

Book Review

Paul Mojzes. *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR: Before and After the Great Transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press (Boulder: East European Monographs), 1992, 473 pp.

This splendid new study of religious liberty provides extensive documentation on twentieth-century conditions in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. The author marshalls historic detail to produce an account that is a model of objective scholarship. Objectivity is a value especially to be cherished on a topic which has been dominated so often by hysterical anti-communist rhetoric--or occasionally by sweeping socialist rationalizations. One is reminded of the fine British classic of 1974--*Discretion and Valour*, by Trevor Beeson. But Dr. Mojzes' book has the advantage of covering an additional two decades, including the period immediately before and after "the Great Transformation" (1989).

With conditions in Europe now so changed, what is the point of recounting these details of decades of oppression? The author indicates, in the Foreword, some important motivations which stand behind the writing of this volume. For one thing, religious liberty requires constant protection and nurture. To do nothing at all, as Edmund Burke observed, actually encourages the triumph of evil. Furthermore--recalling a dictum of Paul Ricoeur--Mojzes affirms that remembering the victims is a moral duty. Survivors owe a debt to those who have suffered and perished. Those who know are obligated to tell and retell what happened. Dr. Mojzes is a native of Eastern Europe himself, and his repeated visits and extensive contacts there have greatly enriched the content of this study.

Some might suppose that such a book is a depository of information for future generations--for young students, say, who have experienced nothing of the oppressive atmosphere of the former Soviet Union. But there is yet another audience--those who indeed encountered these restrictions in some measure but who need to be sharply reminded of the enormous scope and the pervasive extent of these practices. I have noticed a puzzling thing as I have discussed the former USSR with recent classes of college students. Not only are my students nearly incredulous when I share with them certain experiences I had in the Soviet Union more than twenty years ago, but even I myself find that some of these incidents seem quite remote--even unlikely! Detailed documentation is important--as fresh information for some, and as an authentic reminder to others. Dr. Mojzes has performed a significant service in creating an accurate record of this particular period of human history. The coming of Communism often produced sharp discontinuities with former religious practices. But there were also certain continuities, differing according to the unique history of each particular region. An early chapter discusses the USSR as "the trend setter in repression." The way the Soviet model was applied elsewhere, however, varied greatly. Separate chapters introduce the variations which developed in nine different socialist countries. Dr. Mojzes proposes a four-point

typology which can be applied to conditions of religious freedom in various places. These are, basically,

(A) Ecclesiastic absolutism: the established church enjoys special privilege while non-members suffer restrictions;

(B) Religious tolerance: religion is favorably supported by the state, although various religions are treated equally before the law;

(C) Secular absolutism: religion is rejected as an acceptable worldview, and non-believers receive special privileges.

(D) Religious liberty in a pluralistic society: the state remains truly indifferent and neutral toward both religion and non-religion.

Interestingly the switch from one type of absolutism to another (Type A to Type C) appears to have been facilitated where there was a cultural attitude of intolerant absolutism. "Dominance of one view simply gave way to dominance of another, but the structural relationship did not need to change"(p. xiii). In places where religious tolerance had been practiced to a considerable extent (Type B), secular absolutism confronted greater resistance, and there was a tendency for features of both (B) and (C) to persist together. And religious liberty in the midst of pluralism (D) tended most to prevail following historic experience with an attitude of tolerance (B). These four models are more distinct in theory than in history, as the author admits. But these basic patterns may nevertheless be quite instructive.

The focus of the book is on religious liberty, including the restrictions or expansions of that liberty, in this chosen region. The volume is not about general religious developments in Eastern Europe or about church-state relations. It does not elaborate upon individual cases of harassment, torture, imprisonment, or death. These are indeed horrors and radical denials of religious liberty; but much as been written about such cases already. Dr. Mojzes attempts to place individuals and incidents in a larger frame. He seeks to provide a reliable discussion on the various aspects of religious liberty itself with fairness, comprehensiveness, and balance.

The author understands religious liberty to be both the freedom to believe and the freedom to act religiously (and also not to believe or not to act). That is, freedom goes beyond the right to worship according to one's conscience. It includes also the social expression of responsibility according to certain ethical norms. The Bolsheviks considered the issue of religious freedom to be primarily related to worship. But various consultations of the World Council of Churches and the Council of European Churches (with representatives from both East and West) have helped to create the general understanding that the Bolshevik interpretation is inadequate. Mojzes thinks that the American constitutional separation of church and state ("benevolent non-intervention") provides a clear model for what religious liberty should be.

To effectively promote human rights, Mojzes says, it is necessary to understand the important differences between various East European countries--to become sensitive to the traditions, concerns, and needs of different religions and different nations. "Not all religions have an equal need for Bibles, the right to emigrate, formal training for clergy, Sunday schools, etc. Not all countries respond in an equal manner to economic sanctions, public attack, or quiet diplomacy"(p. 27). Stalin also neglected important differences when he created structures, from Comintern to Informbureau, to impose the Soviet interpretation into the thinking and practice of other socialist countries. This unimaginative copying of the Soviet model, contends Mojzes, did violence to the national histories of the quite diverse peoples of Eastern Europe (p. 101).

Historically to be Russian has meant to be Eastern Orthodox. The multiple invasions which so tormented the Russians were fought against non-Orthodox people. "Those of other religions were intrinsically linked with that which is foreign and dangerous." Thus Mojzes reminds us that patterns of persecution for religious convictions, and efforts of the government to control religious institutions, pre-date Communism in Russia by several centuries.

Mojzes identifies several specific phases in the Soviet government's approach to religion, with periods of vacillation between intense hostility and lesser restriction. Actually, he suggests, the years since 1917 can be divided into six separate periods, with eight sub-phases. The initial policy of the Bolsheviks was to terrorize and annihilate the Russian Orthodox Church, but Lenin ordered an easing of the persecutions lest believers be turned into fanatics (p. 57). Curiously non-Orthodox traditions experienced greater freedom for a dozen years than they had known under the Tsar. But eventually they too suffered. The Bolsheviks perceived the world in simple and sharp contrasts; an adversary was viewed as "a traitor, an opportunist, a hireling." Such rabid intolerance exacerbated conflict with persons of religious conviction. As is well known, Stalin's assault on the church was devastating. He was indeed "the master of obliteration," says Mojzes (p. 68). Few churches remained open in 1939. Only four Orthodox bishops were still functioning. After 1942, ironically, Stalin began to relax pressures against the church, lest the Nazis be welcomed as liberators.

Repression returned with the coming of Khrushchev. It may be, suggests Mojzes, that Khrushchev undertook persecution in an effort to demonstrate his own Communist orthodoxy. He had denounced Stalin, and he had begun a process of liberalization and reform in several areas. Was this, then, Khrushchev's response for the hard-liners who questioned his ideological purity? The number of active priests (30,000) was cut by 50%. Accounts of the dreadful life in the Gulag are well known to our readers.

Can the territories of the former USSR learn tolerance? Mojzes discusses several factors which contributed to the shift from one authoritarian system to that of another, including the absence of any democratic tradition prior to 1917. There are at present a number of internal and external forces which encourage greater religious liberty. Many of these found expression immediately following the Great Transformation of 1989. Religious liberty was gradually being extended, first in practice and then in law. "The Law

Concerning Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organization" was passed in 1990. (Should we be disturbed that the vote was 341 for vs. only 1 against? The general direction may be encouraging, but one might wonder--in light of the history of past decades--whether this apparent mandate for freedom is truly democracy in action.) As Mojzes observes, surely it will be decades before significant change is made in the widely shared misperceptions about religion (p. 111). The long-range forecast for the former USSR remains uncertain.

The material on other socialist countries is so compact in detail that it is difficult to decide what to single out for attention in this brief review. Not only is every chapter crammed with careful documentation, but the final section offers an additional 75 pages of endnotes! The dominant impression from all this material is that each country has its own distinct history and character and that those who ignore this distinctiveness (whether in the East or in the West) create serious misunderstandings and problems for themselves.

The Communist Party of ALBANIA was organized only in 1941, but it soon destroyed institutional religion by exploiting discord among religions and through using terror. The Balkan peninsula has an ancient heritage of cruelty and brutality (p. 119). Professing admiration for Stalin, the authorities moved swiftly to close or demolish all religious buildings and to establish the world's "first atheist state." Although it was announced in 1990 that private worship is no longer forbidden, Albania remains the most backward country in Europe, in both economics and in civil rights. Apparently it deserved its reputation as "a small country with a large Gulag"(p. 131).

The chapter about BULGARIA details the several techniques systematically employed to crush the will of resisting pastors. This psychological assault left nothing to chance and had consequences which were devastating to pastors and congregations(p. 145 f.).

CZECHOSLOVAKIA was an independent multiparty parliamentary democracy between the two world wars. But the roots to democratization stretch back to the Middle Ages. There were major government efforts to manipulate the church. Clergy salaries were paid by the state, but this pattern became a device for control. Some 200 monasteries were surrounded by the military and closed down during two terrible days in 1950. Female orders suffered a similar fate a few months later, with 13,000 nuns being sent to factories and farms. Despite everything, however, this land cherished a tradition which no amount of repression could erase from the minds of its people.

Separation of church and state came to Germany in 1919. Even after the Soviet occupation of EAST GERMANY in 1945, the authorities made an effort to project an image of religious toleration, and a considerable degree of freedom was permitted. Religious people were seen as second-class citizens, but they experienced less brutality in the GDR than elsewhere and a significant amount of institutional liberty. Church membership diminished across the years. Still the church provided pockets of freedom and protection for unofficial peace and ecology groups which could find nowhere else to meet. Interestingly the religious community of the GDR embraced Gorbachev's new policies of openness even while the local authorities resisted these developments. The

participation of the church in events which led to the Gentle Revolution is probably a familiar story to persons reading this review. Nevertheless the recounting of these momentous events makes exciting reading! (pp. 218-224).

HUNGARY traces its Christian influence back to St. Stephen--crowned in 1000 A.D. Roman Catholic culture resisted Turkish Muslim conquest (1526) but eventually lost ground to Protestantism. A bloody counter-Reformation created prolonged bitterness and caused a strong undercurrent of religious intolerance among competing groups. In the mid-19th century (and for 100 years), Hungary legally became a tolerant society (Type B) retaining a few aspects of absolutism (Type A). The church accepted major land reform after the Soviet occupation. But Communism soon encountered the unswerving resistance of Cardinal Mindszenty. The government's response produced "a modern horror tale" (p. 241). Eventually the church was compelled to compromise, to promote loyalty to the state, and to condemn anti-state activity. Mindszenty sought political asylum in the U.S. embassy, and there he remained for 15 years. The last quarter-century of Communist control was marked by less violence but by continuing discouragement and harassment of religious activity. With fascinating detail, Mojzes cites a catalog of restrictions placed on religion even in a time of increasing liberalization (pp. 250-260). The author notes that Hungary's reforms preceded Gorbachev's, in part through the efforts of reform and humanistic Marxists. With Gorbachev's pledge of noninterference, the reformers gained an ally in the Kremlin.

POLAND provided a unique situation, with a single religion playing a dominant role. With a tradition for unusual tolerance--dating back to 1573--Poland was for centuries a place of refuge for the persecuted. Mojzes explains that most Polish Communists were not atheists, and that Poland was the only Communist country which continued to provide chaplains for its armed services (p. 278). Poland did not escape the reach of Stalinism, but the strength of the church and its efforts for independence made it difficult to manage. Resistance to Communism increased with the birth of "Solidarity" and the martyrdom of Fr. Jerzy Popielusko. Poland today is still trying to discover its identity, having no clear model of what it ought to be.

ROMANIA, too, had a dominant religious tradition--Romanian Orthodoxy--with a history of tension between Type A and Type B systems. Churches were viewed as branches of the government, and clergy as government employees; they were given wide space for their activities as long as they were willing to offer uncritical support of the government (p. 316). Stalinism in Romania produced a docile and fearful church, even as the general public remained massively religious (p. 327). The heritage of Ceausescu, with his secret police and bureaucrats, has produced a fragile situation for the growth of democracy.

The chapter on YUGOSLAVIA provides insights on the distressing complexities being endured in that unhappy land. Since early times the territory has been marked by the rivalry of intolerant factions. Mojzes identifies no fewer than eight(!) competing groups, each with their own goals and complex histories. These are: (1) Eastern Orthodox, (2) Roman Catholic, (3) Bosnian Christianity, (4) Islam, (5) Protestants, (6) Neo-Protestants,

(7) Jews, and finally (8) Communists. There has been little inclination toward tolerance anywhere in the mix. The Communists came to power after fratricidal civil war and massacres. Hoping to eliminate all rivals, Communism introduced still more divisiveness into the region. The Soviet model of religious persecution and restriction was dominant during the life of Stalin. A more liberal period followed in the late 60's, with several humanistic Marxists becoming interested in religious issues and in Christian-Marxist dialogue. Despite instances of government repression, a greater degree of openness toward religion developed in the two decades prior to the Great Transformation. Religious publication in Yugoslavia, in fact, became quite extensive (p. 365). Since 1989, as the world knows, inter-ethnic conflicts and worsening economic conditions have erupted in violence and disintegration. The churches themselves were no models of tolerance, and the country seems unable to engage in the dialogue necessary to create pluralistic democracy. After introducing readers to some of the intricacies of the situation, Mojzes concludes, "It is far more complex than can be described here"(p. 375).

A final chapter surveys developments up until 1992. By now the euphoria of 1989 has been modified with sober apprehension. Nationalistic chauvinisms are stirring again. If the transformation is ever to be complete, says Mojzes, each religious community must grant to others those rights and liberties, which they so eagerly seek for themselves.

I have but one slight complaint about this volume: the proofreaders should have done their work more carefully. It is somewhat distracting to find a few dozen typographical errors in such an important book. The text itself is the product of superior scholarship. And its relevance could hardly be more timely.

William Luther White