

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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Notes on Contributors

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Editorial

Two articles in this issue of *RSS* deal with the regeneration of religious education in formerly communist Eastern Europe. Tatjana Rakar looks at the provision of religious education by the Catholic Church in Slovenia, and Bojan Aleksov at the introduction of religious education into state schools in Serbia.

In both countries, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the reintroduction of religious education has been heavily influenced by political considerations. In Serbia its introduction into state schools did not begin until after the fall of Milošević in October 2000. Milošević had made many concessions to the Serbian Orthodox Church in the context of his programme of Serbian nationalism, but as a communist with an instinctive opposition to pluralism he had rejected all initiatives seeking the introduction of religious education into state schools.

Since the end of communism Slovenia has been ruled almost continually by socialist governments. This may well have something to do with the fact that over the communist period the ideological application of socialism in Slovenia was probably milder than anywhere else in Eastern Europe. The predominance of left-wing governments is one of the reasons why the regeneration of Catholic religious educational establishments has been slow.

Rakar argues that Slovenian education policy still manifests monopolistic characteristics, arising out of the belief that quality and equal opportunities in education are best guaranteed by a comprehensive network of state schools. Meanwhile, Rakar notes, Slovenia is now the only country in Central and Eastern Europe which provides no confessional religious subject in state schools. An optional nonconfessional subject on religion and ethics has been introduced, but the Catholic Church has been assigned no exclusive competence in this area. This is currently one of the most disputed issues in relations between the government and the church in Slovenia.

In another area entirely it is interesting to note the enduring influence of the communist period on current religious developments in Central and Eastern Europe, and how the communist legacy often gives those developments a distinctive character not only in the various countries of Central and Eastern Europe but in those formerly communist countries as compared with western countries. On the basis of her extensive fieldwork among New Agers in Slovenia, Barbara Potrata argues that

the interest in New Age in postsocialist countries is not a coincidence. Whereas in many aspects similar to the western New Age, the reasons for the popularity of this phenomenon in postsocialism, I believe, can be better understood only when New Age is seen as a constant dialogue with, and opposition to, socialism and postsocialism.

She argues that like the 'socialist project' in Eastern Europe, New Age is millenarian in nature, and shared many values with socialism; nevertheless New Age stood against

socialism in many respects; most obviously in the rejection of atheism, but also for example in the belief that societal change would be effected through the individual rather than the collective and through evolutionary rather than revolutionary means.

Potrata notes one interesting difference between New Age in the West and New Age in socialist Slovenia, arising out of the dysfunctional formal economy of the latter, marked as it was by constant systemic shortages.

When looking for goods and services which were hard to obtain, people had to use their initiative as entrepreneurial and atomised individuals. This had important consequences for New Age understandings of gender. Whereas in the West, New Age ... celebrate[s] values which are culturally identified as 'feminine' ... , Slovenian New Agers curiously celebrated (and continue to celebrate) what are culturally defined as 'masculine' values: individualism, power and empowerment, self-confidence and assertiveness, determination and strength, perseverance in the face of adversity and entrepreneurial behaviour.

In the postsocialist period New Age again finds itself in an environment that is in some ways congenial, but it again finds itself offering an alternative social vision, this time maintaining some of the values represented by socialism, notably in a resistance to the social atomisation promoted by the market economy by an emphasis on reciprocity, sociality and egalitarianism among New Agers, and in a continuing belief in an eventual millenarian utopia.

The articles in this issue of *RSS* thus demonstrate in different ways the continuing importance of an understanding of the role of the communist past in Central and Eastern Europe in the shaping of current religious developments.