

COMMUNISM AND RELIGION - Telling the story for the 21st Century

By Mark Pargeter

Mark Pargeter, MA, MCIM is Company Secretary, Keston Institute, Oxford. As corrective and update to our reporting on changes at Keston, he contributed the following paper. In addition, according to Pargeter's reports in Frontier (Summer 2003) Keston has established a formal partnership with Regent's Park College in Oxford. The newly appointed Director of Keston, Dr. Davor Peterlin of Zagreb, Croatia, is also Research Fellow at Regent's.

Points of revolution and change in political affairs almost always bring with them changes in religious perspectives. A crucial feature of the Peace of Westphalia which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648 was a revision of religious perspective which led to a unique feature of religious community in Alsace, that of shared churches between Catholics and Protestants which remains to this day.

Although we are too close to the events which followed the break-up of Communist totalitarianism in Russia and Eastern Europe, we can see religious perspectives emerging which may over time be as influential, and if undocumented will remain as unremarked as the shared churches of Alsace. Yet the cohabitation of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe has been influential within the whole of Western European civilization and has had an effect on geopolitics. Similarly the experience of enforced atheism may be seen to have had an equally influential effect on the future course of history.

In this the documentary evidence of religious life, and its maturity under a rampant atheism is a pivotal area of academic study. For many of the middle years of the twentieth century university syllabuses in politics, and a great deal of theological discourse was influenced by the experience of Communism. There were many who

believed that it was possible for Communism to cohabit with Christianity, and other world religions despite or

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perhaps because of its avowed atheism. It was intended to sharpen faith and to point to the social and economic ills of civilization, showing how the theoretical tenets of Communism were compatible with the development of the Christian Gospel. Some of the theological perspectives which emerged centered in the death of God controversy and Liberation theology. These matters were all hotly debated by groups which included representatives from both sides of the Iron Curtain, and some of the discussions took place in Eastern Europe. This gave the illusion of cohabitation while ordinary religious people were subjected in some Communist countries to civic disabilities, active persecution, the confiscation of property and exile. For many adherence to a faith was a death sentence. Albania was alone among the countries of the Eastern bloc to outlaw religion altogether, but they all shared the conviction that even if superficially tolerated, religious practice, when denied economic foundations, would wither away.

What was ignored in this discourse were the unintended consequences of a social system which in its zeal for reform disregarded the hopes and aspirations of the people it set out to prosper. A natural desire within the human spirit to test the power of authority led to an underground movement, and shaped the way in which many art forms and literary genres developed. Modern serial music, in particular, was given a boost by being against the Communist establishment, and constituted a 'safer' form of expression because it was nonverbal. Even so, Estonia's greatest living composer, Part, was forced into exile, and Shostakovich regularly came under suspicion for so-called modernism. It might be noted that performances of Bach and Handel in Communist regimes were rare, and that when played the Christian references in Bach were almost always replaced

simply by the catalogue numbers. This deliberate destruction of the cultural tradition has led to a revival of interest in the very things the regimes sought to overthrow in the post-Communist period.

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The time has come to explore the documents and to analyze the thoughts and beliefs of those who lived through this period of state atheism. At Keston Institute in Oxford there lies an archive of materials from this period which needs to be shared with scholars and with the ordinary public to show how the religious spirit can survive constant attack, not only from those who imposed state atheism but from well-wishers of Communism who were sure that cohabitation was possible.

During the 1970s and 80s Keston Institute was occupied in receiving documents from Communist bloc countries and making information available from that documentation. It has never been a campaigning organization in the way that Amnesty International was set up to be, and has relied constantly on letting the testimonies, the documents, the pictures, speak for themselves.

Now is the time to analyze this material and to interpret it for the future. Keston Institute intends to begin a long-term project that will make available some of this material in a way that will both interpret and invite further discussion. It will consist of copies of original self-published (samizdat) religious poetry, testimonies and defence testimony from court cases from the Brezhnev years with translations, photographs, audio tapes and contemporary newspaper and journal reports. In some cases material direct from the KGB archives which relates to the materials delivered to Keston from those who were suffering persecution will be added together with contemporary commentaries. There will be comments from religious leaders both East and West as they appeared at the time.

Together these materials will offer a challenge to those who study it. Keston Institute has never campaigned but it has always challenged and encouraged those who read its materials to use them. This will continue as those who read the histories and study the documents say – never again. But we believe that not only does it say something about

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Communism, and about its reaction with the capitalist west, it says more about the soul of people everywhere. It has something timeless to say about the indomitable human spirit which refuses to lie down under dictatorship and totalitarian regimes. It provides a window on that spirit as it attempts to provide answers to questions such as – Why are we here? Is there a purpose in life?

We at Keston Institute believe that the story of the Communist years relating to the religious yearnings of believers is an important element in the understanding of that human spirit, and that it is not a story which closed with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism. Communism has left its legacies across the world that it dominated and there are still countries in which the laws passed in the Communist era are part of the current constitutional basis of society. There are persons who maintain power who are comfortable with the old methods, and use the methods of control that they were brought up with.

Furthermore we can assemble groups of witnesses to the story of religion under Communism not only from those who were oppressed but among those who were present at the consultations and conferences which spread the Marxist message through involvement in the Peace Movement, and other ‘Communist front’ organisations. These witnesses are drawn from those now retired from the organizations in which they served

but who are vital to an understanding of faith history, and so indirectly to a deeper understanding of humanity.

Keston Institute is therefore to embark on this program as a matter of urgency. Its aims are simply to ensure that the importance of religion in the life of nations in extremely hostile conditions is documented in as complete a way as possible, by word, written and spoken, moving and fixed image, and by memoir and discussion from those who were present at the time. This material can be placed in context which will include discussions of the economic and political background against which the religious life was played out, and in a rigorous

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sociological and psychological investigation of what effects this manipulation of the human spirit has had on those who were willing or unwilling participants.

It is not to be forgotten that the process of indoctrination into the Communist system was begun with children when they first attended their local schools and continued through to the highest levels of the educational hierarchy. We need to investigate whether this system of education was in fact an encouragement to eventual disbelief in the promotion of state atheism and contained within it the seeds of its own downfall. If this is so then we may discuss whether a system which contains no measure of indoctrination is a better vehicle for the destruction of religious belief. Within this material there are inevitably parallels and discussion points which concern the post Communist world and the structure of society in Western Europe today. But these will inevitably emerge from the material. It is not our business to present our material as a vehicle of indoctrination in its own right.

Time is short. There has been a decent interval since the collapse of Communism in the West, an interval in which it has been possible to see the result of this collapse over a

decade. But at the same time many of the voices from that era are beginning to be silenced through death and by the inevitable destruction and deterioration of documentary sources. There is also the question of denial among those most actively involved in the promotion of state atheism and among those who dealt with the hierarchies of state churches under Communism.

The Rev. Dr Michael Bourdeaux, founder of the Keston Institute has already trawled the archive at the Institute for numerous obituaries of those who have already passed on from that age. We are anxious that the living word of those who remain should be available to be passed on to future generations rather than simply a eulogy to an outstanding voice. It is all too easy for an obituarist, however well intentioned, to be selective in his story, even more

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for the text editor of the journal in which it appears to cut perhaps something which the subject when alive would have regarded as crucial.

The work of Keston Institute has been of a piece in preparing the ground for this new

and exciting development in its activities.

1. 1. It has preserved the archive from the period which marks a particular but perhaps arbitrary era within the Communist period on which it has daily news clippings, extensive written testimonies and photographic evidence.
2. 2. Its library covers the whole period of Communism in the Soviet Union and Western Europe.
3. 3. In the post-Communist period it has extensive documentation of continuing abuse of power relating to religion, and has examined as an example the extent of religious belief in the whole of Russia.
4. 4. It has some material and a watching brief on areas which continue to embrace Communism, through adherence to a totalitarian form of government.

5. Its Moscow staff are beginning the crucial task of examining some of the provincial archives in Russia which are in danger of destruction on religious affairs in the Communist period.

We are fortunate that much of the material for this presentation is available to us in Oxford. However, resources are urgently needed to make this material accessible to a new generation for whom the Communist period is already history.

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BOOK REVIEW:

Serhii Plokyh and Frank E. Sysyn, Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine. Edmonton and

Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2003. 216 pp. \$39.95 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper). – Reviewed by James R. Payton, Jr.

Within the last generation, the topics of nation and religion have forced themselves back into scholarly consideration of Eastern Europe. The scholarship tolerated within the USSR had little appreciation for either of them, and Sovietologists in the West learned that catechism well. However, with the tensions arising in Yugoslavia after Tito's death, the impact of Pope John Paul II, and the sheer weight of what has transpired throughout the region over the last couple of decades, the importance of both nation and religion as major foci for understanding developments within the region have come back – sometimes, with a vengeance – into undeniable prominence.

In many ways, Ukraine had been a special case in that regard. Anyone familiar with its history could hardly ignore either the significant role played by Ukrainians' desire over the last two centuries to have their own state or the impact religious communities had played in that desire. The spawning place of Ukrainian nationalistic longings had been Galicia, the westernmost region of Ukrainian settlement; a leading role in the development of those longings had been played by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) which had flourished there since the late seventeenth century. Galicia was at the time within the Austrian Empire, out of reach of the Russian tsarist empire, which gave but little room to independence-minded ideas on the part of "Little Russians" (the usual Russian designation for Ukrainians at the time). Even so, the large majority of

Ukrainians adhered to the Orthodox church, rather than to the Uniate one. So, for Ukrainians who longed for an independent state, nation and religion were all tangled up – and have remained so to the present day.

The book under review treats the history of the interrelationship between national yearnings and religious communities in Ukraine, from the Early Modern period to the present. The various chapters have all appeared elsewhere (the last in the volume from a 1999 issue of *Religion in Eastern Europe*), but the authors have revised and updated them all; ten of the eleven chapters were written between 1990 and 2000. The book covers the major developments: while both the UGCC and Orthodoxy within Ukraine are considered, the authors note that the UGCC receives overall less attention in the articles included in this book than that church's role deserves; they do not specifically note, though, that the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) receives a great deal of treatment in the volume.

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The two authors are well-known Ukrainian emigré scholars: Serhii Plokhyy is director of the Church Studies Program at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS), and Frank E. Sysyn is director of the Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research at the same institute. CIUS has long been a faithful disseminator of information about Ukraine and a vigorous voice for Ukrainian independence. With this volume, CIUS continues to meet its typically high standards of careful scholarship and unabashed support for Ukrainian distinctiveness. The volume makes for interesting and informative reading.

Ukrainian Christianity is an undeniably major player in Christendom, whether it has been allowed full opportunity by its erstwhile religious leaders to show that or not. Prior to its forced incorporation into the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) after World War II, the UGCC was the largest of the Eastern Christian churches in union with Rome. It reemerged only in the waning days of the Soviet Union, as Ukraine lurched toward independence. While a large number of formerly UGCC parishes have remained within the Orthodox communion, over 3000 parishes have identified with the UGCC, re-

established in 1990 – allowing it to retain its status as the largest Uniate church. As well, the nation of Ukraine has more than 13,000 Orthodox parishes – a number greater than that in the whole of the Russian Federation. Even with the three-way split of Orthodoxy within Ukraine since 1991 – into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate [UOC-MP]), the UAOC, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate [UOC-KP]) – the Moscow patriarchate has nearly as many congregations in Ukraine as in Russia. Ukraine has long boasted the most faithful of the East Slavic Orthodox faithful in numbers of parishes, vocations, and religious; regrettably, in independent Ukraine those faithful parcelled out among three competing Orthodox communions.

The volume under review deals with a variety of facets of the role played by these major Christian communions within Ukraine, including the restricted field of operations allowed to the UGCC by Roman hierarchical leadership in various countries and the impact of the Ukrainian emigré community in Canada on the UAOC re-established in 1989. This review cannot take the space to cover all the chapters; it may be hoped that comment on a few will entice readers to obtain the volume and read it for themselves.

The authors pull no punches in exposing the ROC's attempts to inhibit the development of a sense of Ukrainian distinctiveness, whether in state or in church. As well, the authors openly acknowledge the radical departures of the first existence of the UAOC from Orthodox canon law,

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departures which raised enough suspicions within the worldwide Orthodox communion that it could not possibly hope to find acceptance; the authors are thus at pains to point out that in its second brief existence (during World War II) and in the post-1989 situation, the UAOC has been careful to remain within canonical expectations. The authors deal forthrightly with questions about the legitimacy and implications of the late seventeenth century elimination of the Kievan metropolitanate via absorption by the Moscow patriarchate; given that background, the conflict between the UOC-MP and the UOCKP is, at least, easier to understand (if not necessarily to justify). Each of these topics is fleshed out in considerable detail, with abundant notation and exploration of significant implications.

This volume has much to offer anyone interested in exploring the interrelationship of religion and nation, in general, and within Ukraine, in particular. This collection of articles comes together well to present a coherent whole – something frequently not accomplished in similar attempts. This book has much to commend it, and it is warmly recommended.

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Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation & Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*; translated from Slovenian by Rang'ichi Ng'inja. *Eastern European Studies*; no. 20. General Editor: Stjepan MetÓrovi. [sic; MeÓtrovi.]. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003. pp. xiv + 365; includes endnotes, bibliography and index. -

Reviewed by Gerald

Shenk

There are many books you wish you had written. There are some texts you wish others would read, so that they might better understand you and your experiences. There are also a few books you wish you could have read some 25 years earlier, the better to make sense of a complex situation in which you were living.

This text by a young Slovenian sociologist is all of these, for me. It represents a careful and sober compilation of historical data on the role of the three primary religious traditions (Orthodox Christian, Catholic Christian, and Islamic) in what was Tito's Yugoslavia and its aftermath. It is no small undertaking for a scholar to sift through the myriad competing claims about the data with understanding and critical evaluation. Velikonja accomplishes this and much more. He is close enough to speak with the confidence of an insider, yet sufficiently removed to sort the often florid rhetoric and place the contradictory claims into a useful comparative framework. As a Slovenian, he can and does take standpoints that are above the fray, so to speak.

Velikonja's account centers on Bosnia-Herzegovina, which means that it must intertwine the legacies of neighboring empires over many centuries. It also inevitably includes many specific developments in next-door (Yugoslav) republics of Serbia and Croatia. Going far beyond the merely descriptive rehearsal of primary recent trends, his approach is interpretive and explanatory, keying in to some of the deepest puzzles that

stymied outside journalists, military strategists and scholars alike during the eruptions of the 1990s.

In order to untangle religious interactions and cultural or political intolerance at the heart of the Balkans, this research carefully explicates the strands that our contemporaries in the region have inherited from centuries of complex exchanges among such empires as the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Habsburg. Bosnia's historical fate closely mirrors the big games and petty moves of the Great Powers throughout most of the past two centuries. Waves of military conquests, border shifts, accommodation and compromise for the sake of survival have left an indelible imprint on each cultural group.

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Velikonja's account places an appropriate amount of emphasis on the unique profile and role of the medieval "Bosnian Church," and on the extensive impact of the 500-year Ottoman reign on all Bosnia's religious communities (Pax Ottomanica, Chapter 3). The Turks' millet system of administering subject populations for civil purposes through their religious structures is especially important for an understanding of the linkage between religious and national identity in the Balkans. It meant, for all practical purposes, that ideas of citizenship and political agency had to emerge through a thick layer of religious identity, heavily filtered through the mediation of officials who bore primarily a religious responsibility for the well-being of their "flock." Compromise and adjustments for the sake of preserving religious institutions understandably took precedence for many generations over the more mundane tasks of fleshing out national and cultural autonomy.

Five centuries of Ottoman management in Bosnia made religion politically important. As Velikonja puts it, "One result of the millet system was that religion became the main identifying factor for the individual ethnic groups" (122). For this reason, the primary intellectual forces came from religious circles, and until the Austro-Hungarian invasion and occupation (1878 and following), Bosnia's constituent populations had effectively not yet been politicized into nationalist bodies.

What the Habsburg management accomplished in the next four decades in Bosnia is crucial for understanding consequences throughout the rest of the 20th century,

according to Velikonja. While Bosnia had previously been quite isolated from many geopolitical processes in the wider European context, the Austro-Hungarian Empire set out to wrest it as quickly as possible into the world of modernization (electricity, trains, trams, major road systems, monumental architecture, museums, etc.).

In a remarkable disclosure of the occupying forces' mentality, the Austro-Hungarian Finance Minister in 1895 gave an interview (to a London paper) that characterized the Empire's mission "in the entirely mythical binary categories of transition from chaos to cosmos," Velikonja observes. The official, who was a Hungarian historian and diplomat, viewed Bosnia-Herzegovina before the occupation as a "totally chaotic country engulfed in complete confusion, corruption, and anarchy. The new authorities would solve these problems, restore order, and ensure the equality of all religions" (120).

However well-meant their invasion and occupation, however "enlightened" their cultural and political policies, the Empire's interventions sparked such resistance and reactions (including those in neighboring Serbia and Croatia) that the toll may be traced directly down through to the far end of the

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bloody 20th century. Habsburg rule in four decades set off a politicization of each respective religious community, yielding a virulent new breed of confused clerical-nationalism:

The more or less forcible transplantation of the religio-national ideological myths from the neighboring nations manifested a new dimension in the multinational and interreligious relations of what was a heterogeneous Bosnia-Herzegovina. These

myths encouraged division, intolerance and usurpation from the start (122).

The zealotry of the Catholic Habsburg monarchy included annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina (October 1908), sparking reactions from newly awakening nationalist resistance by Serbs in Bosnia, and leading directly to waves of repression, collective punishments and outright state terror against undefended civilian populations. During World War I, which began with young Serbs assassinating Austria's Crown Prince, Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, "the Austro-Hungarian authorities terrorized Serbian

nationalists and the Serbian population through trials, massacres, internment, and ostracism. . . For the first time in their history, a significant number of Bosnia-Herzegovina's inhabitants were persecuted and liquidated because of their national affiliation. It was an ominous harbinger of things to come" (141).

Velikonja concurs with another Balkanologist (S. P. Ramet) who notes that Bosnia's Muslims also catch the spark of nationalism from their friction with the Habsburgs: it was "Austro-Hungarian occupation itself which more directly sparked a new consciousness" among them (130). Velikonja's general conclusion: "the fateful differences between the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina emerged mainly as a consequence of external nationalist influences and existing internal religious distinctions" (134).

From this point forward through the 20th century, Velikonja's chief contribution lies in explicating the art and artifice of each community's survival strategy: mythmaking. Previous mythologies had been primarily religious, cultural and somewhat historical in nature. He summons considerable evidence to differentiate these late emergent ideological nationalisms in Bosnia from the religious and historical communal identities that preceded them.

Such mythmaking skills are not unique to the heirs of Balkan realities, of course, but the elaborations he portrays (relying in part on the key work by Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*) sometimes reach fantastical proportions. Typical elements include the notion that [our] soil is sacred, [our] nation is chosen by God, all victims [on our side] are innocent, [our] warriors are heroic martyrs, automatically slated for sainthood, and the sufferings [of our side] are claimed to equate to the

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sufferings of Christ. Particular stress is placed on the idea that anyone who is not with us is not only dangerous, wicked, etc., but a traitor to our faith, our race and our holy cause (since the opponent is by definition someone who originally should have belonged to our side).

Vilification and demonization of the enemy reached new depths in the 20th century, Velikonja observes. During the Serbian monarchy between World Wars I & II, "ecclesiastic organizations in the kingdom of Yugoslavia were conflict-ridden, undemocratic, and infused with religious intolerance and animosity. In addition, they had

very strong nationalistic ties,” although individuals in Bosnia constituted a conspicuous exception, showing a “high level of mutual tolerance” across different religious backgrounds (160). With the potent and vicious brew of militant clericalism and political conservatism, Yugoslavia’s religious communities headed into the bloodletting of World War II armed with anti-Semitism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, anti-masonry and pro-fascist proclamations by hierarchs both Orthodox and Catholic (161).

After a careful review of policies on religion in Tito’s Yugoslavia, Velikonja moves to the penultimate chapter, which could almost stand alone as an explanation of the “War over Differences: the Religious Dimensions of Conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-95.” How Croatia and Serbia (Presidents Tudjman and Milošević.) conspired to carve up Bosnia; how the West’s failure to intervene and feeble ineffective gestures of rebuke made matters much worse; how intellectuals, journalists and cultural workers on all sides fell to the lowest levels of “profane political agitation” directed against their enemies; and how warlords using religious language and symbolism manipulated the media with xenophobia and apocalyptic fear of all other entities—all of these dimensions are examined and found culpable for the moral and spiritual bankruptcy which devastated every one of Bosnia’s religious communities during the most recent war.

In many ways the religious organizations had been weakened throughout communist rule in Tito’s Yugoslavia; the new nationalist states emerging from the break-up of that order were also quite insecure. Religious legitimation was required if the new regimes were to secure the consent and collaboration of their constituent populations. Velikonja calls this process “the frail attempts at re-Christianizing and religio-national integration in post-Socialist countries.” Never before had Bosnia’s inhabitants, he reasserts, been “subjected to such systematic persecution, mass slaughter, dispossession, and forceful proselytizing. Never before had they been forced to seek refuge from the destructive logic of religio-national exclusivity outside their own borders in such vast numbers” (288). When weak new

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states use poisonous nationalist ideologies in nostalgic ploys to offer weak old religious bodies a shortcut back to a share of power from ancient times, the combination

is literally deadly. The religions of Bosnia had long been tolerant, Velikonja reminds us; it was not until recent centuries of “Ottoman weakness and Western aggression that both Muslims and Christians became fanatical and intolerant” there (289).

If this treatise had been available a quarter century earlier, I would have brought many questions to it from my experiences living for two years in Sarajevo, Bosnia’s capital. Why does my Muslim neighbor immediately connect me with Prince Eugene of Savoy, while showing me the little wooden mosque he is so painstakingly refurbishing in his retirement? What does it mean when a Muslim friend greets me in December and inquires whether I celebrate Christmas, and if so, which date do I observe? (“In which case, congratulations on Christmas!”) Furthermore, why does the Catholic cathedral seem like a hub of bustling activities, while the two synagogues and the Serbian Orthodox monuments seem rather neglected? What were the indicators for a resurgence of Islam in the Balkans among the traditional Slavic Muslim population, and what sort of renewed Islam would it be? What were then fresh questions on Kosovo and the Medjugorje phenomena are covered in some detail as well.

But the best reasons for reading this text deeply today have to do with new empires, new legitimations for violence on a global scale, and new crusades to exclude the “other” on religious and cultural grounds. Hegemons in Washington, London and around the world, together with their pious helpers offering religious blessing, should take serious warning from this account. And all of us should learn the hazards of “hate silence” (in addition to “hate speech”). It is the failure of moderates to reject, isolate and refute the fanatics on our own side that gives such license to hatred, fear and carnage in the name of God (293).

Velikonja’s work is very well-documented, using primarily indigenous sources. He mostly neglects Protestant matters; minority affairs turn up in relation to a few passages noting Jewish history in the region. But the work is of substantial merit. I am glad to commend it to all readers of REE. Religious tolerance and real diversity cannot remain content at superficial levels, as if differences among us are insignificant. Comprehending and making positive room for the other, in all their reality, is essential if the whole world is not going to follow Bosnia into self-destruction. Gerald Shenk, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg VA.

