Ramet's "Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW


Some of the most eminent scholars who are experts on the relationship between nationalism and religion in various Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union wrote papers for a conference at University of California at Los Angeles and Santa Barbara in 1982. These essays have been ably edited by Pedro Ramet who is making his presence felt in the scholarly community through his prolific studies of Eastern European religious and political life. The volume is comprehensive and systematic and the material dependable. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious life was surveyed. The generally close identification of national groups with certain religious institutions were analyzed by various scholars, some of them, like Ramet and Alan Scarfe taking a regional approach, the others dealing with specific groups. The writers are very well informed about the actual situation in the various countries or states and provide a wealth of information not only on the relationship between nationalism and religion but also on the life of various religious communities. Originally I intended to single out essays which stood out for their excellence, but I became persuaded that they are uniformly outstanding.

A few emphases with which I would take issue are to be found at the very beginning of the book in Ramet's essay, "The Interplay of Religious Policy and Nationalities Policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe."
In an effort to portray the political aspects of religion Ramet made some highly dubious assertions such as that "Liturgy and ritual are important less for their own sake than for the occasions for the reaffirmation by a community of the authority of the ecclesiastical leaders" (p.3), that "religion's claims are absolute not relative" (p. 3), and that heresy has been tolerated by no religion. These are sweeping generalizations, which do point to tendencies of hierarchical authoritarianism and frequent absolute claims, but at least in some instances this has not been the case, nor are these features perceived by all as being of great significance. Since these claims do not determine the truth of the analysis which follows and since the author himself significantly qualifies the bold claims, by stating "When we say, then, that religion's claims are absolute, we perceive that religion has always played a powerful role in cementing the loyalty of citizens toward their national collectivities" it seems that it would have been well to soften or even omit entirely those assertions. It is equally evident that certain religions have played at certain historical juncture a role of detaching the loyalty of citizen's to their nations, as for instance, when religious dissenters were forced to flee their homelands or caused bloody civil wars. But none of this debatable introductory assertion weakens the impact of this important collection which was written by very competent specialists.

The collection is not entirely complete. Missing are articles on Czechoslovakia and Albania, both countries where religious pluralism complicates the relationship between nationalism and
religion. The analysis role of religion in Armenian and Georgian national life would have reaffirmed the thesis of the unusually strong bond between nationalism and religion. But it is understandable that it is hardly ever possible to obtain essays on every country or ethnic group in such a large and complex area as the USSR and Eastern Europe.

This book is a "must" for every university or theological library which aims at a solid collection and likewise by those persons who are students of Soviet and Eastern European affairs.

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