
Book review

In the present context of turbulent transformations of higher education landscape in all the Eastern and Central European region, a study of the dynamics of religiously maintained universities and colleges in the region is a \textit{rara avis}. Denominational higher education institutions have become however important actors in the field during the last two decades signaling the strong demand emerging from half century of official atheism and ban on faith-based education, on the one hand and cultural diversity in the area, in which religious identities overlap often with ethnic ones. Although this case of institutional substitution in the area of higher education provision, as Margaret Archer would call it (Archer, 1984), is of unquestionable significance, both culturally and quantitatively, little systematic research effort has been devoted so far, in any case much less than in the case of emergence of private higher education with which it is often simply equated.

The first two articles in the volume set a framework for the entire consequent materials and also for the international research project within which the volume has been delivered (REVACERN – Religion and Values – a Central and Eastern European Research Network). In an approach with strong functionalist tones, Santiago Sia (Contemporary Society and Faith Based Higher Education: Challenges and Issues) suggests that religiously maintained higher education is solicited by recent cultural developments like secularism, mechanization of society which makes the world to be “…viewed not as a unified metaphysical system but as a series of problems and projects” (p. 11), globalization, all having as ultimate consequence of making us forget the ultimate goal of education, „that of the development of the human person” (p. 14). Such a knot of worries is addressed by faith-based education which has as peculiarity its’ ethos, (i.e. values, traditions, beliefs) which really contribute to the above mentioned development of individuals as human persons.

In her own programmatic article, Gabriella Pusztai develops on previous experience in investigating the social and cultural embeddedness of religious higher education and describes the conceptual foundations of the research made within the REVACERN international research project. Her article emphasizes the multidimensional, multifaceted and dynamic nature of the problem. Thus, one layer of analysis could be established distinguishing individual forms of religiosity within higher education from actions and institutions identified at the community level. There are, obviously, individual correlations of religious representations and practices within tertiary educational institution, factors that could explain part of the faith-based variations of the institutionalizations in the field but the dynamics of religious and ethnic communities are probably more important in explaining specific configurations of supply of religion-based higher education. These dynamics are further made evident with a focus on internal and external conflicts.
of religious communities. Religious or ethnic competition, which are pervasive in the Central and Eastern European region, may have positive effects through the mechanisms of bounded solidarity (Portes, 1998), of increasing social cohesion in the face of threat and stimulating ethnic (or religious) entrepreneurship even in the educational field. On the contrary, other oppositions can erode the abilities of religious colleges and universities to fulfill their primary goals: the tension between academic freedom and the denominational mission, that between the state expectations and those of the community and the contradictions between the ethos of the religious institutions and the market values that drive the recent wave of academic capitalism.

As the main objective of the initial activities of REVACERN was to identify the specificities of religion-based higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, the rest of the volume contains studies at national levels based on the thorough investigation of organizational sagas in the quest of deciphering the paradigms laid at the foundations of the denominational universities and colleges in post-communist Europe (p. 30). In a first applied section we read four case studies dealing with the evolution and contexts of religious higher education in Romania, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. A second section contains case-studies and comparative analyses of specific institutions from Slovenia, Estonia, Ukraine, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia and Czech Republic. The final section is made up of empirical articles, mainly survey based quantitative, concerned primarily with the attitudes and life-styles of students enrolled in religious universities in comparative perspective.

The research had been reaching at the moment of the book’s publication merely provisional conclusions. National case-studies and comparative approaches suggest that typically religious higher education institutions were established at the pressure of religious communities as part of their effort to recover from decades of political repression (Pusztai, p. 31). These institutions contribute also to the mitigation of social inequalities and of the risks of social exclusion in the case of populations for which religious identity often overlaps with factors conducive to isolation and discrimination. Moreover, it is suggested that the competition with secular universities forces the denominational schools into more international openness. The research also highlights the institutional diversity of forms of provision of religion-based university education, a fragmentation which is often explained by country-specific legislation and situations.

References


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