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Book Review

Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia: the Communist and Post-Communist Eras, edited by Sabrina Petra Ramet. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1992. x + 441pp.

This is the third and final volume in the series 'Christianity under Stress', following *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (1988) and *Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies* (1990), both also edited by Sabrina Ramet. Unlike the other two collections of essays, *Protestantism and Politics* has the advantage of having been written after the final collapse of communism in Europe. The relationship between communism and Protestant Christianity can now begin to be examined from the perspective of historical hindsight rather than as current political reality.

Of course, there is still plenty of scope for research into this period of history that is now closed, but it is extraordinary how quickly the Protestant churches' accommodations with communist authorities have been rejected by the churches themselves and recognised by scholars as deviations from theological traditions. The East German theology of 'Church in Socialism', which seemed to many in the West to be quite respectable, collapsed as quickly as the Berlin Wall when the communist system that sustained it disintegrated. The term 'critical solidarity', which was used by leading East German churchmen to describe their attitude to the communist regime, was acclaimed as courageous and responsible churchmanship even by most of those who condemned Protestants elsewhere in the Soviet bloc for being weak-kneed in the face of communist pressure. Yet it now seems insufficiently significant to receive a mention in Ramet's chapter 'East Germany: a Summing Up', even as a precursor of 'Church in Socialism'. In Hungary too the 'Theology of Service' of the Reformed bishops and the 'Theology of Diakonia' of their Lutheran brethren have been rapidly buried by the churches. The rise of these theologies, which were central in Protestant relations with the authorities, is documented by their longstanding critic Joseph Pungur in his chapter on Hungary.

In many cases the church leaders who were most clearly aligned with theological support for communist governments have also been swept away, along with those whose opportunism was more naked. Of necessity the coverage of Protestantism in postcommunist Eastern Europe is limited, but this trend is clearly seen, symbolised most potently by the flight from Romania of Reformed bishop László Papp and his replacement by László Tőkés. However, the wounds inflicted by communism, whether physical or spiritual, will not be healed easily and a knowledge of the immediate past remains important for an understanding of the present and future of Protestantism in the region.

All the contributions, except that on the USSR, treat the relations between Protestants and European communist states as a closed chapter, supplying a useful summing up of the period. The extension of political control over the churches, their resistance to it and their final liberation from it are documented. At the same time the chapters provide a survey of Protestantism in Eastern Europe. Some authors go further in analysing Protestant–communist relations in their sociopolitical context

and the role of Protestants in political and nationalist dissent. On the other hand some Protestant denominations – and in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia all the Protestant churches – are such tiny minorities that they were of little or no political significance as far as the communists were concerned and can be seen only as victims or beneficiaries of policies entirely beyond their influence or control. The volume includes chapters dealing with each country, either separately or in the cases of Poland and Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in pairs, only Albania being omitted. There is also a review of conscientious objection throughout the region by Lawrence Klippenstein, a historical essay on 'Protestantism: Theology and Politics' by Sape A. Zylstra, a masterful synthesis in Gerd Stricker's 'Afterword' and analyses of past, present and future by Sabrina Ramet in an introductory chapter 'Protestants and Communism: Patterns of Interaction in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union' and in a conclusion, 'The New Church–State Configuration in Eastern Europe'.

One of the major components in communist control of the churches was the activity of the security services in exerting influence by recruiting church leaders and clergy as agents by blackmail, pandering to ambition or a combination of both. This work was carried out in parallel with state agencies for religious affairs, the latter being the public face of government policy towards the churches. As one would expect, the role of these bodies has been widely analysed, but hitherto the more shadowy world of the security services in relation to the churches has received little serious attention. Unfortunately, the partial release of information, notably from the archives of the East German *Stasi*, but also from those of some of its colleagues elsewhere, seems to have come too late for the authors of these essays to use. This aspect of collaboration with the communists is one of the most sensitive, but a proper analysis of it must be made if the various forms of accommodation of churches to communist regimes are to be correctly understood. The absence of even any preliminary discussion of this issue is disappointing.

Protestants, as Ramet notes, continue to be minorities everywhere in Eastern Europe. Even in eastern Germany, Protestants are merely the majority of a minority in society who are religious, outnumbered three to one by those who have been thoroughly secularised. Elsewhere, Protestants are anxious about the tendency for traditional national churches, whether Orthodox or Catholic, to move towards a privileged position in society, if not towards becoming the official state church once again. This phenomenon has become more widespread with the creation of new predominantly Catholic states in Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia. Ramet concludes that the Catholic Church, with its strong tradition of religious education leading to Catholics being better educated about their faith than Protestants or Orthodox, stands to gain most from the new freedoms and opportunities. Although all churches have been freed from communist oppression, the relatively stronger position of the larger churches could lead to a new intolerance toward minorities.

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