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James Lindsay Hopkins. *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Evolving Relationship between Church, Nation, and State in Bulgaria.* Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2008. xv +340 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-624-6.

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A Controversial View of Bulgarian Orthodoxy

James Lindsay Hopkins's *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church* is an exhaustive survey of the history and political machinations of the Bulgarian church beginning in 865 CE and continuing to the present. Hopkins has done extensive archival work in Bulgaria as well as media analysis and informal interviewing. For the aficionado of all things Bulgarian, the book is probably the most comprehensive examination of the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) in Bulgarian culture and society. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the English language scholarship on Bulgaria. Furthermore, Hopkins asserts several controversial arguments that are sure to stimulate debate among Bulgarian historiographers. Although some of his more strident claims will be flatly refuted by many historians, Hopkins's book will force Bulgarianists to critically rethink the role of the BOC as national savior even if they ultimately disregard his intervention.

In his introduction, Hopkins clearly lays out his scholarly agenda as a "Western Christian" wishing to minister in the Balkans with a "degree of cultural sensitivity and respect," claiming that this "missiological and cultural imperative prompts the research that has been undertaken in the preparation of this thesis" (p. 1). Throughout the book, Hopkins asserts that Bulgarian Orthodoxy is not a "true" religion, but merely a marker of ethnic and national identity based on a series of carefully crafted nationalist myths. He supports this claim by pointing to various statistics that demonstrate that while more than 85 percent of Bulgarians claim an Eastern Orthodox Christian identity, very few attend church services or actively practice their religion. Hopkins argues that Bulgarians and Bulgarian society are in need of spiritual guidance and fulfillment, but that the BOC is incapable of providing this guidance because it is more of a political arm of the state than an independent institution interested in bringing parishioners closer to God or assisting the laity with achieving personal salvation. This conclusion would surprise very few Bulgarians,[1] but may come as a surprise to religious studies scholars and theologians in the West.

The eight chapters of the book marshal an impressive array of evidence that demonstrates how the BOC has always been a tool in the hands of Bulgaria's tsars, communist leaders, and even its postsocialist prime ministers. Hopkins writes: "the [Bulgarian Orthodox] church forged a role for itself in Bulgarian foreign and national affairs by willingly becoming an instrument of Bulgarian geopoliticism, allowing itself to get used by the government, as a necessary medium toward the realisation of its goal of national unification" (p. 8). Establishing the ethno-national nature of the Bulgarian church is the intellectual project of the book and its implicit agenda is to show how there is room in Bulgaria for Western Christianities (i.e., Catholicism and Protestantism), which are truly spiritual rather than ethno-national in nature.

Hopkins is disturbed that many Bulgarians claim to

be Orthodox but do not actively participate in religious activities, seeing this as evidence of an ineffective church that has lost touch with the true needs of the people. The problem with this argument is that it imposes a very Western definition of "religion" onto an Orthodox society without respect for the idea that Bulgarians may wish to live their religious commitments differently than devout Christians in the West. Hopkins assumes a primordial need for spiritual fulfillment and discounts the possibility that people may treasure a commonly shared cultural identity more than a personal relationship with the divine.

Hopkins also delegitimizes the Orthodox Church because of its particular relationship with the state, claiming that the Orthodox doctrine of symphony (i.e., church and state working together for the good of society) is antidemocratic and in violation of the religious rights of those Bulgarians who believe in minority faiths. Despite his recognition of the historic split between Eastern and Western Christendom and their differing theological positions on church-state relations, the author clearly believes that a complete separation of church and state is necessary to guarantee pluralism and interfaith tolerance. He completely ignores recent critical scholarship on secularism that argues that secularization projects and modern religious rights discourses are thinly veiled attempts to export a particularly Protestant definition of religion to the rest of the non-Western world (e.g., Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity* [2003], Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* [2006], and Charles Hirshkind and David Scott's *The Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* [2006]). Instead, he insists that the continuation of the historic relationship between the BOC and the Bulgarian government will undermine religious pluralism, despite a long history of relative interfaith peace and tolerance in the Orthodox East as compared with the Catholic/Protestant West.

In addition, although the book brings together a truly impressive range of historical sources, some of the topics covered in the early chapters duplicate existing work in the field. The chapter on communism could have benefited from a little more historical detail of how the state worked through the church while repressing religion at the same time (e.g., Evgenija Garbolevsky's *A Church Ossified? Repression and Resurgence of Bulgarian Orthodoxy 1944-1956* [2005]). Furthermore, in the chapter on the post-socialist era, there are some problematic omissions and curious elisions of facts that might contradict the book's argument. For instance, in his discussion of the 2002 Bulgarian Law on Religion, Hopkins states that the law was opposed by religious minorities in Bulgaria, but fails to mention that the Jewish community of Bulgaria did not, in fact, oppose the law.[2] This might suggest that not all religious communities in Bulgaria feel particularly oppressed by the state's support of Eastern Orthodoxy. Furthermore, Hopkins complains that spiritual groups cannot operate in Bulgaria without approval of the Directorate of Religious Denominations, but it is not only the Bulgarian government that regulates religious denominations in Europe. Many Western countries, such as Germany and France, also have outlawed such groups as the Scientologists in order to protect the public from what are considered American "cults."

Beyond the actual substance of the book, there are some issues with the volume that make it less than user friendly. There is no index and none of the in-text tables list sources beneath the data. The biggest drawback is that the book is clearly an unrevised dissertation, with the phrase "this dissertation" openly used on page 258. The writing style and organization of the chapters makes it clear that this was a credentialing exercise more than it was an artfully crafted piece of scholarship aimed at an audience broader than a handful of committee members. The research is important and there are many valuable reflections on Bulgarian historiography. But overall, the volume is rather hard to get through, with typos and unwieldy grammar sprinkled throughout the text. A good editor and copyeditor could have helped to reshape this book into a solid piece of scholarship, and certainly Hopkins is to be commended for writing a very good dissertation. Nonetheless, the *Bulgarian Orthodox Church* is not a book that can be easily used in classrooms, and is ultimately a specialist text for those with an abiding interest in Bulgarian history and culture.

Notes

[1]. Petar Kanev, "Religion in Bulgaria after 1989: Historical and Socio-Cultural Effects," *South-East Europe Review* 1 (2002): 75-96.

[2]. Kristen Ghodsee, "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 227-252.

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