

## Religion and the Cold War

**Review Number:** 362

**Publish date:** Wednesday, 1 October, 2003

**Editor:** Dianne Kirby

**ISBN:** 333993985X

**Date of Publication:** 2003

**Price:** £47.50

**Pages:** 245pp.

**Publisher:** Palgrave

**Place of Publication:** Basingstoke

**Reviewer:** Merrilyn Thomas

That religion played a significant role in the Cold War might seem self-evident, given the atheistic nature of communism and the powerful influence of Christianity on the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. But, according to Dianne Kirby, editor of *Religion and the Cold War*, many Cold War historians have barely mentioned the subject, or have even omitted it altogether. She points out that even John Lewis Gaddis, while concluding that the Cold War was a contest between good and evil, has chosen to focus his attention on communist ideology, the 'evil', rather than that of the West, 'the good'. (p. 3) In this volume of essays, Kirby has set out to rectify this omission.

The book has evolved from a meeting of scholars who gathered in London in 2000 to consider the subject of religion and the Cold War. They were a diverse group, from different countries and different disciplines. Kirby draws attention to the fact that within this diversity lies one of the reasons why religion is only now beginning to be accorded a place at the top table of Cold War historiography. The ability to cross geographical and denominational boundaries makes it a difficult area for the lone scholar.

She also points to other reasons why religion should have escaped the attention of so many Cold War scholars, some of them almost of an administrative nature. Where does religion fit within university departmental boundaries? What is meant by religion: belief or culture? To what extent has religion's invisibility been due to the simple fact that Cold War historiography has been dominated by American scholars working in 'secular' universities? (p. 7) George Egerton also addresses the question in his contribution ('Entering the Age of Human Rights: Religion, Politics and Jurisprudence in Early Cold War Canada, 1945-1950') and suggests that:

The contemporary peripheralisation of religion in the public domain of most modernised political cultures of the West has abetted a lacuna in historical understanding of the powerful political functions of religion and the eagerness of politicians to draw upon religious resources that operated in most Western states until the 1960s. (p. 164)

These words suggest to me another possible reason why religion has so far been the Cinderella of Cold War historiography. To what extent is it a matter of perception, dependent upon on which side of the Iron Curtain historians spent their formative years? This history is so recent that all those now writing about it will also have experienced it. That religion mattered during the Cold War will surely have seemed obvious to those

who actually experienced religious persecution in Eastern bloc countries, or who, by virtue of their Christian faith, jeopardised their educational or employment opportunities. There is no doubt that the governments of communist countries saw Christianity as a threat and responded accordingly. Erich Mielke, head of the East German Stasi, described the Church as 'this legal organisation of the enemy'.<sup>(1)</sup> But in the secular West, religion has been sidelined in life and in contemporary historiography. Many scholars fail to recognise the power of religion despite the fact, as Kirby points out, that it is perhaps more important today than ever before that the 'political influence of religion, its role in the international arena and in the hearts and minds of men' should be properly understood.(p. 21)

The thesis of Kirby's excellent introduction is that the Cold War was one of history's great religious wars, 'a global conflict between the god-fearing and the godless'. (p. 1) It was a war in which 'Christianity was appropriated by Western propagandists and policy-makers for their anti-communist arsenal' (p. 2), nowhere more so than in the USA. But in addition, as this volume demonstrates, Christianity was not simply a tool of psychological warfare. Church leaders were not merely pawns in a political game; they were active participants. Their flocks were not only recipients of propaganda; for millions religious faith was central to their lives. This fact is most vividly demonstrated in the several chapters that deal with the Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII during the early years of the Cold War.

Frank Coppa ('Pope Pius XII and the Cold War: Confrontation between Catholicism and Communism') examines the Pope's stance in relation to Bolshevism and Fascism, concluding that the Vatican's alliance with the Western bloc contributed towards the post-war triumph of Christian Democratic parties in Italy and Germany, as well as the containment of the Soviet Union. The Pope's warning that it was not possible to be both a Catholic and a communist struck home. Peter Kent ('The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII') puts forward a different view. While acknowledging that the Catholic Church was 'among the first ranks of the Cold Warriors' (p. 67), he raises the question of how close and effective a working alliance there was between the American government and the Holy See and argues that, although the Vatican contributed towards Cold War ideological rhetoric, it had little direct influence on the course of events in the years that followed the Second World War. Its main success was in persuading the USA not to impose a punitive peace settlement on Germany and Italy that would drive them into the arms of the communists.

Kirby ('Harry Truman's Religious Legacy: The Holy Alliance, Containment and the Cold War') examines the nature of the relationship between the Vatican and Truman, focussing on the value of religion in the fields of propaganda and psychological warfare. She makes the case that the defence of Western civilisation and the defence of Christianity became linked in the minds of people in general, and also in the minds of their leaders, taking on the characteristics of a crusade. She quotes Truman in 1945: 'I believe honestly - that Almighty God intends us to assume the leadership which he intended us to assume in 1920, and which we refused'. (quoted on p. 86) One of the main attributes of Kirby's essay is that it gets down to the nitty-gritty of what went on behind closed doors, giving examples of precisely how governments believed they could manipulate religion. She quotes a discussion that took place on the subject of the Catholic Church within the British Foreign Office's Russia Committee in 1946. Faced with the question of how publicly Britain should ally herself with the Vatican, the view was that Britain should keep her distance, while at the same time assisting the Church to deploy its influence by 'inconspicuous means'.(p. 99) In addition, the British representative at the Vatican would feed information about communist activities to the Holy See. Conversely, the Americans accepted the Vatican's offer to share information from its 'world-wide intelligence sources'. (p. 86) The Cold War was largely an intelligence war and, as Kirby demonstrates, it is in this murky world that researchers must look for evidence of manipulation by and co-operation between Church and state.

Charles Gallagher ('*Pro Patria, Pro Deo*: The United States and the Vatican in Cold War Yugoslavia, 1945-1950') provides an example of such activity, putting the spotlight on evidence of secret diplomacy between the USA and the Vatican in Tito's Yugoslav republic. The 'flowering of furtive diplomatic contact' between the Vatican and the USA was nowhere more prevalent than in Yugoslavia, he asserts where, in 1945, Tito initiated a period of brutal repression against the Catholic Church.(p. 118) In order to stem this persecution,

the Vatican aimed to establish a 'cosy relationship' with the USA and appointed prominent American prelates to key diplomatic posts behind the Iron Curtain. (p. 119) The relationship became so close that the Vatican secretly provided the Americans with intelligence material, in return for official Vatican correspondence being sent from Belgrade in the US diplomatic pouch.

John Pollard ('The Vatican, Italy and the Cold War') focuses on the Vatican's use of religious propaganda in the domestic arena and demonstrates the way in which it influenced the course of events within Italy in the post-war years. Referring to the manner in which the Catholic electorate was mobilised during the 1948 election, Pollard describes the way in which the 'pulpit was also used as a major instrument of anti-Communist propaganda in the weeks leading up to the poll'. (p. 108) In the following years 'Italian Catholicism seemed to assume more and more the characteristics of a mass, political movement with a charismatic leader - the pope.' (p. 110)

There are two essays dealing with Christianity in Germany, the European country which experienced the Cold War division most directly. Matthew Hockenos ('German Protestants Debate Politics and Theology after the Second World War') concentrates his attention on the Darmstadt statement of 1947. In this members of the Confessing Church, that branch of the German Protestant Church which provided some opposition to the Nazi regime, defined the way in which the Church had erred politically during this period and provided precise guidelines aimed at ensuring that it did not repeat its mistakes. Hockenos' contribution succinctly describes the debate which dominated German theological thinking, a debate which centred on the Lutheran doctrine of the division of power between the earthly and the spiritual and the question of whether or not the Church had a duty to interfere in the administration of earthly power. This debate is crucial to an understanding of the dilemma faced by German Protestant Church leaders living under communism who, once again, were faced with the decision of whether to openly oppose a totalitarian regime or find an accommodation within it. It was not merely an esoteric theological debate but one with real political meaning in terms of opposition to communism.

Hockenos whets the appetite for more on the subject of the influence of the German Protestant Church on Cold War politics but the volume's only other contribution on the German Cold War, while enlightening, is more of a dessert than a main course. Hartmut Lehmann devotes his essay ('The Rehabilitation of Martin Luther in the GDR: or, Why Thomas Müntzer Failed to Stabilize the Moorings of Socialist Ideology') to the story of how the GDR regime tied itself in philosophical knots, in its attempt to argue the political correctness or incorrectness of two of Germany's leading theological figures, Thomas Müntzer and Martin Luther. The story of the glorification of Müntzer and the vilification of Luther by the communist regime during the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a reversal of these characterisations during the 1970s, reflects the twists and turns of official policy towards Christianity in the GDR. The 500th birthday of Luther in 1983 concentrated the minds of Marxists and non-Marxists, faced with the difficulty of celebrating this event. By this time, Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, with its concept of dialogue, had penetrated beyond the purely political. In addition, in 1978 GDR Church leaders had agreed a form of accommodation with the regime. In the end, Luther the traitor became Luther the reformer. The significance of Lehmann's piece, in the context of this book, is that it demonstrates how deeply Christianity mattered to the atheistic East German regime.

France and the Soviet Union merit one essay apiece. Anna Dickinson's contribution ('Domestic and Foreign Policy Considerations and the Origins of Postwar Soviet Church-State Relations, 1941-46') is very much a scene-setter, being an analysis of Soviet Church/state relations between 1941 and 1946. She tells us how the Russian Orthodox Church was transformed from an institution fighting for survival before the Great Patriotic War, to one of real political influence both domestically and abroad in the years following it. This transition took place due to the mutual recognition by the Church and the Soviet government that co-operation would benefit both institutions. The Soviet Union was looking for ways to strengthen its hegemony in its Western territories and also to crush the Uniate Church in Western Ukraine, which was loyal to the Vatican and therefore seen as a political threat. The Russian Orthodox Church was sympathetic to these aims, as it also was to the government's desire to rid itself of underground churches that had established themselves during the period of persecution. Dickinson's contribution provides an interesting

specific example of the Cold War's occasional unholy alliances between atheist states and Christian organisations, with communist governments seeing Churches as powerful institutions that could be manipulated for political purposes and Church leaders co-operating in the interests of self-preservation.

Paul Hainsworth ('Cold War on High and Unity from Below: The French Communist Party and the Catholic Church in the Early Years of the Gaullist Fifth Republic') gives us an account of the complex relationship between the Catholic Church, the de Gaulle government and the French Communist Party during the late 1950s and 1960s. Again, this is in essence an investigation of Catholic/communist co-operation. Despite the fact that French communists saw the Catholic Church as an ally of the de Gaulle government, there was room for flexibility within the communist/Church relationship. Hainsworth shows how this flexibility gathered momentum as the Cold War moved into its period of détente and co-existence.

Church/state relations are also the subject of Egerton's essay, in this case in Canada. Egerton focuses on the Canadian reaction to the Cold War debate on human rights. He argues that the perceived threat of communism created a new interest in human rights in Western democracies, resulting in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948. Canadian opinion on human rights varied, with some Christian leaders arguing against the need for their legal incorporation within the constitution because of the freedom this would give to 'communists and Jehovah's Witnesses' (p.169), while others stressed the fact that all rights were God given and this fact needed to be included within any human rights declaration. Egerton's essay provides a good illustration of the way in which Christianity was seen as a defence against the threat of communism, much as the fight against Nazism had been seen as a defence of Christian civilisation against pagan forces.

Ian Jones picks up this theme in his piece on the manner in which British clergy in the Birmingham area presented the Cold War to their congregations ('The Clergy, the Cold War and the Mission of the Local Church: England c.1945-60'). This is a look at the grass roots, as opposed to the high policy of most of the other contributions. It appears that local clergy saw themselves as very much involved in the global conflict that was taking place. According to Jones, the Cold War began to seem 'a serious pastoral issue'. (p. 190) Essentially, the clergy saw Christianity as being under attack from an atheistic dogma, not only in far-flung foreign places, but also closer to home through the actions of organised labour or increasing state intervention.

In the final chapter 'Martyrs, Miracles and Martians: Religion and Cold War Cinema in the 1950s', Tony Shaw explores the way in which filmmakers on both sides of the Iron Curtain linked religion with domestic and international politics in the 1950s. He quotes the critic Catherine de la Roche, who noted in 1955 that Hollywood and others believed that the Cold War was 'fundamentally a conflict between Christianity and atheism and that religion is therefore a strong weapon against Communism'. (quoted on p. 212) Shaw examines the links that existed between filmmakers and governmental Cold War propagandists, the religious message conveyed in film, and how that message was received by audiences. He demonstrates a trend for Soviet films to become more liberal in their attitudes towards religion, while the West became more dogmatic in showing the Cold War as a conflict between Christianity/capitalism and communism. Biblical epics, such as *Quo Vadis* and *The Ten Commandments*, for example, portrayed Roman or Egyptian despots as a 'thinly veiled metaphor for Soviet tyranny'. (p. 217)

It is Kirby's opinion that the most important contribution made by this volume to the Cold War debate 'is the evidence that religion mattered'. (p. 20) It is, she says:

the first major step towards establishing if religion warrants the same sort of consideration given to ... the 'stuff' of international politics, in a world in which power remains the currency that states use in international affairs. (p. 20)

One small practical way in which this point could have been made more effectively would have been by the inclusion of a religious map of the world showing the strength of different denominations in different

countries - a visual demonstration of the power of religion. That apart, Kirby has achieved her aim. Religion is not a subject to be relegated to a rather woolly area loosely described as 'culture'. Religion is about power, the stuff of politics. Both politicians and Church leaders know this. One of those who recognises this is Bruce Kent, veteran peace campaigner, priest and active participator in the Cold War who has contributed a foreword to the book. He writes that, since 11 September 2001, the world has once more had to understand 'that religion still plays a major part in the shaping of global relationships' and that this book has done a service by lifting a curtain on the 'use and misuse of religion during Cold War days'. (p. xii)

To have done more than lift the curtain, it would have been necessary to include a wider spread of essays in terms of geography, denomination and period. As it is, there is only one essay relating to the Soviet Union, there is a heavy bias towards the Catholic Church, and most of the essays focus on the 1950s. Although the bias towards the Catholic Church is understandable, given the united global nature of that church, it would have been useful to have had, for example, a piece on the World Council of Churches which also played its part in the Cold War. A chapter on the role played by Pope John Paul II in the final years of the Cold War would also have been welcome. Both Kirby and Kent refer briefly but tantalisingly to his significance, with Kent asserting that it was this Pope's election that 'instigated the public process leading to the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union'. (p. 67) Surely more on this thesis would clinch the argument that religion mattered.

But, as Kirby says, this is a first step and it is for others to fill the gaps. If success is judged in terms of leaving the reader wanting to know a great deal more, then this volume has more than fulfilled its purpose. This is a very welcome and much-needed contribution to our understanding of the Cold War. It has opened a door for future researchers, demonstrating that the subject of religion during the Cold War lies firmly within the borders of mainstream history and that, yes, it mattered.

## Notes

1. Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat. Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949-1990* (Munich; Carl Hanser, 1998), p. 474.[Back to \(1\)](#)

### Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/362#comment-0>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2031> [2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>