

Review for South Slav Journal by James Pettifer

Book

Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Postmodern Age (History of Christian-Muslim Relations Volume 16)

Andrew.M.Sharp

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This book is an ambitious and important work, although given the nature of the subject matter and the approach to it taken almost every reader is likely to find much to have reservations about, as well as much to admire. The title is somewhat misleading, unless postmodernism is supposed to start in the mid-fifteenth century, as this is where the author's chronological account begins. He then moves on to consider Orthodox theological perspectives on the religions, and the heart of the book follows, which is about the changing relationship of Islam and Orthodoxy in the twentieth century. It concludes with a comprehensive consideration of the role of dialogue in the Greek Orthodox church, leading up to a detailed consideration of the situation after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, and other contemporary issues. His accounts of the early periods of history going back to Byzantium is in general sound and judicious and draws on modern Byzantine and Ottoman scholarship.

This will be an important book for future Balkan historians, whether they are interested in religion or not. Although it would not be apparent from reading the blurb, a great deal of the evidence for the author's views emanates from the Balkans, Albania in particular, focussed on the role of Archbishop Anastasias Yannulatos, the current Greek-born head of the autocephalous Albanian Orthodox church in Tirana who in general Sharpe sees as a model of modern Orthodox leadership. He sees Yannulatos emerging as a key moderniser in the Orthodox leadership internationally in the time of the high tide of the involvement of Orthodox Church leaders in the upper organs of the World Council of Churches after 1971. In Sharpe's view, this organisational and public commitment came as a result of the theological dialogues held at the same time, or earlier.

The great weakness in the arguments put forward by Sharpe are connected to his very formal model of Orthodox church organisation, and also Islamic religious institutions. He appears to assume that both Orthodoxy and Islam follow organisational models that in general resemble the highly centralised model of the Roman Catholic church, where a particular Pope can put his personal stamp on the Church in a decisive way. This is not so, particularly in the Balkan churches. Sharpe frequently argues as if, for instance, most Albanian Orthodox were happy to accept the spiritual and social authority of Yannulatos and accept his views. The non-specialist reader of this book would have no inkling whatsoever that the entire tenure of Yannulatos's post has been marked by often acrimonious controversy within his church about whether it is appropriate for a Greek citizen to have been imposed on them as occupant of its highest post. These reservations have also been shared by Albania's Muslim majority. This culminated recently in disorderly anti-Yannulatos demonstrations inside a main Albanian Orthodox church in New York City when he visited the United States last year. In contrast, Sharpe makes an acute analysis of the real position of the Patriarch in Istanbul, Bartholomew, as a leader, where, as he puts it, the Church is 'threatened in various ways', but this does not extend to the situation elsewhere in the region.

The book has nevertheless some great strengths; it brings together a mass of material from many sources in several languages on the inter-religious situation, although the focus excludes for the most part Roman Catholics and Vatican political issues. The author seems to share the view of Catholicos Aram of the Armenian Orthodox church that the Orthodox have centuries of experience of living with Muslims that Western Christians could profitably learn from. The moral of the story must be, though, that this takes place in the context of local traditions of tolerance and common sense, qualities not always associated with the political cultures of the Balkans and Middle East where most of the book is situated, intellectually.