

Book Review

Postkomunistički horizonti (Postcommunist horizons) by Pero Aračić, Gordan Črpić and Krunoslav Nikodim. Đakovo: Teologija u Đakovu, 2003.

'*Aufbruch*' is the overall title of a research project, international in scope and interdisciplinary in nature, headed by the Pastorales Forum in Vienna. Basic fact-finding research for the whole of Europe was done in 1997 and so far eight studies based on this research have been published by a German publisher. The aim of the research is to conduct empirical and quantitative study of the changes and developments that have occurred in value systems and religious belief systems in 10 postcommunist countries (eastern Germany, Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Hungary).

Postkomunistički horizonti is the presentation of the work of the Croatian team, which is composed of sociologists, historians and theologians. The book is published in Croatian by the Roman Catholic seminary in Đakovo, Croatia. It is divided into five main sections.

The first section outlines the socio-historical context of each of the 10 countries covering the last two centuries and with special emphasis on key historical transitional periods, including postcommunism. The authors conclude that in the postcommunist transitional period Croatian society has been developing externally along the postmodernist axis, while internally it is characterised as a mixture of traditional, modern and postmodern.

The second section presents the results of the study of religiosity, primarily Christian and Roman Catholic, in the various societies. Comparative statistical results are given for participation in sacraments of initiation, mass attendance, confession and prayer. This section also addresses various elements of belief (such as belief in the resurrection, the soul and miracles); understandings of the character of God and of Jesus Christ; the nature of religious experience; personal contact with the Virgin Mary; the characteristics of the church after communism; and Christian political engagement.

The third section is an analysis of value systems and the elements of people's world views against the communist background. After a useful discussion of various aspects and consequences of totalitarian societies in Europe (the notion and practice of social solidarity, religious persecution, historical nostalgia, satisfaction with civil rights and pride taken in them) the authors discuss aspects of people's world views and their understanding of the meaning of life in postcommunism. Topics include: optimistic and pessimistic outlooks on life; materialism; the sense of the purpose of existence based on religious convictions and the resulting degree of personal, intentional self-determination; church and family; the media and religion.

The fourth and longest section reflects on ecclesiastical life and church practice in Croatia from a pastoral standpoint and suggests possible ways to improve it. The authors proceed from the observation that Christians under communism suffered three-fold martyrdom: social hardship, economic hardship and imprisonment. These are reflected in their orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The main consequences of communism were the isolation and self-isolation of the church and the privacy of belief. Today Croatian Christian believers

may be divided into three categories: practising (25 per cent), traditional (50 per cent) and nominal (15 per cent) (*sic*, although these total only 90 per cent). An alternative suggestion is that 35 per cent of Croats are Christians by choice who accept the teachings of the (Roman Catholic) Church, while 65 per cent do not follow those teachings and therefore cannot be called Christians. Thus the main pastoral direction must be, according to the authors, evangelisation, and that primarily of marriage and family, through a personal and mystagogical pastoral approach. The proper context is the local parish in which specialised ecclesial workers operate following a carefully prepared plan.

'Responses' by a sociologist and a pastoral theologian conclude this section and the book. The (unnamed) sociologist starts by declaring that today's transitional Croatia, formally a democracy, is in a state of anomie in which laws, customs and traditions exist but do not apply. This state of affairs, which is a consequence of the former communist experience, manifests itself in a mentality characterised by social passivity, nepotism and idleness. Another reason for this state of affairs is the perceived lack of will by the current political elite to work towards the common good. A common good depends on a value system, which underlies all societal developments, and its primary context, according to the author of the section, is the basic family unit. The development of such a value system is related to religiosity, which it is argued is under attack from secularism and individualism. Thus values gradually lose footing in society at large as well as in the religious community and in the individual, and gradually dissolve. Religiosity, concludes the sociologist, is significant as it underpins a value system and thus fosters the integration of Croatian society.

The pastoral theologian declares that the new pluralist democratic environment requires that the church reposition itself as an equal partner in the shaping of the emerging society. In this context it is mandatory that it engage in the (new) evangelism of those who declare themselves Christians. Further, it is argued that the church should restructure itself into a plurality of (smaller) 'basic communities' in which an individual would receive spiritual nourishment rather than be a 'mere object of church education' in a large impersonal parish church. New church workers are called for who have a 'clear value profile and a deeply lived spirituality'. In addition, Christianity should not retreat from public life and the mass media but participate as much as possible. Finally, the author is of the opinion that the results of the research are encouraging: the Roman Catholic Church is alive and well, people live their faith in a meaningful life and to a large degree support 'Christian values'. The section concludes with the admonition to the (Roman Catholic) Church to engage even more decisively in the social processes taking place in Croatia.

A bibliography is followed by the extensive fifth section. This contains a body of statistical information and charts covering all ten countries included in the search.

So how to evaluate this publication? There are many obvious reasons to commend the book. The publication in one place and in the Croatian language of a large body of statistical material related to religious sentiments and practice, ethical values and world views in several formerly communist European countries is certainly extremely commendable and useful. Equally important is the publication of corresponding information culled from Croatia and the juxtaposition of the two bodies of information. The resulting thorough comparison and analysis, the result of the interdisciplinary approach, yield insights which no researcher of Croatian culture and religion in this transitional period can afford to neglect. The background presentation of the church under communism is done well.

The two 'responses' at the end of the book come in a sense as the crowning summary of the study. Yet it is to them that I direct my few critical comments. The least that can be said is that they are too brief for the bulk of the book. The 'response of the sociologist' offers no new insights and is replete with sociological jargon. Perhaps this is inevitable, though.

The 'response of the pastoral theologian' is less technical and less academic and thus easier to read. It proceeds from the questions raised on the basis of the results of the research. However, it may be argued that this response in particular would be formulated differently if it came from someone representing a majority Orthodox or Protestant country, or from someone representing an Orthodox or Protestant church within Croatia. For instance, in response to the call for (new) evangelisation a Protestant would say that those who are declared Christians need to recommit themselves, and that evangelism by definition is focused on those who do not profess to be Christian believers. A Protestant would also argue that 'basic communities' actually correspond to fellowships of gathered believers as in most Protestant ecclesiologies. As for the qualifications of church workers, that which is invited by 'deeply lived spirituality' is what evangelical Protestant Christians have for a long time covered by notions of 'growth in spiritual maturity' based on true repentance and conversion experience.

In short, the study is clearly written from the Roman Catholic point of view, and although other religious communities do receive token mention, whenever the word 'church' is used it is the Roman Catholic Church that is usually meant. There is no hint that the concept of 'church' may not be monolithic, and that it might be a collective comprising various Christian churches. Moreover, throughout the study and in the 'responses' the reader is steadily led to imagine Croatian society as a Roman Catholic society in transition. The transition is depicted as moving from a more traditional to a less traditional Roman Catholic society, which is a trend that is to be halted and reversed. Little attention is paid to religious pluralism as a present reality and even less as a desirable future quality.

The comment about the overall Roman Catholic bent of the study applies equally to the bibliography. It is representative rather than exhaustive, but its main shortcoming is that it does not include any works from authors from religious communities other than the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Such sources would add to the usefulness of the study and create a more nuanced treatment of the topic. The same applies to the list of contributors/authors, which does not boast one such name either. In conclusion, this excellent source of information and very useful analytical tool would benefit from a more pluralist and diversified perspective.

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