Buchenau's "Auf russischen Spuren: Orthodoxe Antiwestler in Serbien, 1850-1945" - Book Review

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol31/iss3/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
BOOK REVIEWS


After his definitive work, Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien 1945-1991: Ein serbisch-kroatischer Vergleich (Wisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), Klaus Buchenau has published another tour de force that establishes him among the foremost scholars on matters of religion in the western Balkans. With his awesome display of erudition in both of these works he confirms that German scholarship is still unrivaled in comprehensiveness, depth, mastery of the area languages and source material. Buchenau’s books are an impressive scholarly achievement and are worthy of emulating.

Scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy are aware of Orthodoxy’s traditionalism, its steadfast adherence to patristic theology, and its deep suspicion of innovation and modernity. In this study Buchenau explains how the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) after centuries of subservience to the Ottoman Turkish Empire and dominance by Greek Orthodox hierarchs sought support and inspiration both from East and West. Buchenau explains how the single most influential factor for the SOC was the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), especially its Slavophile wing. As the Russian Empire was competing and warring with the Ottoman Empire aiming to create for itself an outlet to the Mediterranean the Russians became increasingly aware of the advantages of linking up with their “Little Brothers,” the Orthodox Slavs of the Balkans. Soon a strong bond was created between Russians and Serbs that resonates among both peoples to this day.

In addition to diplomatic, political, and military relationships the most influential linkage between the two sister Churches was education, particularly theological, which became the most effective means of strengthening these ties. Naturally, this was not a two-way street; Serbs could not contribute as much to the Russians as they did to their Balkan kin. Students from the Balkans, particularly future priests, studied in Russian theological institutions, especially Kiev, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. Upon return many became professors at newly founded institutions of higher learning in the Balkans, while some were elevated to the episcopacy and even the patriarchate. Additionally, Russian professors (particularly after the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution when thousands fled to Yugoslavia), taught in Serbian institutions where they left a deep mark on their students. The Slavophile intelligentsia of Russia, while by no means unanimous in their worldview, nevertheless shared a profound anti-Western bias, feeling that westernizing influences in Russia — and likewise in Serbia — in the 18th and 19th centuries were the source of all evil, corruption, alienation, sinfulness, violence, and other negative phenomena. Buchenau must be given credit for a very nuanced and detailed treatment of these developments, pointing out that not all of these educational exchanges resulted in a monolithic perspective.

Between the two world wars, during the turbulent years for the newly founded state that was later named Yugoslavia, the SOC sought to assert itself as the established state church in a multireligious environment thereby adding to the conflicts of the interwar period. Two towering monastic figures emerged epitomizing a strong Serbian Orthodox nationalism, Justin Popović and Nikolai Velimirović. Justin Popović was a learned ascetic monk, a Byzantologist who wrote a very influential dogmatic theology. Between the two world wars he taught in theological schools but was during the Communist period placed under ‘house arrest’ in a monastery, from which he
nevertheless exerted a strong influence even posthumously. Nikolai Velimirović, likewise a monk and a professor, was a fiery orator with a great following, who had been elevated to the episcopacy. Despite his right wing conservative leanings he was first incarcerated by the Nazis in Serbian monasteries followed by a brief incarceration in Dachau. He wrote some of his most influential antiwestern tracts during this imprisonment. After WWII he decided not to return to Yugoslavia but lived in exile in the USA.

Both of these theologians believed that Serbians, particularly the peasantry, are Christ’s most obedient people. Popović emphasized the Orthodox notion of Christ as the God-Man who enables his Orthodox followers to elevate their humanity into divinity, whereas Western secularists, humanists, rationalists, agnostics, and atheists simply hold that humanity is divine. Salvation for the Serbs, consists in the humble following of their patron saint Sava, a Christ-like figure who set the example of a divinized humanity when he organized SOC as an autocephalous patriarhate during the middle ages. Bishop Velimirović, regarded the Slavs, especially Russians and even more so the Serbs, as the future of a redeemed humanity, if only they succeed in warding off the Satanic Western influences. For him Islam and the Eastern religions are closer to God than Catholicism and Protestantism and their spin-off secularism, rationalism, modernism, egoism, capitalism, and communism. The West is the cause of moral decline, exploitation, violence, and all wars. Some of Velimirović’s writings are strongly anti-Semitic, as he blamed the Jews for all Western evils. His anti-Semitism was abstract and ideological and did not seem directed at specific Jews, of whom there were never many in the Balkans. His anti-Semitism however was overshadowed by his even more pronounced anti-Catholicism and anti-papism, which among the Serbian Orthodox is deeply rooted in their historical experience. Both Popović and Velimirović relied upon a pietistic movement named Bogomoljci [God-prayers] which the two men through their charisma succeeded in channeling into Orthodox devotees. Needless to say, ecumenism, for these two monks, was of the devil. All of this is important because these two theologians became very influential among Serbs since the 1980s.

There was also a right wing political movement in Serbia before and during WWII of which the most pronounced leader was the Orthodox politician, Dimitrije Ljotic, who during WWII became an outright Nazi collaborator. Ljotic became the leader of a populist movement called Zbor which also promoted cultural and theological traditionalism. The political right wing appeared to be completely defeated by the victory of Tito’s communism, but it made a resurgence with the fall of communism and the wars of Yugoslavia’s break-up. Orthodox traditionalism and anti-Westernism, however, never disappeared from the scene and was evident among many of the hierarchs and priests in the period from 1945 to about 1980 and even more pronounced since that time as most Serbs blamed the West for Yugoslavia’s disintegration. Buchenau points out that Orthodox traditionalists never perceive themselves as a source of their own troubles but always blame others. A resurgence of interest in Popović and Velimirović characterized the 1980s and 1990s. An increasing number of Serb theology students began studying in Russia again, a practice which had practically ceased after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Buchenau concludes, based on his interviews and the work of Thomas Bremer, a prominent German Catholic ecumenist and expert on Balkan religious developments, that there is currently sufficient diversity of orientations and theological interests among contemporary Serbian clergy and theology students, to give hope that SOC will not close itself off from the rest of non-Orthodox Christendom, despite the continued anti-Western leanings of some of its leaders.

Buchenau’s work, as I stated in the introduction, is astonishingly thorough and detailed. The topics singled out in this review are but a small part of this lengthy monograph. The extensive
and lengthy footnotes are full of useful and interesting source material and comments. I am awed by the sheer amount of information on a wide range of materials. I found practically no mistakes in the book, except a very minor one, in his statement that the Russian Orthodox community in Novi Sad does not have its own church building—which, was not correct when I lived in that city in the 1950s. The English reading public would greatly benefit from a translation of Buchenau’s work. Since he does speak English (in addition to at least Russian and Serbian/Croatian), it would be good to have him lecture in the USA. He is a young man with a promising academic career.

Reviewed by Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College


As the world watches largely peaceful revolutions of the Arab Spring give way to violent repression and civil war in the Mideast, it is salutary to recall the non-violent revolution in East Germany (GDR) of 1989 and consider the role of the Protestant churches in galvanizing civil society and serving as the focal point of protests against the Communist dictatorship. In this volume Wendy Tyndale, a lay activist for various Christian aid organizations with experience in Latin American and European contexts, adds to the burgeoning number of monographs on the “Protestant revolution” in the GDR. To this enterprise Tyndale brings an advocate’s queries: how did church leaders, theologians and laypeople deal with the challenges posed by the atheistic regime, a regime which succeeded in gaining the world - emptying the churches - while losing its soul – forfeiting its claim to political authority as the more progressive Germany? What is left of the legacy of the church’s stance of “critical solidarity” and were its compromises with the “real existing socialism” justified?

The answer she arrives at, in brief, is that the church remained true to its mission as a Bonhoeffer-inspired “church for others”, a model for churches today despite the changed circumstances. She argues that the churches inculcated values of peace, ethics, and non-violence and nurtured “social capital” which was to pay dividends in the context of 1989. The churches were not system stabilizers, as some have argued, but undermined socialism from within.

Although Tyndale covers the main periods of historical development in the church-state relationship, her main focus is on the lived experience rather than the documented one. Thus she uses the documentary evidence on the topic – particularly the rich trove of archival documents from the East German Communist Party (SED), Stasi, or churches - very sparingly. As a result this volume cannot claim to be definitive history. Instead she relies primarily on secondary sources and extensive interviews with laypersons and selected church leaders/theologians, such as Heino Falcke and Friedrich Schorlemmer, whose political orientation is decidedly on the left of the German spectrum.

This methodological approach produces a rich, albeit anecdotal description of church life. For example the SED’s battles with the churches’ youth work are very vividly reconstructed. Most theological debates regarding dealing with the regime are likewise elaborated robustly. The strongest part of the book is the author’s intelligent and balanced, yet comprehensive treatment of the effect of reunification on the church, as well as the dilemmas in “coming to terms with the past” regarding church complicity with the Stasi and SED.

Tyndale’s take on these issues is clear: the churches did not particularly benefit from the “golden calf of reunification” (p. 128), but suffered a relapse of inferiority toward West German