Nihil Obstat, by Sabrina P. Ramet.

reviewed by Thomas Albert Howard in the January 20, 1999 issue

By Sabrina P. Ramet, Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia. *(Duke University Press, 340 pp.)*

Nearly a decade after the rending of the iron curtain, transition and flux still characterize Europe's former communist lands. While we Americans are inundated with analyses of political and economic changes there, we are less informed about the subtle and arguably more fundamental shifts in religion. Sabrina Ramet's book is thus most welcome. Professor of international studies at the University of Washington and a veteran observer of Eastern Europe and Russia, Ramet concentrates on how pre- and post-1989 political changes have affected religious institutions (traditional and nontraditional), church-state interaction, and religion's role in national identity.

Nihil obstat--nothing stands in the way--is Ramet's watchword throughout. The Latin phrase is used by Catholic diocesan censors to signify that a book is suitable to be published. Ramet employs it to suggest that now in the former Soviet-East European region "literally *nothing stands in the way* of new religious movements, groups, and associations, including many previously illegal."

While most chapters--many of which are made up of previously published essays--aim to shed light on the post-'89 scene, Ramet situates the present in an historical perspective. Many of the essays trace the interaction of religion and politics throughout the communist era. Others go back even further. Ramet ably discusses the legacies of the Austrian-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires in the Balkans, currents of nationalism in the 19th century, and even the earliest efforts of Christian missionaries in the area.

Ramet partitions her terrain into three areas, which in turn function as subsections of the book. The "Northern Tier" contains essays on East Germany; Catholicism and national culture in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia; and the religious differences between Czechs and Slovaks. The section on the Balkans is comprised of essays on nationalism and religion in the former Yugoslavia (including a timely

discussion of Kosovo, "the Serbian Jerusalem"), on Romania's Orthodox Church, and on Albania's triple heritage (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam). The section on the former Soviet Union is the shortest, with just two essays--an overview of Russian Orthodoxy since 1927 and a survey of the Ukraine's fractious Orthodox and Greek-rite ecclesiastical polities.

In addition to the regional sections, Ramet includes cross-regional and comparative essays, and some which focus exclusively on postcommunist trends. Among these, two in particular are noteworthy: "*In Hoc Signo Vinces*: The New Evangelism in Postcommunist Europe" and "*Nihil Obstat*: The Rise of Nontraditional Religions." In the former, Ramet marshals a wealth of statistical data to shed light on recent proselytizing efforts, mainly by American evangelicals; she also documents the alarm and hostility established churches feel toward these "new rivals." In the essay on nontraditional religions, Ramet offers evidence of a postcommunist "frenzy of activity." The frenzy's participants include the Church of Scientology, Messengers of the Holy Grail, Hare Krishna, Baha'i, strands of Satanism and occultism, and sundry individual healers and clairvoyants, including the blind Bulgarian woman Vagna, from whom, Ramet claims, Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev and Vladimir Zhirinovsky have sought advice.

Nihil Obstat has many strengths and two weaknesses. A salutary mix of political science, history and sociology of religion, Ramet's essays are insightful. Drawing from an array of sources in the relevant languages, she chronicles the key policy decisions, demographic changes, personalities and events that have shaped the present. She also has a knack for gracefully embellishing potentially dry social science with illuminating details, such as the Albanian government's 1975 decree requiring everyone to assume a nonreligious name.

Yet despite its sound and interesting scholarship, the book is blemished by a lack of theoretical rigor, manifest not so much by theory's absence as by its awkward and offhanded intrusion. Ramet tells us, for instance, that individuals submit to strict religious observances because "most people" desire, according to Erich Fromm, to "escape from freedom." She neither explains Fromm's phrase nor submits the concept to critical scrutiny. Similarly, she interprets the behavior of fundamentalist missionaries by appealing to Theodor Adorno's notion of an "authoritarian personality," but she does not explain this term. Finally, Ramet occasionally employs market metaphors to describe religious phenomena--a device popularized by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, among others. Ramet states, for

instance, that the postcommunist milieu has created a growing "demand" for nontraditional religion. Once again, this theoretical tidbit is simply dropped on the reader, with no effort to justify its legitimacy.

More fundamentally, Ramet's conception of religion is wanting. Throughout the book, she portrays religion in the public sphere almost exclusively as a power-grabbing, fear-inducing, "homophobic" phenomenon. Certainly this is sometimes true, but not always. She succumbs to the temptation to see religion simply as an expression of power. Ramet seems to make little effort to understand empathetically the motivations and concerns of religious adherents. Her dogged commitment to "social science" and "universal reason" (a notion she judges incompatible with religion) precludes a more balanced picture.

Nevertheless, Ramet's volume is worthwhile and informative. It will be of interest to anyone curious about the recent history and current state of the postcommunist religious environment. Moreover, Ramet's main point is well substantiated: the "religious configuration of Eastern Europe and Russia has changed permanently and will continue to change."