

Book Review

Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe by Patrick Michel. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, viii + 321pp., £39.50.

It is a pleasure to introduce Patrick Michel's work to an English-speaking readership, or rather to reinforce an introduction that is, deservedly, already under way. For in his *Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe*, Michel provides not only a wealth of valuable information but also a sustained critical analysis concerning the relationships between religion, the state and civil society in parts of Central Europe.

One or two preliminaries are, however, important before discussion of these themes in more detail. First, this book is a translation of a French volume which appeared in 1987. In other words, both the material collected and the important reflections on it – apart from a brief post-face to the English edition – concern the period before the *annus mirabilis* of 1989. There have, moreover, been developments of almost equal significance since the English edition appeared in 1991, not least the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union, the split between the Czech lands and Slovakia and the war in the Balkans. All these events have undoubtedly altered – and will continue to alter – our perceptions about the former communist countries. Changes of such magnitude are, of course, reasons to improve our knowledge of the areas in question, not to avoid them just because they are impossibly fast-moving targets. On the other hand, it is important to get the time scale right in appreciating the material in question. Just how far and how fast events have moved is nicely caught by a quote at the beginning of the book. It is taken from a poster in a secondary school at Trenčín in Czechoslovakia and reads: 'There will never be any prosperity until the last priest has been killed by the last stone of the last church.' It was, as Michel reminds us, difficult to survive among those who displayed this kind of material, never mind to hold any kind of dialogue with them.

A second preliminary remark concerns the rather misleading title of the book. It is not really about politics and religion in Eastern Europe; it is about politics and Catholicism in Central Europe. In other words it is concerned with the relationships between church and state, between church and civil society, between grassroots believers and the episcopate, in three countries in this part of Europe which have Catholic majorities: Poland, Czechoslovakia (or to be really up to date the former Czechoslovakia) and Hungary. These three cases are, moreover, treated rather differently for there is – for very good reasons – disproportionate attention paid to the Polish case. Among these reasons the relative availability of adequate source material is an important factor, though not the only one.

Bearing these preliminary remarks in mind, we can move on to consider the essence of the book, which is contained in five chapters, followed by a short conclusion, the post-script to the English edition, the usual notes and references, and a useful and moderately detailed chronology of events in the three countries from 1944 to 1990, the entire period of communist rule in Central Europe.

Michel tackles his subject from a variety of angles. Crucial to his approach,

however, is an awareness that religion cannot be reduced to its established forms, for 'it exhibits a tremendous propensity to overstep the bounds within which the institutionalized protagonists would like to confine it' (p. 20). It follows that religion is capable of resurfacing in the most unexpected contexts (social, aesthetic, symbolic or cultural, to name but a few); the more so if denied its more obvious outlets. How this process occurs, however, depends upon a multiplicity of other factors, not least the other protagonists in the arena: the state and civil society. But they also – like the church – are entities made up of composite elements and they operate in constantly shifting situations. Incessant movement becomes, therefore, the dominant feature, constantly influencing the mode and locus of relationships, 'breaking down patterns of behaviour and reforming them elsewhere as new priorities dictate' (p. 20). It is good to be reminded of this constant flux beneath the apparent immobility of the communist regimes, a point set out in the initial discussion and returned to in the chapter entitled 'The meaning of modernity'.

Michel's second chapter considers a rather different dimension of the debate: the academic study of religion within a communist framework. The sociology of religion (whether official, independent or clandestine) raises much wider issues, for it reflects the way in which religion is, or has been, variously understood in the communist world. From an official point of view, for example, there has been a progression from a simple negation of the religious phenomenon to an effort to gain an understanding of religion and religiosity for the purposes of control and manipulation. In between we find an intermediate stage: a gathering of information about religious activity in order to effect its demise. This idea of a progression masks, once again, the very considerable variety between the three societies in question; a variety which increases steadily through the postwar period (i.e. across time as well as across space).

Different sociological – or indeed different intellectual – perspectives are, of course, equally evident among the western observers of the role of religion under communism, who occupy points on a continuum from those who would be cautious about the effectiveness of religion as 'a vehicle of desovietization and detotalization in East-Central Europe' to those who emphasise the prominence of the churches in this respect. The phrase 'desovietization and detotalization' is one of the rather too many examples of ugly sociological jargon in this book; but the point is a valid one despite the jargon, and Michel undoubtedly finds himself among those who regard religion as more rather than less effective as a carrier of resistance against the totalitarian state.

The process of resistance is, however, a complicated one, for it starts with the state's attempts to marginalise the religious constituency. Marginalisation more often than not creates dissidence, which is itself one step towards political opposition, a point well recognised by the secular opponents to communism. Indeed, secular and religious opposition become curiously confused in some cases. In his subsequent analysis of the possible reactions of the believer to the social and political pressures of communist society, Michel highlights one 'type' who is, paradoxically, not a believer at all: 'it is plainly no accident that Eastern Europe has invented the new and decidedly strange phenomenon of the practising non-believer just when that of the non-practising believer is becoming increasingly widespread in the West' (p. 5). It is hardly surprising that this sentence caught my attention, for the non-practising believer in the West has been a focus of my own work. It seems to me that the western combination of variables (high belief and low practice) is too often taken for granted, as if it were necessarily 'normal'. Michel points out with considerable clarity that given a very different state of affairs, religious practice becomes an effective protest against 'the

utter falsity of the official secular pattern' (p. 106). Hence comes the decision to practise, to encourage one's children to practise and to pay attention to the church's pronouncements; actions which do not necessarily imply acceptance of the church's dogma. What has happened to the non-believing churchgoer since 1989 is, of course, a very different question.

The final substantive chapter is appropriately called 'Slavorum apostolus', and considers in some detail the significance of a Polish-born Pope for the Catholic countries of Central Europe and indeed for all Christians in the East. As far as Poland itself was concerned, the 1978 papal election was clearly a crucial event. It was, however, only one stage within a process that was already under way. With respect to John-Paul's visit to Poland in 1979, Michel comments:

during the visit it was the Pope, the Church and Catholicism that provided the Poles with a significant proportion of the symbols, the words, themes and motivations that they needed. A society atomized by the government was reconstituted around the Pope – or rather, the Pope's visit was only one stage in a process that had begun some time previously, but one that revealed how far the movement had come and set the seal on the new alliance between the different groups of which civil society in Poland was composed. (pp. 133–4)

In that it privileges the Polish case and underlines the effectiveness of religion as an agent of resistance to the state, this quotation is representative of Michel's writing. It is, I'm afraid, also representative of his somewhat convoluted style, which has gained nothing in translation. Indeed, at times it has become incomprehensible. The reader must persevere to get the best out of a stimulating book.

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