

BOOK REVIEWS:

Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu. *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 270pp. \$55.00.

Reviewed by Ines Angeli Murzaku

Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania is meticulously researched and succinctly presented by Professors Lavinia Stan, a political scientist, and Lucian Turcescu, a theologian. Stan and Turcescu bring to the reader their scholarly expertise as well as their deepest knowledge of the subject matter. The authors with depth and breadth explore Romania's church state relations including the very intricate post-communist period and the church-state relations in a post-communist milieu. The monograph analyzes the theological and political reasons behind "the established church model" as represented by the Romanian Church case. Under this model, as explained in the book, the church and state form a partnership in advancing the cause of religion and the state.

Furthermore, the study gives the necessary tools to students and scholars of Eastern Europe to understand the most recent events in the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church including the most recent internal problems the church is facing with its own clergy. The abyss between the Romanian church hierarchy and the low-level-clergy prompted the clergy to set up clergy trade unions, which were unacceptable by the Patriarchate. The relations of the Romanian Orthodox Church with other churches, including the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, are part of the study. The authors scrutinize the persecution suffered by the Greek Catholics during the time of communism as well as the current problems the community is facing in regard to the restitution of church properties.

We are all in Professors Stan's and Turcescu's debt for offering such a refined, informative and elucidating study which makes the post-communist transformative period of Romania accessible to the English-speaking audience. The book is a valued reference for both graduate and undergraduate courses focusing on church state relations in Eastern Europe, Romanian religious and political history, post-communist religion and politics, as well as church-state relations in more general terms. The book will appear in Romanian in early 2009, published by the Bucharest publishing house *Curtea Veche*.

Tolle, lege! Take up and read!

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Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Reviewed by Joseph A. Loya, O.S.A.

Dostoevsky averred, through his main antagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, that Russians are a people of expansive nature and ideas, as expansive as the vast land they inhabit. In the first chapter of this book Froese credits theism's antagonists for the breadth of their dreaming. The Bolshevik's bold and massive "Soviet Secularization Experiment" employed, through time, a number of key theoretical assertions about religion. These assertions tested "the extent to which religious vitality or decline are a product of ignorance, ritual activity, social institutions, social rewards, salvation incentives and church-state relations" (page 5). In the concluding chapter these same theoretical perspectives are revisited and clarified as to how each were supported or

undermined by the “Experiment.”

The intervening chapters provide a historical analysis that points to fundamental failures in comprehension and applied methods on the part of those at the levers of Soviet power. An example of the first type of failure was misjudgment by Communist Party officials of the inherent power of the God idea to legitimate values, motivate behavior and inspire a wide variety of political, social and existential worldviews. Authorities also failed to realize the profound existential and personal dimensions of religious demand. The power elites lacked insight into the how the ferocity of their attack on religion served to highlight the importance of religion and the degree to which the intensity of their commitment to atheistic ideological exclusivity itself resembled religious fanaticism.

Tactically and strategically, the anti-God forces underestimated the capacity of religious leaders to navigate the difficult balance between their theological concerns and institutional commitments. In attacking God, the Communist Party leaders “foolishly” alienated potential allies in the quest for ideological domination, thus forcing religionists into permanent politically hostile opposition (page 174). Criticism of religion based on the assumption that religious explanations were merely misguided quests for scientific understanding targeted aspects of religion that are largely unimportant to believers in the first place. Godless rites innovated by the state could not compete with the authority and influence of religious rituals that were deeply engrained into the fabric of social life. Although religious authority often depends on earthly power as Trotsky noted, the introspective nature of religious sensibility worked against the complete ideological conversion of a population by means of coercion. The attempt to replace religion’s affirmation of personal self worth with an ideology that conveyed the notion that the individual is but a minor and disposable player in a larger historical drama was doomed from the start. The significance of the afterlife in religious imagination cannot be ignored: failures in offering an adequate material “happy ending” substitutes were all too obvious. Any examination of modern church-state relationships reaffirms that trying to kill God is a political dead-end. In sum, the book presents a compendium of theomachy’s arsenal that proved, for the most part, to be internally defective and awry in its target sighting.

The final chapter’s brief extrapolations of the author’s thesis about God’s resiliency into the social-political contexts of belief-without-participation Western Europe, religion-rich America and Communist China’s underground “gray religious market” seem sound. With regard to Western Europe, the arts of negotiation and compromise vis-à-vis the religions are recommended. (President Sarkozy of France, for one, seems to subscribe to that play book as he calls for a positive secularism that engages the religions in a “dialogue of respect.”)

There is much in Froese’s material that invites further exposition from a religionist’s standpoint. For example, the fact that a great number of Soviet citizens were willing to give their all for Marxist-Leninist dreams and/or for homeland is alluded to with reference to religion’s “suffering gladly” for a higher ideal, the only difference being the commitment to a worldly vs. otherworldly goal. This Christian reviewer would remark that, when it comes to the ultimate sacrifice – martyrdom – there is a subtle but crucial distinction to be made: the believer does not die “for” Christ and Christianity in a heroic sense that parallels patriotism, but rather dies “in” Christ so as to rise in him at God’s appointed time.

After discounting an occasional statement of the obvious (e.g., “Around the world, religious expression is by no means monolithic” on page 199), the text as a whole is engaging, demanding and evocative. The employment of the language of economics to categorize the secular assertions into supply side and demand side hypotheses – the former treats why individuals seek

out religion, the latter, how churches seek out members – is artful and effective.

A minor historical correction is here registered. It is asserted that Patriarch Tikhon resisted changes imposed by the state and was “immediately replaced by Patriarch Sergeii” (page 78). Actually, after Tikhon's death in April of 1925, Metropolitan Peter of Krutitsy and Kolomna was elected Patriarchal Locum Tenens. His tenure was short, for he staunchly rebuffed the socialist-leaning, Bolshevik-backed church renovationist movement that Trostsky touted as indication that proletarian revolutionary ideals were finally being embraced by the church. After Peter's arrest Sergeii assumed leadership of the Church under the title Deputy Patriarchal Locum Tenens. Not until after Stalin permitted a patriarchal election to the throne in 1943 could Sergeii be deemed “Patriarch Sergeii.”

One particular assessment regarding Soviet method is cause for mild perplexity. Froese marshaled the analyses of Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Brooks to provide insight into how Marxist-Leninists mystified their rhetoric through the melding of past, present and future into a magical, transcendent continuum. It was noted that state-sponsored rites mimicked religious rites to the extent that Lenin, Stalin and Marx were portrayed as stand-ins for God. (In his own work, James Billington practically revels at the achieved level of secular co-optation of the canons of religious iconography regarding the arrangement of relative echelons of power and the portrayal of poses, postures and hand gestures.) Froese continues: “The very idea of God disgusted Lenin, Stalin, and many revolutionary activists. Their passion to rid the world of the supernatural ironically explains why they were so quick to don the garb of religion” (page 173). He then characterizes the donning of religious garb as examples of irony and even hypocrisy on the part of the anti-God forces. But, why so? The revolutionaries did not parachute down from some completely alien society: they, too, carried within their cultural DNA the same deeply engrained responses to conceptual archetypes, visual cues and the sense of realizable eschatology that the believers possessed.

In sum, the author successfully made his case that history witnesses to the truth of the book's opening statement, “It is easier to invoke God than to get rid of him.” The task of developing answers to large extra-sociological questions that explain the ubiquity and embeddedness of the God idea in the human psyche was rightly left to philosophers, psychologists, biologists and geneticists. This reviewer will be glad to accord this book a place on his university-level “Religion in Russia” course syllabus, and recommends it to others for their own purposes.

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