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Hardy, Jeffrey S.: *Finding God in the Gulag*. A History of Christianity in the Soviet Penal System. New York: Oxford University Press 2024. 280 S., kt. £ 27,99 ISBN: 978-0-19-775167-1.

Jeffrey S. Hardy, Associate Prof. of History at Brigham Young Uni. and a specialist in the Soviet penal system, approaches religion in *Finding God in the Gulag* from the perspective of Gulag history, making the Soviet carceral world itself a central site in the history of Christianity under Soviet rule. Rather than another general history of antireligious repression, the book asks what happened to faith in prisons, camps, and corrective-labor colonies. Hardy follows this question across virtually the entire Soviet period, from the first Bolshevik experiments with incarceration to the reversal of the late 1980s, when Christian organizations entered penal institutions. The result is the first sustained history of Christian life and antireligious coercion across the long history of the Soviet penal system.

This long chronology is one of the book's greatest strengths, and its organization follows transformations in both penal and religious policy. The opening chap. reconstructs the uncertain relationship between the new Bolshevik order, freedom of conscience, and penal administration: separation of church and state did not immediately produce a uniform prison policy, and local officials continued to negotiate the place of religious practice in confinement (14–38). The second chap. turns to the Solovetsky Islands, where a major Orthodox monastic complex was transformed into a concentration camp. Solovki becomes a particularly revealing site for observing the concentration of clergy and believers, the persistence of worship, and also the factionalism that complicated any simple notion of Christian unity (39–69). Chap. three follows the creation of the Gulag system in the 1930s and the intensified campaign against religion, while showing how the system's overriding emphasis on labor and production could paradoxically leave some space for religious practice (70–91). Chap. four carries the story through the Great Terror, the Second World War, and Stalin's final years. Here the book's concern with both belief and disbelief becomes especially important: repression and catastrophic wartime conditions could deepen religious commitment, but could also produce concealment, doubt, despair, and loss of faith (92–119).

The postwar chap.s broaden the picture and illuminate a much less studied phase in the history of Soviet incarceration, as the camps filled with Christians from the newly annexed western territories: Catholics, Greek Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, Mennonites, Baptists, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. Religious and national identities could reinforce one another, while camps generated both interconfessional proximity and sharp boundaries; Hardy also examines Christian symbols in criminal subculture (120–145). Under Khrushchev, the concentration of "sectarians" in places such as Dubravlag, intended to contain their influence on society, could instead

facilitate worship, mission, correspondence, and the circulation of religious texts. The camp could become a “school,” even a “theological seminary,” preparing future leaders (146–175). Under Brezhnev, letters, petitions, samizdat, and international advocacy for religious freedom increasingly allowed prisoners to articulate their faith across the prison boundary. Hardy is particularly attentive to letters and narratives produced by advocates and representatives of religious communities as texts shaped by religious motivations and addressed to particular audiences (176–202). The final chap. completes the arc: under perestroika religious prisoners were released and Christian groups gained access to prisons. Christianity shifted from an object of penal “re-education” toward one of its instruments (203–222).

The chronological breadth is matched by an unusually heterogeneous source base: penal-administrative records, inspection reports, official correspondence, prison newspapers, and atheist propaganda alongside prisoners’ letters, petitions, memoirs, oral testimonies, poems, songs, and religious samizdat. Hardy also uses material objects—improvised crosses and rosaries, embroidered icons, handwritten biblical and liturgical texts. For the later period he adds materials from relatives, religious communities, Keston College, and the foreign religious press. This diversity allows him to move between views from above and below and to recover practices scarcely visible in administrative records alone.

Precisely this richness and breadth offer many impulses for further reflection. Is this ultimately a history of Christianity in the Soviet penal system, or of Christians under incarceration? Hardy’s evidence reveals distinctive Orthodox, Catholic, Greek Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, and Jehovah’s Witness practices, structures of authority, and attitudes toward mission, labor, suffering, and the Soviet state. He recognizes confessional difference, notably at Solovki and Dubravlag. Yet his framing in terms of a shared Christian camp subculture can smooth over differences his own sources reveal. Can clandestine Catholic Eucharist, Baptist or Jehovah’s Witness mission, Orthodox monastic and True Orthodox refusals of labor, and improvised forms of women’s religious leadership be subsumed without qualification under a common Christian subculture?

A related issue is the position from which religious life becomes visible. Hardy is alert to bias, retrospective construction, and exaggeration in memoirs, and his Brezhnev-era letters are read as normatively shaped testimonies. Yet the communicative situations of different ego-documents could be historicized more systematically. A camp letter, a testimony selected for religious samizdat, and a memoir written decades later do not provide the same access to experience. This matters especially in Dubravlag, where administrative documentation is combined with retrospective accounts by political prisoners who often observed believers from outside their confessional communities. Some comparisons therefore invite the question: whose observations—and whose optics—underpin them?

Gender offers another analytical possibility that the book only intermittently pursues. Female prisoners organize worship, assume religious functions without clergy, and resist administrations collectively; wives and mothers sustain connections across prison walls; Baptist women later enter prison ministry. Hardy’s material invites us to ask whether incarceration redistributed religious labor and authority in gendered ways and whether women formed an essential infrastructure connecting prisoners with communities outside.

The book’s most productive question may lie beyond the penal system boundary. Hardy shows how camps produced texts, networks, practices, and future leaders, but what was the afterlife of incarceration? Did former prisoners reshape congregational hierarchies and acquire particular

authority? Did practices formed under surveillance—secrecy, coded communication, copying texts, mutual aid, readiness for arrest—enter the everyday habitus of late Soviet religious communities? How did incarceration feed into samizdat, transregional and transnational mobilization, and memories of confession and martyrdom? Hardy thus prepares the ground for a history not only of religion in camps but of how the camp helped produce late Soviet religious cultures. Future work might also extend beyond Christianity to Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, so-called new religious movements, and other religious experiences of confinement. It also invites us to ask why confession, steadfastness, and martyrdom are more readily narrated and preserved than despair, divine abandonment, and the erosion of faith.

These questions give the book an unsettling contemporary resonance. At a moment when political imprisonment and repressive uses of legal and penal systems have again become prominent in several post-Soviet states, belief behind bars cannot be read solely as a phenomenon of a closed Soviet past. What space remains for the practice, articulation, transformation—or loss—of faith under renewed repression, violence, and dehumanization? *Finding God in the Gulag* opens an important field for studying religious life inside the penal system and the articulation of faith within a political order long committed to militant secularism. Above all, its rich evidence generates questions for more differentiated and interdisciplinary research into a still underexplored field.

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