Pusztai's "Religion and Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW


This 6th volume of the Series of the Center for Higher Education Research and Development grew out of an international research carried out by a team of the above mentioned research center at the University of Debrecen under the direction of Gabriella Pusztai. The main objective of the researchers was to study the role of the church and religion in education in the post-communist area following the change of the political system.

As a result of restructuring the educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe in the last twenty years, one of the biggest challenges was to provide appropriate education to different cultural and social groups of different ideologies after a long reign of a society with a monolithic ideological system. Following a totalitarian ideology education has experienced the pluralism of values and the birth of teachers and schools with neutral ideology, in addition students' autonomy in choosing their own values has been widely accepted. Thus, the present work attempts to analyze the function of different churches and religions in this period of change. While the previous volume of this series dealt with the place of the church in schools, this study focuses on higher education.

Editor Gabriella Pusztai has succeeded in collecting papers that offer the reader an outline about the role that religion plays in the world of the pluralized higher education in the post-communist area. As she says, the work started by building a network and finding the researchers who were interested in this topic and were ready to interpret the role churches played in higher education within the context of their country or region.

The researchers came from different fields. Most of them are education researchers, sociologists and theologians, but experts from higher education management also contributed to this work. Studying the relevant literature in international context, the authors have realized that church related higher education of this region are discussed under the heading of private schools together with the profit oriented institutions, although in the context of the political transmission these church related higher education institutions are not profit oriented nor elite universities, but rather institutions giving possibilities of higher education for underprivileged young people coming from multiethnic stagnant areas or offering training in sciences where counteracting the ideology of the last decades is particularly needed.

This compact volume explores its topic in three chapters: Church-related higher education on the system level, Faith-based higher and adult educational institutions and Religious Students in Higher Education

The first chapter is comprised of four studies presenting four higher education systems by detailing the Roman (Szolár 2010), the Polish (Novak 2010), the Czech (Rozanska 2010) and the Slovak (Prohazka 2010) situation with their special traditions and functions concerning the faith related education.

The following six studies of the next chapter focus on institutions and offer a useful overview on independent church related higher education institutions (Oleksak et al. 2010, Burghardt 2010, Galabova 2010) and theological faculties integrated in the state-managed universities of the post-communist area (Potocnik 2010, Galabova 2010).

The last chapter is a compilation of five papers dealing with the attitudes of religious and non-religious students in the post-communist region. These papers devote special attention to
students’ expectations towards the higher educational institutions of the region (Révay 2010), their consumption of time and plans for the future (Bocsi 2010), their extracurricular activities (Németh 2010), as well as their attitude to academic integrity (Barta 2010) and to moral issues (Smolitz et al. 2010).

The importance of this book lies in the fact that it has made the first step in focusing on the necessity that church-related and private institutions should be treated separately. The book also points out that in the post-communist area religion has different historical background with varying types of structure and social function, thus we cannot use Western-type of standards in examining the role of religious culture in higher education. Strengths of this work also include the usefulness of the information, the detailed analyses, and the various samples of institutions surveyed by the authors who have rich experience in this special field.

As the title indicates, this volume attempts to provide a concise picture of religion and higher education in Central and Eastern Europe dealing with the general topic of faith-based higher education in various ways and from different perspectives. The papers wish to explore whether the social context dominated by religious youth and the personal religious identity or practice have an effect on general moral questions, attitude to academic integrity and expectations towards the higher educational institutions of the region. As Santiago Sia states in his introduction the challenges that education has faced recently are relevant to faith-based higher education and this is an issue that needs to be focused on (Sia 2010).

This volume explores its topic from various angles through the writing of authors who present their results in this book. Nearly all post-communist countries are represented by a study showing “the country-based interpretations of the investigated type of higher education offer a chance to understand the speciality and the common features of faith-based institutions in this region.” (Pusztai 2010: 30) Due to the fact that the studies are written in English, a wider public may read, for the first time, the findings of an international team.

This book will be particularly helpful to those wishing to study the place for religious cultures in higher education after the change of the political system in post-communist countries. These studies also give useful analyses and explanations for readers eager to understand the transformations that took place in central and eastern European education policy. Furthermore, these writings can stimulate foster reflections and researches.

It is worth mentioning that editor Pusztai has recently published a book exploring the same topic. (Pusztai 2008.) Examining the academic career of students coming from different types of (state or church-related) secondary schools, her book reveals that even underprivileged students who studied in religious institutions achieve better results in higher education than their counterparts from stateschools. Their faith has a significant effect on their social context in higher education as well as on their attitude towards work (Pusztai 2009).

Reviewed by Professor Mária Farkas, University of Debrecen, Hungary.


Charles Frazee’s *Christian Churches of the Eastern Mediterranean* adds to the growing body of historical scholarship oriented toward a recovery of the significance of eastern Christianity. His work, aimed at both the academic and layperson alike, demonstrates that non-western spheres of influence were especially crucial in the early centuries of the history of Christianity. Frazee desires...