

Secularization in the Eastern Bloc States

Approaches for a finely tuned understanding

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1. to reflect critically on the theory of secularization

The theory of secularization is the leading theory in the sociology of religion since the seventies and holds this position despite some well-founded critiques. In this article I will not enter into the broad and apparently never-ending discussion about the validity and relevance of the theory, but will use a very simple version of the theory. Secularization is a process of social, institutional and private transformation of religion that signals a decadent tendency of presence and importance of religion. The question of this article is therefore to show how this tendency developed in the societies of the former Eastern bloc. It will focus primarily on the Central European countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

2. periods of religious persecution

Before I come to the sketchy presentation of the communist heritage, I would like to make a few introductory remarks. The period of the communist dictatorship was not a uniform period. On the one hand in all the countries mentioned it had its own colourings, on the other hand the initial period of the communist assumption of power is to be distinguished from the later period of the consolidated oppression. The former I have called elsewhere than the period of Egyptian captivity, the latter as Babylonian. This (biblical) metaphor is important and useful if we do not want to reach the impasse of a historical nominalism. The metaphors allow it to use its own historical and sociological terms. On the other hand, there are significant differences between the constituent republics of the former Soviet Union, the so-called satellite countries, and the constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia. Although I have focused here on the experiences of the satellite countries, but in order to understand the political, economic and cultural situation of these countries, the constellations in the other countries should not be completely ignored. Thirdly, of the many national nuances, what has been said here is to be regarded as phenotypic statements, which from a bird's-eye perspective would like to offer approaches for further analysis.

The communist legacy

I will present this legacy in two steps. First the indoctrinated way of thinking about religion, which I call the communist way of thinking (mindset). In the second step, the administrative side of the communist secularization program.

3. post-communist mindset

A communist way of thinking about religion has many elements that come from the tradition of the Enlightenment and are also considered a commonsense in Western Europe. The big difference, however, is that in Eastern Central Europe these ideas were indoctrinated without

alternative and by force, and the confession of these basic truths was vital. The Communists wanted to create new people with new thinking - yes, to create how God created the world and man - and to forge an army out of these new creations and to stage it against capitalism and the West.

There was a kind of historical Darwinism in the view of history, a development towards communism. Some deterrent moments in history were meant to demonstrate how Christianity and the Church were underdeveloped. The Middle Ages got the quality "dark" and should demolish the scientific hostility of the church. The Kreuzzüge the unjust struggle against peace, the wealth of the Church the exploitation of the poor, the conservatism of the Church the blocade of all constructive developments and the alliance between emperor or state and the Church the stabilization of social injustice. In this world view, matter not only has right of way, but is regarded as the only objectivity to the spirit, which is subjective. Religion and religious emotions are mental disorders, mental illnesses, and ultimately obsessive-compulsive disorders. Materialism was geared to this side and denied a life after death. It is not difficult to hear the positions of the great atheists of the 19th century behind these dogmas alongside the Enlightenment: Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. But Stalin and other apparatus fates simplified the explanations of her theses and robbed them of their original intentions and connections.

4. administrative measures

As I said, this ideology was not only taught at all levels of education, but was imposed by very hard administrative means. The party power has seen in the churches the curators of the past, the bourgeois way of thinking and power structure and therefore declared the hardest fight against religion and churches. In the period of Egyptian imprisonment the goal was the complete extermination of religion from society, in the period of Babylonian imprisonment "only" the subjugation and total control of all ecclesiastical affairs. The ecclesiastical estates were nationalized, the ecclesiastical activities and the institutions belonging to them (also the religious communities) were forbidden and/or dissolved, and the public confessions of private persons were forbidden.

A special dimension of total control was that church representatives were forced to cooperate with the secret police and all the key posts of the important church institutions were occupied by people who knew and practically demonstrated their loyalty to the regime. Perhaps Poland is regarded as an exception, since there the Catholic Church possessed an enormous political power. In Czechoslovakia all bishoprics were vacant for decades, the dioceses were "led" by state agents. In Hungary, on the other hand, almost all bishops' seats were occupied but almost exclusively by bishops loyal to the regime. These differences can be explained not only by the national characteristics, but also by the inconsistent diplomacy of the Vatican's Ostpolitik.

Total control and refined persecution methods have also made it possible - especially in Hungary - for bishops and parishes to be used for international diplomatic purposes. In the late sixties and early seventies the party apparatus made various concessions to the churches in the expectation that the churches, through their international channels, would witness to the philanthropic face of communism. This strategy also explains the diplomatic achievements of the communist party to get a papal audience.

5. developments after the regime change

The heirs of these two periods of persecution are partly evident when one considers the desolate financial, organizational and theological situation of the churches after the fall of communism. In part, however, a permanent task of research and appropriate interpretation is to clarify what and how can be traced back to this past from today's situation and what is independent of it. Relevant research shows that the direct persecution after the communist takeover strengthened the church, consolidated its unity and resilience, but that the second period deepened rather a culture of lack of trust and divided the church inwardly.

The transformation after the fall of the Wall broke a clear upswing in the data on religiosity in the countries of Central Europe with an Orthodox majority rather than a moderate positive development. The countries in Ostmitteleuropa could be classified into three categories according to the international sociological religions. The former GDR, the Czech Republic and Estonia could be counted as atheist societies, among the church-religious Romania, Poland, Lithuania and Croatia, among the cultural-religious Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. The countries of Central Europe thus belong to three different types of religiosity, although politically they all belong to the group of satellite countries with 40 years of religious persecution. The data concerning atheism are also very different in these four countries and, in addition to the theory of secularization, also call for further approaches for an appropriate interpretation. According to the latest data (Pew Forum 2017) the proportion of atheists and agnostics in the Czech Republic is 26%, in Hungary 5%, Poland 3% (Slovakia was not asked).¹

In addition to trends in personal religiosity, the presence of religion in the public sphere, in political rhetoric and even more in the activity of churches and other religious institutions at the levels of the common good should be considered as indicators for the analysis of the religious dimension of society. These together can be taken as indications of a tendency towards de-secularization (according to the theories of P.L. Berger or J. Casanova). Right-wing politics likes to make use of the Christian traditions, where the contents overlap less with the teachings of the Christian churches, but rather with the political position descriptions against left-wing opposition and against the immigration of the Islamic population. The church's activities for the common good are particularly evident in the school system and in health care. It is a new division of responsibilities between the State and the major Churches, which used to be the exclusive responsibility of the State. Especially in Hungary, the two large churches (the Catholic Church and the Reformed Church) have taken over about a quarter of all primary schools in the last 10 years.

In the uncensored public after the regime change the expectations increased towards the large churches, which in the communist past lived in a kind of political incubator. The high expectations of credibility and political independence declined rapidly and criticism of the churches' behaviour became stronger in all countries. It is expected of the population from the churches as large institutions above all that they raise their prophetic voice at the side of the poor and disadvantaged, and certainly not that they actively participate in the party-political struggles. It seems disappointing that the churches did not illustrate their own past and assert themselves as innocent victims in public discourses. The proximity of the major churches to right-wing governments is also strongly criticized, as it gives the appearance of political instrumentalization. The political landscape of the countries of Central Europe is deeply divided

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

and the churches cannot bridge this division because of their lack of political sovereignty and weak Christian identity. This behaviour of the churches is also an effect factor on the situation of religiosity.

For adequate hermeticism

In order to understand the complex transformations of the religious, different theoretical approaches of the social sciences must be used. But also the term "religion" itself is to be reflected and should be understood less as a cultural matter of course than as a *terminus technicus*. In order to understand the region of Central Europe properly, the binary code of the political East-West division should also be avoided. Not so much the geopolitical characteristics of the post-war period, but rather the longer historical and cultural circumstances serve as definitive explanatory factors, which also applies to Central Europe but also to Western Europe. Post-war developments in Western European societies have had their own rules, which must not be taken as a yardstick for evaluating developments in Central Europe. The approach of S. Eisenstadt multiple modernity seems to be better suited for regional hermeneutics than the idea of delayed modernity. It should not be forgotten that, after 40 years of dictatorship, social development is unique in the history of the world, and the societies of the region of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as those of other subregions of Europe, are in a common migration, where maps are drawn along the way. A speciality of Central Europe can be understood from its liminal position between two cultural, economic and military haemmonies, which I call a wounded collective identity. The situation and functions of religions, churches and guiding ideologies are to be analyzed in relation to this liminality, as are the phenomena of atheism, agnosticism, apatheism and dishonesty.