

## **Book Review**

Pedro Ramet, Ed. **Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies** Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990, 454 pp.

Reading of the momentous events transpiring daily in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is enough to induce vertigo; attempting to keep abreast of the events and their implications is at times tantamount to attempting comprehension of a video tape stuck in fast forward. Although in such a situation it is inevitable that much of the assessments and predictions concerning the course of current events quickly becomes dated material, it would be unfortunate and completely misguided to dismiss this work, published during recent mercurial times of transformation, as just another example of the topical relegated to the historical. Although much of the title's intent to be contemporary is indeed being usurped by the rapidly changing scripts and casts on the East European set of the world stage, there remains much in this effort to recommend it.

Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies is the second of a three-part series dealing with church-state relations in communist countries. The first volume studied the status of the various Orthodox autocephalous churches in their respective political contexts; the concluding volume is intended to profile the experience of the Protestant communions. Volume one was highly commended for serving to demonstrate how erroneous it would be to assume uniformity in the plight of Orthodoxy as it struggled to survive under the various regimes that, now or previously, proclaimed atheism as their official "confession" (see Leonard Biallas's review in the fall, 1988 issue of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies). A similar commendation should be given to this second installment as it treats of the experience of Catholicism.

Roman Solchanyk and Ivan Hvat inform readers that as 1989 came to a close, prospects for the Catholic Church in the Soviet Union looked better than at any time since the early 1920's. Significant improvements in the Church's position has been made in Lithuania, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine. The way is clear for formal diplomatic relations to be established between the Kremlin and the Vatican. Negatively, the registration and legalization of the Eastern Catholic Church in the Ukraine continues to be a flashpoint of rancor between the Holy See and the Russian Orthodox Church. Attempts of Ukrainian Catholics to reclaim the church properties possessed by them until the infamous 1946 "self-dissolution" of their Church have resulted in what Orthodox leaders have termed as a "religious war." (To update: the September, 1990, meeting of Orthodox, Ukrainian Catholic and papal representatives gathered to affect a degree of healing of the situation dissolved itself without achieving any agreement or resolutions.)

Robert F. Goeckel writes that the Church's recent emergence from political hibernation in Eastern Germany seems to reflect the work of broad forces (such as the international peace movement and the initiatives of a generally disaffected youth) that lie beyond the control of either church or government. It is no surprise that the Catholic Church should be challenged to reevaluate its traditional inner-directed orientation and political abstinence.

Vincent C. Chrypinski assumes that in spite of recognized weaknesses of Polish "folk Catholicism," and regardless of the process of secularization, the church, led by a politically astute hierarchy, will maintain its status as the main broker of cultural and religious influence in Poland. (The apprehensions of author concerning the new church-sponsored anti-abortion bill becoming a source of extreme tension between church and state have been substantiated by subsequent events. On the other hand, the fact that the church threw its considerable weight behind the presidential candidacy of Lech Walesa undercut Chrypinski's projection that the church would continue to "maintain the stance of an impartial critic of sociopolitical relations".)

Milan J. Reban opines with regard to Czechoslovakia that the vitality of its underground church during the communist years, the unprecedented pilgrimages of recent years, and the interest among the intellectuals and the youth (especially in Slovakia) all indicate the presence of a religious resiliency that will serve the church well in the coming years of continued ambiguity and change.

According to Leslie Laszlo, whether or not the Hungarian Catholic Church will succeed better than the communist propaganda machine in winning the allegiance of the broad masses of people remains a critical and open question.

The editor himself suggests that in a Yugoslavia divided by the competing power centers of its eight federal units, church-state relations will continue to assume a distinctly regional character.

Janice Broun instructs that the markedly conservative character of Romanian Catholicism, forged through years of state oppression and extreme isolation, has served in the past as a unifying factor among believers. How to cope with individual hierarchs who now feel free to preach and teach their modernistic-sounding proclivities poses a major challenge for this local church. (Updates: At the beginning of January, 1990, the Front of National Salvation annulled the 1948 decree which had dissolved the Eastern Catholic Church in Romania, and now Eastern Catholic-Orthodox conflict similar to that transpiring in the Western Ukraine has arisen; sad also is the profound gulf of cultural estrangement separating Romanian Eastern Catholics from Hungarian-speaking Roman Catholics; the church's thinly spread resources handicap its effort to address the public health crisis--particularly the problems of AIDS and hepatitis B--which is one of Ceausescus' many dark legacies.)

The first stirrings of political consciousness and world awareness among Albanian Catholics only now beginning to make themselves felt. Broun observes that like the Bulgarian Catholic Church, the Albanian Church is an extremely united community having its church life chiefly influenced by the comparatively more committed and disciplined clergy of the religious orders, rather than by the regular parish priests. (To update: The Vatican restored diplomatic relations with Bulgaria on December 6, 1990, and post-Hoxha Albania recently ended its twenty-three year proscription against religion.)

Eric O. Hanson informs that at the present time both the Chinese state and the local Catholic Church advocate the practice of a very traditional pre-Vatican II Catholicism. In contrast to what is current in many East European countries, in China it is the episcopate that pursues a course independent of Rome, while the grass-roots organizations have tended to be pro-Vatican in the Chinese sectarian tradition. The resulting political dynamic has fostered tension between the government approved bishops and a number of local groups of clergy and laity who do not recognize their legitimacy. Reestablishment of ties between the Vatican and the church in China in the coming decades is possible but not assured. Since 1980, the Chinese government has been much more sophisticated in its religious policies, and the Vatican has been more flexible in its approach to Chinese political-religious organizations. Closer relations between the two appear to be in the rational political interests of both the PRC and Vatican moderates. The factors that threaten any proposed reconciliation include the following: Chinese economic troubles and their political fallout, the influence of doctrinaire anticommunists in the Vatican and Marxist antireligionists in Beijing, the Vatican's continued relations with Taipei, the Vatican's clandestine consecration of loyal bishops and ordination of priests without permission of the government, and the Vatican's interpretation of canon law that assumes the excommunication of illicitly consecrated, state approved bishops, and their consecrators.

Stephen Denney points out that throughout its history, the Catholic Church in Vietnam at times has been severely persecuted, and at other times it has exercised influence far out of proportion to its population. Today, it is a church moving toward reunification after twenty years of partition during which the two churches--north and south--developed under highly different circumstances. Despite restrictions, church attendance is reported by refugees and foreign visitors to be high, and the faith is more intense than before. Vietnamese Catholic leaders will continue their efforts to conduct a dialogue with the government in the spirit of Vatican II, but the meaningfulness of the dialogue will depend upon the degree to which they are allowed to speak freely.

Thomas E. Quigley notes that beginning in 1985, the phenomenon of a new presence of religion, and specifically of the Catholic Church, in the Cuban equation has been widely observed. As in other parts of Latin America where the spiritist or traditional religious forms are mixed together with aspects of Christian faith, the church in Cuba is beginning to pay serious attention to the growth of popular religiosity. Religious syncretism should become an area of heightened pastoral care in light of the fact that popular religion contributes both to the development of the church and to the unity of civil society that the regime is at pains to protect and project.

Humberto Belli writes that in the recent tortuous history of church-state relations in Nicaragua, the powers-that-be have on occasion shown sensitivity to the reactions of the International Catholic community in dealing with the local church.

It has almost become a reviewer's cliché to remark about the uneven quality of a book comprising articles originating from disparate sources. This is one work where, happily, the standard criticism does not apply. There is not much to distinguish between the

articles in terms of competent, substantial, and informative content. That the uniqueness, history, complexity, and outlook of each national situation was presented apparently according to plan testifies to an originally clear and unified editorial vision. As in the first volume, each article concludes with a fact sheet conveying such vital information as current strength of the church, chief official and unofficial news organs, and a list of local primates.

Given the above observation about strong editorial oversight, it comes as an irony that Ramet's own introductory essay, while displaying an impressive range and depth of knowledge on the topic of religion and the politics of coexistence, is lacking in both discipline and focus. The other essays that begin and end the book (Arthur McGovern on "Catholic Social Teachings: A Brief History," Hansjakob Stehle on "Papal Eastern Diplomacy and the Vatican Apparatus," and George H. Williams on "Karol Wojtyla and Marxism") could serve well as short, effective learning modules in college courses dealing with related topics.

As the burden of the state is lifted from particular churches, those churches are being challenged to re-integrate themselves into world Catholicism. In noting the recent revelation that the underground church in Czechoslovakia was served by ordained married men and women deaconesses who now look for a role in the freer church, and observing how church unity is tested by the involvement of opinionated Polish Catholics in political elections, let it not be lost that the Church Universal is, in its turn, challenged by the experience of the local communities.

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