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BOOK REVIEW

LITHUANIAN CATHOLICISM UNDER THE SOVIETS

J. Savasis, THE WAR AGAINST GOD IN LITHUANIA (New York: Many land Books, 1966).

Anyone interested in a quick, cram course on how the Soviet go about suppressing religion need look no further than this small and inexpensive paperback by Dr. Savasis. It can be read and digested in a few hours at one sitting. The prose is spare and lean, with hardly a wasted word. Only occasionally does the author allow an ironic twist in a sentence to betray his objective reporting and reveal his personal feelings.

For a study of Soviet persecution of the Catholic Church, Lithuania makes an ideal paradigm. Before the Soviet takeover, 85.5 per cent of its more than three million inhabitants were Catholic; 94.4 per cent of its native Lithuanian population (80.6 per cent of the total population) were Catholics. Nearly every method known to have been used in other Iron Curtain countries was employed by the Soviet government of Lithuania, since the Communist pattern is generally the same everywhere. Dr. Savasis, therefore, has been able to analyze these patterns and narrate them in detail.

His book contains a host of documented facts and figures, but presented in a way that does not overwhelm the reader. The forbidding technical appearance of some other studies and reports of the situation I have read are happily absent here. (And if the statistics given here do not correspond in every detail to figures in other studies, it is doubtless because present-day statistics on the Church in Lithuania are extremely hard to come by — even for the Vatican). Dr. Savasis has also had the good sense to illustrate each pattern of Soviet persecution with concrete examples that make the actual application of each Communist tactic crystal clear, even for readers not yet familiar with Soviet methods or Communist double-talk on the subject of religion.

In the straightforward manner I find so appealing in this book, Dr. Savasis begins with an historical survey. His first five chapters cover only 30 pages, but they are brilliantly written. After a brief examination of pre-war Lithuania to set the scene, he vividly sketches the first Soviet take-over of the country and describes Soviet policy toward religion.

When the Red Army drove the Germans out of Lithuania in 1945, therefore, the Communists could take up against the Church almost where they had left off. Organized partisan resistance, begun under the Nazis, became the pretext for new and more vehement mass deportations. And because the bishops refused to denounce the resistance movements, the Church and the hierarchy were especially hard hit. By the end of 1947, Lithuania was left with but a single bishop. In that same year, the last remaining convents and monasteries were closed and religious communities dispersed; any person discovered to be a member of a monastic institution faced imprisonment or deportation.

By far the largest part of Dr. Savasis' book, though, deals with the present status of the Church in Lithuania under Soviet persecution. It is in these pages that he analyzes and explains in great detail the tactics of the Communist war against religion. It is in these pages, too, that he presents an outstanding handbook of Soviet strategy for anyone who cares to study the full range of Communist methods vis-a-vis the Church.

Since Lithuania is considered part of Soviet territory, the status of religion is covered by Article 124 of the Soviet Constitution, that peculiarly worded article which guarantees "freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda." Dr. J. Savasis begins, then, with an analysis of the massive Soviet campaign of atheistic propaganda — in the factories and on the farms, in the schools and in all social organizations, in the press and the mass media, in the arts and cultural activities. Even doctors are pressured into testifying that such religious practices as the kissing of crucifixes or relics, or the dipping of fingers into holy water, are unhygienic and dangerous to public health. Courses in atheism are required in all schools, and "universities of atheism" have been set up for the sole purpose of training lecturers and teachers of atheism.

The youth of the country are the special target of this indoctrination. It begins in kindergarten (specific examples are given in the book) and continues through the university. Dr. Savasis even includes a sample of the official lesson plans followed in grades 5 through 11. Unless a student masters his course in atheism at each level, he cannot progress to the next level of education. In the higher grades, students are given anti-religious propaganda duties; if they refuse, they lose their

scholarships or are expelled from school. Even during summer vacation, they are required to lecture and conduct atheistic discussions in summer camps for younger children. If they fail to do so, they cannot return to school.

In order to "protect" children from the religious influence of parents and grandparents, a law forbids all persons under 18 to attend church. Parents who refuse to co-operate can lose their jobs or suffer other penalties. The same is true of parents who insist on having children instructed by the parish priest, which is strictly forbidden. Children are also forbidden to participate in religious services as altar boys, choristers, etc.; they may not even march in a church procession. Parents and priests who permit children to violate these regulations can be severely punished.

Priests who do teach religion to young people are accused of violating "Soviet cult regulations" (since Communist culture is officially atheistic) or of violating "freedom of conscience" (since they contradict what the children are taught in school). The press constantly accuses priests of such violations, but no newspaper will print a denial by a priest of such slanders nor will any court try a libel case brought by a priest. The reason is that such slanders in the press are seen as a legitimate extension of the "freedom of anti-religious propaganda" clause of Article 124.

It is impossible to list in this review all the ways by which the Soviet government of Lithuania persecutes religion. Dr. Savasis, however, has outlined, analyzed and illustrated every facet of Soviet strategy. About the only tactic used in other Iron Curtain countries that is not mentioned in this book is the now-familiar attempt to form a "national" Catholic church subject to the State. The aim of this maneuver is to split the Church away from Rome, thereby weakening it and ultimately destroying it in practice. I should note in closing, however, that such an attempt was made in Lithuania. It failed and was quietly shelved, however, when no authoritative clergyman could be found to serve as a figurehead for such a government controlled church.

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