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Lubomir M. Ondrasek

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Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia: Current Challenges and Opportunities. Edited by Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka. Salem, VA: Center for Religion and Society, Roanoke College, 2012. 548 pp. \$25 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, President and Co-Founder, Acta Sanctorum, Chicago, IL.

For the past two millennia, Christians have wrestled with the question of how to relate the demands of their faith to the realities of the world around them, ultimately desiring to be and act as faithful witnesses of the triune God on earth. In his seminal work, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr offers a penetrating analysis of the relationship between Christianity and civilization, which he aptly characterizes as “the enduring problem.” Niebuhr elucidates and exemplifies five ways Christian believers have related to culture throughout history: Christ against culture (opposition), Christ of culture (accommodation), Christ above culture (synthesis), Christ and culture in paradox (dualism), and Christ transforming culture (conversion).

Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia: Current Challenges and Opportunities, a work edited by Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka, is an attempt by fourteen Slovak Christian scholars to reflect on the history, place and function of the church in Slovak society, written two decades after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The book reflects the continual struggle of people of faith to interpret the meaning of Jesus’ metaphor and obey his related injunction to be “the light of the world and the salt of the earth.”

This book is the outcome of a collaborative effort between academics from the Faculty of Humanities at University of Žilina and the Greek-Catholic Theological Faculty at University of Prešov. Scholars from the Faculty of Arts and Letters at Catholic University in Ružomberok and the Evangelical (Lutheran) Theological Faculty at Comenius University also contributed to the

volume. The collaborative project was coordinated by the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College, which also published the book.

Comprised of thirteen wide-ranging essays, the book centers on four topics: The Contemporary Situation and the Way Forward (chapters 1-6), The History and Renewal of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia (chapters 7-9), Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Slovakia (chapter 10) and The Church and the Media (chapters 11-13). “Setting the Stage for a Meaningful Engagement: The Need for a Competent Public Theology in the Post-Communist Context of Slovakia” is a key chapter in the first part of the book. Authored by Michal Valčo, this chapter provides a basic framework for exploring the main theme of the present volume.

In the introductory essay, “Church and Society in Slovakia – Past and Present,” Daniel Slivka provides an informative historical overview of Christianity in Slovakia while placing special emphasis on state-church relations since 1989. Reflecting on the results of the last three censuses (1991, 2001, 2011), he observes that even though a large percentage (75.2%) of the Slovak population identifies themselves as Christians, “Slovak faith is based more on tradition than on a search for experience with God” (p. 47). He also criticizes the present system, in which the state directly finances registered churches and religious societies, and the government’s current registration law, which requires churches to reach the 20,000 members threshold before they can register with the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic.

In their insightful piece, “The Relevance of Christian Faith for Everyday Life in Post-Communist Slovakia,” Lukáš Bomba and Adrián Kacian underscore the complexity of religious phenomena in post-communist countries and explore how the Christian faith affects Slovaks’ everyday lives. The authors adumbrate the negative influence of communist totalitarianism on Slovak Christianity and identify three major shifts resulting from communist oppression: “from

confession to culture, from public to private and from urban to rural” (p. 90). They conclude that presently a majority of the Slovak population “views Christianity as a private conviction of a person’s heart and a cultural phenomenon that preserves the tradition” and “increasingly appears to doubt its relevance to everyday life” (pp. 90, 91).

The subsequent essays by Kamil Kardis, “Human Crisis and Exhibitions of Dehumanization in the Context of Today’s Society” and Mária Kardis, “The Chosen Aspects of Desocialization in the Context of Crisis of Postmodern Society,” provide a somewhat abstract sociological reflection on topics like modernity, individualization, dehumanization, postmodernity and desocialization. Their contributions nevertheless provide a larger context that needs to be taken into account in our effort to develop a theology that can competently and creatively engage the public square and thus show the relevance of Christian faith for social and political life.

In her essay, “Liturgical Renewal as a Means of Church Renewal in the Slovak Post-Communist Context,” Katarína Valčová discusses the topic of the Slovak Christian liturgy and focuses on recent developments within the Lutheran church in Slovakia. The author views – as the title of her piece indicates – “liturgical renewal as a means of church renewal” (p. 157). She implies that while churches should remain rooted in their traditions, they must also be rejuvenated and empowered if they are to play a positive role in social transformation.

The first part of the book closes with the aforementioned essay by Michal Valčo, whose primary concern is the development of public theology in Slovakia. The author emphasizes the importance of the interdisciplinary nature of this project when he notes that Christian theology must not be afraid to enter dialogue with a spectrum of the sciences. Valčo proceeds to examine what he calls the four “burdens of the past” – Nazism, Communism, the Counter-Reformation

and Hungarian oppression, which exert a residual power on present-day Slovakia and must be recognized by the church as forces to be reckoned with. In the early 1980s, David Tracy was “defending the public character of theology” while Richard John Neuhaus confronted “the logic of the naked public square” in the United States. Some three decades later, Michal Valčo similarly calls attention to the public dimension of Christian theology in the increasingly pluralistic and secular Slovakia. He maintains that “Christian churches, if they want to remain faithful to their own Gospel identity, should not abdicate prophetic, social and educational roles in their societies” (p. 209) but instead should learn to fulfill these roles in accordance with God’s ultimate purpose for the world.

The second part of the book contains three essays focused on the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia. Jaroslav Coranič, in his essay, “The History of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia,” presents historical background and highlights the religious persecution this church experienced in communist Czechoslovakia. Peter Šturák’s piece, “The Attack on the Greek Catholic Church and its Bishop during the Period of Communist Oppression,” further explores the cruelty of the communist regime directed toward this religious community, which included closing monasteries and seminaries, trials against its bishops and the subsequent liquidation of the church. Finally, Marek Petro’s contribution “Stability and Flexibility in the Church after the Fall of Communism” examines the persecution, rehabilitation and beatification of two bishops, namely, Pavol Peter Gojdič and Vasil’ Hopko, and also pays particular attention to the developments within the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia since 1989.

The third part of the book contains František Ábel’s extensive essay, “Righteousness, Justice and Holiness within *Koinonia*: The Theological Perspective of Development of the Jewish Christian Dialogue in Slovakia.” The author, acutely aware of the horrendous deeds

perpetrated against the Jewish people in Slovakia during World War II, encourages Christian churches to reach out and meaningfully interact with the Jewish religious community. As a New Testament scholar, he turns to selected aspects of Pauline theology, which he believes can be useful for improvement of Jewish-Christian relations in Slovakia by helping Christians more clearly understand the Jewish roots of their faith.

In the fourth and final section, Hedviga Henneľová in her essay, “The Culture of Media as a Substitute for Religion in a Post-Communist Context,” describes the political and cultural changes that took place in Europe in the 20th century. In her critical appraisal, she considers the human quest for self-autonomy, the loss of the Christian metanarrative, religious and cultural pluralism, secularism, moral relativism, consumerism, the blurring of the distinction between public and private and the negative effects of media among the most formidable challenges Christian churches face in Europe. But there are also numerous opportunities, including in the new media world, for the church to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel message.

Terézia Rončáková, in the next essay, “Mass Media Coverage of Religious Topics: Understanding *Topoi* in Religious and Media Arguments,” focuses her attention on the relation between the media and religion, and critically examines the coverage of various religious topics by the mainstream and Christian media. In the first part of her essay, the author cursorily refers to the works of over twenty scholars in the field of media research, while in the second part, she presents the result of her own research conducted in Slovakia. She has among other things discovered that “The secular media tend to severely deform original religious messages,” while “the church media tend to ignore the social dimension of religious messages” (p. 470).

The last essay of the book by Imrich Gazda, “Catholic Media in Post-Communist Slovakia,” provides a brief survey of four major Slovak Catholic media and pays special

attention to their development after the fall of communism and the current challenges they face. According to the author, the most intransigent challenge facing the Catholic media is secularization; thus their paramount task is to “strengthen the religious identity of believers” (p. 495). Some other challenges these media face include a lack of financial resources, difficulty in appealing to younger and more educated audiences, and limited effectiveness in bringing a moral vision to the public square. One of the responses to the aforementioned challenges, Gazda suggests, could be a creation of a new periodic publication which would not have any confessional affiliation but would still address the issues of public interest from a Christian perspective.

On my reading, the most salient weaknesses of the work under review are the uneven quality of scholarly contributions, essays that only indirectly touch upon the main theme of the book, the absence of reformed and evangelical voices in this discussion, and inadequate engagement with the best scholarly resources in the field of religion and society. The quality of the volume could have been improved had some of its contributors engaged the relevant works of important thinkers such as John Courtney Murray, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Richard John Neuhaus, Jürgen Moltmann, Max Stackhouse, David Tracy, and Miroslav Volf.

Similarly to numerous other works written in the context of former Eastern Europe, the book’s quality is diminished by the fact that most academics here lack regular access to excellent research libraries, including prohibitively expensive subscription-based electronic resources. As a result, they often find it difficult to move beyond descriptive research and provide serious constructive proposals developed in conversation with the best thinkers in their respective fields. The book also suffers from numerous deficiencies in format, style, grammar and translation that are usually absent in scholarly works published by an established academic press.

For all of this book's shortcomings, its editors and contributors should be commended for tackling an important subject and making their material available to English-speaking audience. Overall, the volume significantly contributes to our understanding of the current landscape of Christianity in Slovakia. No one interested in the issues of Christianity and culture in Slovakia can afford to ignore this collection of essays. Scholars and practitioners interested in the larger theme of religion in Central and Eastern Europe should welcome this addition as a helpful companion to other works on Christianity in post-communist Europe. According to the editors, "Many studies will be needed to encourage and help direct the church on a faithful path. To this end, the authors wish and hope that the present work is a worthwhile early contribution" (p. 17). I agree with both of their statements.