Religious Liberty in Transitional Societies

It is commonly assumed that the issue of religion declines in political significance as societies modernise. However, the upheaval associated with the shift from authoritarian to more open regimes can be accompanied by a revitalisation of religion. Individuals within these societies are struggling to find meaning in the seeming chaos of political change; religious elites are seeking to define their own role within the new order; and political elites are looking for new ways of ensuring legitimacy and building national unity. In this book John Anderson constructs a theoretical framework where he compares and contrasts the politics of religious liberty in two Southern European countries, two Central-Eastern European countries, and the evolution of the former USSR, particularly Russia. Exploring these issues of religious ‘recognition’ and religious diversity, Anderson attempts to expose the wider problem of creating a democratic mentality in such transitional societies, through extensive original research and interviews.

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The Politics of Religion

John Anderson
For Jill, Joe and Caitlin
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Most of the work on producing this book took place in 1999–2000, but its origins go back further. My research life started in the field of ‘Soviet studies’ and more specifically in the study of religion–state relations in the former Soviet Union. During the 1990s my focus shifted to political change in Central Asia, but at this time I was also teaching courses on democracy and democratisation. Gradually this led to a fusion of several interests and the emergence of a long-term research project on religion and democratisation. One aspect of this study concerned the issue of how religious institutions handled the development of political, social, cultural and spiritual pluralism that tends to accompany processes of political transition, so I was particularly grateful when the Becket Institute at St Hugh’s College Oxford offered me the chance to spend nine months away from my own department to explore the politics of religious liberty. The consequence of this has been the production of a book exploring the way in which transitional societies have handled the issues of religious ‘recognition’ and religious diversity.

The objectives of this work are set out in the first chapter, but inevitably in venturing out of one’s own area of geographical and linguistic expertise there is a danger that the historical background of some of my cases will be poorly understood, that the nuances of political life will be missed, and comparisons tend to the superficial. For that reason I have tried to keep the focus narrow, though to the extent that this still engenders over-simplification the author must take the blame. If I have managed accurately to portray the experience and politics of the eleven countries whose experience I touch on here, the credit belongs to many others. Over the last twelve years I have visited seven of the eleven countries surveyed and discussed religious questions with a variety of religious activists, administrators, journalists, academics, clergy, lay people and casual acquaintances. Equally important have been the writings of numerous academics, human rights activists and religious leaders whose works are, I hope, adequately cited in the endnotes and bibliography. In addition, a large number of people have provided support and advice, whether in the
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