


5-2016

Review of Bubík and Hoffman's "Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened: The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe"

Branko Sekulić

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Recommended Citation

Sekulić, Branko (2016) "Review of Bubík and Hoffman's "Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened: The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss3/7>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened: The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe. Edited by Tomas Bubík and Henryk Hoffmann, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015. 338 pp. Paperback, ISBN: 9789004283077.

Reviewed by: Branko Sekulić, doctoral candidate, Protestant Faculty, Ludwig-Maximilian University, Munich, Germany.

The famous *Iron Curtain* has always held somewhat mystical connotations, especially for readers in the so-called West. For them it was, and in some ways still is, a kind of a final frontier after which follows a completely different world, insecure and somewhat untamed. And in general, that's how it is, but with one quite important caveat: namely, it has never been one, but numerous worlds. So, when we think about Eastern Europe, the diamond in the rough of *terra incognita*, we must be aware of so many faces interwoven in its identity, which makes it practically impossible to depict in a proper way. We must look upon the aforementioned *Curtain* also in the context of the former Soviet ideology, which was just a single-minded illusion under which a great number of diversities were thriving and continue to do so today. In other words, the Soviet ideology was a kind of *Iron mist*—always on the surface, but without a real stronghold. Of course, we must not forget that this *mist*, in spite of its ephemeral existence, managed to cause many people and efforts to simply disappear. So, this book, in one specific way—through the case of Religious Studies—shows us a part of that story, but, as it seems, not with a closed or opened *curtain*, rather through the holes in it.

Authors included in this edited collection, whose names are absolutely worth mentioning—Tomáš Bubík, David Václavík, Henryk Hoffmann, András Máté-Tóth, Csaba Máté Sarnyai, Ülo Valk, Tarmo Kulmar, Jānis Priede, Liudmyla O. Fylypovych, Jurij O. Babinov, and Ekaterina Elbakyan—focus on some Eastern Europe religious specificities, presenting us this part of the world in a new light, which, as it seems, has never been

extinguished, but just obscured. Namely, through a kind of religious diary of Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine and Russia, this edition tries to cope with the whole history of Religious Studies in each of those countries, an incredible attempt in barely 350 pages. The editors, Tomáš Bubík and Henryk Hoffmann, write, “The main aim of the project was to reconstruct the historical development of the discipline, and to analyze its various methodological approaches and main research interests, and to identify the dominant issues within each period” (pp. X). And exactly this fact, in spite of its briefness and some obvious shortcomings, gives this book a certain charm. When I say shortcomings, I primarily mean the impossibility, in this literary format, to depict a vast compendium of studies of religious movements from the past until nowadays, without having a bunch of questions left hanging in the air, especially for the readers not experienced in and familiar with this part of the world, but even for the younger generations of scholars in these states, as well. However, at the end, this appears to be a small problem, because the plentitude of footnotes and a clear chronology of names and efforts represent a tightly structured overview of Religious Studies in the aforementioned countries, enabling readers to adequately fill in some potential gaps in their own knowledge of the matters in question. And this accomplishment deserves respect, because it shows the authors' high level of concern to leave nothing to chance.

To accomplish this task, the editors, Bubík and Hoffmann address two spiritual and three physical facts. The spiritual ones emerge through the thin line between anti-religious and religious propaganda (pp. x), which is the editors' natural environment. This is something what we can call their *Sitz im Leben*, through which they attempted to articulate the real voice of religion. On the other hand, the physical level manifests itself through the emphasizing of the three periods of academic research; first, one which is devoted to a sort of pursuit of a certain religious identity—studying of mythology, etymology, anthropology, folklore,

traditions, myths, etc.; the second, which tries to reach a proper definition of that identity – Christian dialogues with Marxism and other religions; and the last, which attempts to improve that identity—religion in the era of secularization or even in era of current post-secular period and its pluralism. As Liudmyla O. Fylypovych and Jurij O. Babinov state in the text, “The mission of disciplinary Religious Studies is primarily to re-create and interrogate the whole diversity of the religions person’s and religions communities’ existence in their relation with the supernatural and their specific environment” (p. 251).

Of course, this is a concise conclusion, but I would say, it reflects a main idea of this collection: to allow Religious Studies in Eastern Europe to finally reach a concrete reception in the rest of the world. At the same time, it is a strenuous effort which aims to answer to itself some essential questions about the nature and identity of Religious Studies in these lands. And as we can see from this book, that is a long way of confronting the past and self-inquiry, in which major impediments are Communist heritage, but also Christian theology. Namely, a true Study of Religion, according to authors, if it wants to be *healthy*, must go through this mess of influences and take a distance from both of these sides—atheism and confessionalism.

Today, after almost three decades of dealing with the issue, as we can see from these chapters, a certain stance has been taken in relation to the atheistic ideology (Bubík and Hoffmann, András Máté-Tóth and Csaba Máté Sarnyai, pp. 42, 121, 161 respectively), and now, Religious Studies must pursue this, more clearly pushing onwards toward the theology, in spite of their nearness and past coexistence. “Their struggle for existence and influence was complicated: in the past, Religious Studies and theology were both fighting together against the previously hegemonic atheistic ideology, and yet at the same time, they struggle with each other” (p. 269). This process of separation is ongoing.

Regardless of what Religious Studies have gone through in their history, it is important to evaluate it in a proper way; otherwise, there is the possibility of losing an authentic experience on which to build a concrete platform on which to showcase the practical and theoretical side of this story. In this context, authors of this edition have seriously shown that intention and try to create a framework within which to answer some intrinsic questions such as: why are Theology and Religious Studies not one and the same thing? Why are they not in full cooperation and why they should be? What does Religious Studies imply in the first place, and why does a true humanistic development of a society depend on it?

In the end, this book is first an overview on Religious Studies in Eastern Europe, but also a kind of challenge to the scholars of our days, to the academics of the world, that the *Iron Curtain* is not just a matter of politics, but that it can also be a matter of our own spiritual eyelids, because whether they are closed or open, says much about our readiness to study religion the proper way, and some of the most remarkable persons from this world of Religious Studies, mentioned in this publication, are demonstrating to us exactly how they do that. Namely, these people are a kind of *sacral holes* in the system according to which nothing is ever completely opened and completely closed. Thanks to this edition, we can see that clearly.