeds to a closer look at the three countries under question and looks for a more detailed account of how each church has developed within its society, culture, and political environment in the years after the end of Soviet rule. Part 3 gives brief summaries of political changes in each of the three countries, “Churches and revolutions in Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia.” In Part II the story of the three post-Soviet countries is interwoven together. It may have been more coherent to have done each one separately so that there was a continuity in narrative for each country.

In Georgia, even as the Soviet Union is disintegrating in late 1991, so also was the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. For a brief time, Gamsakhurdia is supported by the Orthodox Church and its Patriarch-Catholicos Ilia II. Metreveli is correct to refer to Gamsakhurdia’s “nationalist discourse” as “sporadic and inconsistent with his actions.” What Metreveli omits here is one of the central ideas that the short-term president’s religious identity was, at least in part, a sort of Steinerite anthroposophy that has been stirred together with Orthodoxy and other theological thinking into something used as a basis for a nationalist messianism. Steinerism, without mentioning Gamsakhurdia’s name, was later sharply criticized in an article in the Patriarchate’s newspaper *Madli*.

In Serbia the Orthodox Church found itself for a time supporting Milošević. Part of their shared religious ideology focused on a victimhood shared by the Serbian state and the Orthodox Church in Serbia. Metreveli points out that, “The coalition of Church and State was somewhat

ambivalent.” It was this that helped the Orthodox Church to let go of Milošević when he fell from political power.

The situation in Ukraine was much more complicated, in that more than one jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church was in competition for the believers and the physical churches—many of which had been under more than one jurisdiction. The question could be asked: “Which Orthodox Church could better be understood as the Orthodox Church in Ukraine? Or which Orthodox Church is the *Ukrainian* Orthodox Church?”

Metreveli properly considers also the role of religious education in the three countries under consideration. He is quite correct in noting how the Orthodox Church in Georgia has, one might say, “infiltrated” the public education system. This has largely been accomplished by teachers themselves working in the stead of priests, but not exclusively so.

Speaking best to the Georgian sources, Metreveli could have spent more time acquainting us with written sources and their wide range of academic and parochial bases. A lot of his information comes from interviews with priests and others, and I found much of it unsatisfying. This, however, is an intentional part of his methodology, as explained in the “Appendix—Methodology.”

Metreveli’s “Conclusion” is less than satisfying as he returns to the concept of “the *symphonic*.” I disagree with the idea that this is a valid modern category for the discussion of Church-State relations. I know the Georgian Church speaks of it now and again, but it has always seemed to be a bit of a fantasy, even though there are policies such as the Concordat between the Church and the State that give some flavor of *symphonia*. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine is too fragmented to speak of such, except when the State is trying to rally the faithful around a single national church. Metreveli’s talks of the “secularization-resistant” mode of *symphonia*, but thi, in itself, seems to prove the point that *symphonia* is not a good means of explaining the modern post-Soviet realities of Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Metreveli’s bibliography is quite extensive and adds a tremendous amount of value to the book at hand. It will continue to be an excellent resource, based on which further study can be carried out, by both the author and his readers.