Religion, Collective Identity and the Public Sphere after Socialism

(Giessen GCSC Keynote Lecture, 27th January 2015)

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I Introduction (thanks to hosts, etc)

This is of course a highly interdisciplinary field in which a social anthropologist has much to learn from specialists in Religious Studies, in Area Studies, in history, sociology and so on. Tonight I want to focus on sociological theorizing. I view the dominant schools in this discipline as intimately bound up with the history of Western industrial societies. This bias must never be forgotten. But it can still be instructive to look at sociological theorizing about religion and about secularization in the West, as a foil for exploring the very different situation in the East. So, this is what I shall do, paying particular attention in the first part of the lecture to my native Britain. I shall leaven this sociological analysis with some ethnographic materials at the end, from Hungary. Before I get there I want to sketch some of the results of the work undertaken in Halle where we had a Focus Group between 2003 and 2010 (this worked in two phases, initially “civil society” and then “morality”; the basic idea to create this *Schwerpunkt* dated back to the EASA meeting in Cracow in 2000, where it was generally agreed among participants – in the city of Karol Wojtyła – that religion had not been as prominent as it deserved to be in the first decade of anthropological work in the former Marxist-Leninist societies of the Soviet bloc, many of which had only opened up to Western researchers after 1990; and even in the more liberal states which had welcomed researchers, such as Hungary and Poland, where I worked myself from the 1970s, topics pertaining to religion were particularly sensitive).

II Secularization in the West

This is a complex story that often gets bowdlerized under concepts such as modernity and modernization, or rationality and rationalization. It moves forward ineluctably on many levels, including that of intellectual elites, where the impact of the Enlightenment and an even earlier scientific revolution is decisive, but also among the masses, where it is tightly linked to processes of industrialization and urbanization. There are glitches in the narrative because neither the cotton workers of Manchester nor the coal workers of South Wales gave up religion when they took up new ways of making a living – on the contrary, these regions experienced an efflorescence of religious belief and practice in the early industrial era. Nonetheless the general trend seemed clear and it was confirmed in numerous sociological works in the third quarter of the 20th century. By now, religion was established by the systems theorists as just another sub-system in a functionally differentiated modern *Gesellschaft*, in contrast with an earlier era of *Gemeinschaft* in which religion had not just

held local rural communities together but provided the unreflected backcloth to the entirety of social existence. Despite diverse historical forms of state-church relations, there were common strands that included a marked shift towards private, individual faith as well as institutional differentiation. Where religion persisted, it became “invisible” in the formulation of Peter Berger. In Britain, Bryan Wilson was the most influential representative of what we might call “orthodox” secularization theory. Religion by no means disappeared from modern British society, but the emergence of a plurality of sects and New Age Spirituality confirmed that the society as a whole was now working according to new secular norms of individual choice. David Martin provided a more elaborate historical framework for the analysis of secularization in 1978, in which he emphasized differentiation of the religions sphere while stressing that the ideal type of a purely rational, purely secular polity and society would never be approximated in any concrete case. He drew attention to blips and “contingencies” in the orthodox narrative, without denying its basic force. In recent years Steve Bruce (2011) has been the most trenchant advocate of this orthodox secularization school – while at the same time polemicising against approaches to religion based on a “market” model that privileges individual choice.

In the last 20 years this body of theory has been attacked – to the extent that many would say it needs to be significantly modified. José Casanova’s 1994 book was undoubtedly a milestone. It marked the obvious (renewed) visibility of religion in many pubic spheres around the world and followed Martin in distinguishing more carefully between the privatization of faith and societal differentiation. Peter Berger was convinced by now that processes of deprivatization and de-differentiation were both gaining strength. In this climate, though without bothering much with nitty-gritty sociological evidence, Western philosophers previously perceived as staunch defenders of Enlightenment rationality, notably Jürgen Habermas, began to deploy notions of the “post-secular”.

These developments need to be placed in wider contexts – the political economy of globalization and ensuing problems concerning social integration, especially of Muslims in the Western societies which need their labour, but also the intellectual rejection of “grand narratives” in the social sciences, including the Durkheimian paradigm in the social sciences. In this context, religion was reassessed by one influential specialist Danièle Hervieu-Léger in terms of its continuing contribution to the social “chain of memory”. In Britain, the works of Grace Davie have been especially influential. Her notion of “believing without belonging” draws attention to the fact that formal membership of a parish and attendance at services can be a very poor guide to belief in God. With the related notion of “vicarious religion” she points out that many ostensibly secular British people still look to their Anglican ecclesiastical dignitaries to speak up on moral issues, and thus to undertake a key role in the reproduction of a collective identity, which nowadays is of course thoroughly ecumenical. By undertaking this role, the established church creates the space in which other faith communities of all kinds can flourish. This element, though not the collective identity element, is consistent with the position of David Martin, who argues that the future of Christianity lies in a voluntarist, religiously plural landscape of civil society. Catholics and Protestants alike compete for followers all over the world on this basis. However, Martin

points out (in his 2011 book) that Orthodox Churches do not share this common ground: where religion is still perceived as a matter of (national) birthright, the presumption has to be that such a Church is irreducibly conservative, non-modern.

I am no expert on Britain, but I do visit regularly and am not entirely convinced that there is any general retrenchment of religion, or spirituality, or enchantment – and certainly not of the historic Christian churches. The anthropologist Matthew Engelke has recently investigated the efforts of the British and Foreign Bible Society, a rather mainstream evangelical organization, to rejuvenate Christianity in urban Britain (Engelke 2013). However, his account demonstrates that explicit attempts to bring religion back into the public sphere are rather unsuccessful. In Swindon the goal was to mount elaborate angels in public space in the run-up to Christmas, but the municipal authorities prohibited any proseltyzing and the design adopted for the angels was Japanese Buddhist rather than Christian. If there was any net gain in enchantment through these decorations, it really had nothing to do with the spread of religious meanings into public space. On the contrary, rather than blurring the line between spheres, such initiatives reinforce a sharp divide between the secular state and religion, to keep the latter in its place. In today's Britain it seems that few citizens actually recognize religious markers when publicly displayed, e.g. in advertising. The goal of producing "ambient faith" (Engelke) is not met, because neither in state schools nor in most families do children receive enough basic information to be able to recognize religious stimuli.

One key domain in which to assess recent trends is that of welfare provision. This was central to the strength of religion in Britain in the 19th century. But by the time I grew up in South Wales, the old chapel life was dying, along with the mining communities. It seemed very apposite that one of the closest nonconformist chapels to my family home in Pontnewydd was converted after the Second World War to serve as an employment exchange. (Of course, many other church buildings have been deconsecrated to serve as places of profane entertainment.) The rise of the welfare state dramatically changed the role of faith communities in the provision of social support. It is true that "faith-based organizations" have become more prominent in recent decades than they were before the age of Margaret Thatcher. But when one looks more closely, the FBOs operate under strict secular controls. They are not allowed to propagate a religious message when they take responsibility for, say, a Community Centre on an urban estate. Because they are subject to the same rigorous "audit culture" as non-religious service-providers, they undergo processes of bureaucratization or "internal secularization". In short, the greater visibility of angels in December and of FBOs on proletarian housing states is a very superficial phenomenon. The name outside the Centre may be nominally religious, but the norms and content of its activities do not refute the diagnosis of a society in a condition not of "post-secularity" but of "advanced secularization" (Wood, forthcoming).

Here I am following the work, to be published later this year, of Belfast-based sociologist Matthew Wood. Rather than any resurgence of Christianity in contemporary Britain, he argues that the micro-level secularism prevailing among individual citizens is reinforced at the meso-level by the ways in which FBOs interact with the institutional machinery of the modern state. However, Wood does not fully refute the force of Davie's analysis of

“vicarious religion” at the national level: in terms of expressing a collective identity, it might still be possible in neo-Durkheimian fashion to speak of the nation assuming a religious character. Whether or not this has much plausibility for Britain, this is the possibility I ask you to keep in mind as I turn now to the East, to the evidence of socialist and postsocialist societies.

III Religion after Socialism

So far I have concentrated on a European country that has not experienced major political ruptures in its recent history. I think it is fair to say that the experience of the former socialist world has not been paid much attention in the Western sociological theorizing. Casanova has written about Poland and David Martin about eastern Germany, but in general eastern Europe is cast as an aberrant story. Martin in his latest book takes it for granted that processes of re-sacralization or desecularization are underway throughout the former Soviet bloc, comparable to the Muslim world. Of course, few of the leading theoreticians in the West have the requisite knowledge of Slavic and other “eastern” languages – this increases the likelihood of stereotypes, of a kind that resemble orientalism – as a result, the east is easily exoticised as a realm of stagnant ritualism. Socialism is generally classified as a “failed modernity” which everywhere promoted a “forced secularity”.

Of course, the persistence or otherwise of religious beliefs was greatly constrained by wider institutional developments and the political climate. Contrary to popular stereotypes, the picture is extraordinarily diverse. A few regions, notably in eastern Germany but also in Silesia and Bohemia, were highly industrialised before they became socialist, and this is reflected in variable patterns of secularization which also antedated socialism. Elsewhere, agrarian societies were subjected to a much more sudden process of transition to industrialization, typically involving commuting on a large scale because the cities were not ready to house the new workers, let alone construct places of worship for them.

Within eastern Europe only Albania dared to abolish religion in its constitution: with little success, as we now know. Elsewhere, religious behavior was tightly linked to political protest, above all in Poland. But satisfying studies of religion and secularization are almost as rare now as they were in the socialist decades, when Marxist sociologists such as Edward Ciupak took statistics of church attendance (or, when these remained high, conformity to Christian precepts in economic or family life) in order to argue that secularization was proceeding apace. In a recent collection of historical studies (Berglund and Porter-Szűcs 2010), James Bjork identifies a “strange convergence” between Catholic sociologists of religion and their Marxist opponents concerning the basic contours of secularization in Poland. Neither was willing to recognize considerable regional differences dating back to the partition era. Poland did not become clearly distinct from Catholic countries of the West until quite recently: the solid foundations of Karol Wojtyła’s united Catholic nation were laid above all by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński’s “ideological project” of the Great Novena (1957-1966).

The life of Karol Wojtyła and his elevation to the papacy was obviously an inspiration to millions inside and outside Poland, and so this country deserves the rich chapter it has in Casanova's 1994 book. But did Poland remain a special case after the collapse of socialist power, when the dominant church was no longer an oppositional force but restored to its rightful place in the collective life of the nation? The paradox is that victory over the atheist enemy could have negative consequences of various kinds; the Church inevitably lost its unsullied moral stance as it became drawn into extravagant commercial enterprises, such as construction of the cathedral at Lichen; conservative Bishops were felt to be out of touch with the consumerist lifestyles to which the vast majority of the population aspired.

I worked as an anthropologist in South-East Poland both during and after the socialist era. Here, in a region which had been characterized by ethnic and religious diversity for centuries, some viewed the dominant Church with suspicion. They even preferred the hegemony of a weak socialist state to that of nationalist state wedded in constitutional alliance to the Vatican. In Przsemyśl in the 1990s the Greek Catholics, repressed under socialism, sought to regain their old cathedral, taken from them in 1946. The Polish pope himself decreed that this should happen. But he was powerless in the face of nationalists who took to the streets to defend what they regarded as Roman Catholic property in an ethnically Polish city.

Things calmed down in this city in the second postsocialist decade. The Greek Catholics and Orthodox can enter the public sphere prominently to celebrate Jordan by the River San, as they did last week. But the city is much more crowded and colorful on Corpus Christi Day and the Feast of the Asssumption, the major Roman Catholic holidays. It is still not as easy as it is in Britain to belong to a minority religion in postsocialist Poland, where the state affords special protection to a number of other historic faiths, including even Islam, but continues to make life difficult for new Protestant groups, not to mention "sects" such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The question which arises, to which I have no answer today, is whether at the "meso" level, if the Roman Catholic Church is more involved nowadays in the provision of educational and welfare services than it was in socialist decades, and is much more prominent in the media – does this warrant a diagnosis that secularization trends have been reversed? Or is it the case that, here as in Britain, when the Church takes over institutions that for decades were associated with the secular state, that it is bound to be compromised by these developments, because obliged to work within legal frameworks dictated by the state power? Perhaps family transmission mechanisms remained sufficiently strong in socialist Poland so that religious cues in the public sphere do generate the "ambient Christianity" which Engelke failed to find in the British case. These are questions that need further research.

Our own projects on postsocialist could certainly have been prolonged but since 2010 we have moved on to other themes, aware that we left many questions unanswered. It was difficult to provide a summary but in 2010 I tried to synthesize results in three dimensions, those of politics, economics and law – that is to say, I explored the politicization, commoditization and juridification of religion in the various regions where we had clusters of researchers.

Beginning with the political: by far the most striking phenomenon was the new relationship between religion and secular power holders; or, to put it more crudely, the instrumentalization of religion for the purposes of political legitimation. Predictably, this was most conspicuous in Central Asia, where the new republics lacked a history of statehood and so legitimation needs were great. The more or less authoritarian regimes of Uzbekistan, Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan have all tried to mould a distinctive national form of Islam. Politicians are more comfortable with unorthodox popular expressions of belief that can be packaged as national heritage than they are with new currents that pose the threat of fundamentalism. Well-funded Islamic missionaries from Saudi Arabia or Pakistan are no more welcome than their Protestant equivalents from the United States or Hong Hong. Under socialism it was generally possible for even senior socialist cadres to remain "cultural Muslims". Today, as the monograph of Irene Hilgers demonstrated (2009), it is very hard to be an Uzbek and profess any other religious identity but Muslim. However, the greater visibility of religion in the public sphere is hardly evidence of radical changes in personal commitments and piety.

I am reluctant to say much about Russia because it will figure prominently in the Workshop tomorrow (first session) and because many of you have more experience of this country than I have. Our researchers here took note of changes in church-state links, though this was not generally their main focus. For example, Tobias Köllner in his research on Orthodox entrepreneurs in Vladimir noted how local officials drew on the Russian Orthodox Church when organizing public rituals or inaugurating new monuments. He paid particular attention to the holiday known as the Day of National Unity (Den' Narodnogo Edinstva), which had been just recently invented (though of course the idea has deep roots in Russian history). In Vladimir in 2008 the holiday was low-key. Despite the best efforts of Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party and the youth organization Nashi to mobilize the population, few bothered to turn up. At the time this holiday was still hotly contested by the Communist Party, which continued to organize public rituals on November 7th. Surveys indicated that many Russians, perhaps half, had no idea what Putin's party was mobilizing them to celebrate on this day. But those who did turn up could not fail to miss the prominence of the Church and religious symbolism in the ceremonies. Nominally secular speeches were suffused in religious language, emphasizing the importance of the Orthodox faith for national unity; the cathedral bells tolled, and the final speech (before the folk dancers took over) was given by an archpriest of the Russian Orthodox Church (Köllner 2012: 177-82).

In contrast to these rather feeble celebrations of a new holiday, Köllner found larger, more animated crowds motivated to attend the unveiling on a sunny day in July of a new statue of Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich, as part of the revisionist postsocialist historiography of the city. He analysed both ritual occasions as triangular events involving the state, the Church, and – the main focus of his dissertation – the entrepreneurs, whose funding is crucial for the rebuilding of so many churches throughout Russia. Köllner denies that the businessmen are motivated solely by political or economic ambitions. Some at least are motivated by their sincere beliefs and quest "to (re)create a meaningful order in the postsocialist context". There are more mundane utilitarian goals involved, and Köllner documents this ambivalence

throughout his book; but initiating and turning up to such rituals is also a matter of conviction, Köllner argues; it is not to be dismissed as *pokazukha*, mere “show” (2012: 192).

Köllner’s principal interest was in the changed salience of religion in economic life. He found that Christian businessmen were more likely to have personal confessors than to participate actively in the life of a parish. They sponsor the construction of many a new church – but the moral evaluation of such financial donations still falls way below that of the human labour invested by ordinary believers. Similar moral evaluations emerged in the work of Detelina Tocheva near St Petersburg, where the practice of giving to beggars persists and there is criticism of posting fixed prices for candles. Agata Ładykowska, a native Pole, did her fieldwork in schools in Rostov on Don. She found that, in spite of the formal separation of church and state, religious messages were conveyed in classrooms by committed Christian teachers, some of them previously equally committed communists, under the rubric of “Orthodox culture”. Of course there are differences between Russia and Poland – but in the general visibility of religion in the postsocialist public sphere, which is above all a national one, there are also similarities. We know too that at all levels, including the very highest, these dominant churches are the very opposite of monolithic: conservative and liberal factions jostle for position and debate contemporary social issues as well as arcane theology.

Our projects did not include an expert on the legal dimension, though the institute in Halle has recently expanded with a new Department led by Marie-Claire Foblets devoted to Law and Anthropology. I think Marie-Claire would be the first to admit that this is not a field in which the West has one obviously successful model to transfer to eastern European countries reconstructing the constitutional landscape after the collapse of socialism. She fears that recent events in France may send out the wrong signal: if the freedom to blaspheme is celebrated as the core of a French public identity, how can even moderate Muslims be expected to react? Eastern Europe has problems of its own, as a consequence of its history. For example, the minority to which I referred earlier in S-E Poland continues to feel religious discrimination, Greek Catholics are often cast as second class in reality, whatever their legal standing. Then there is the more general point: should any so-called “historic churches” be awarded special treatment at all? Perhaps the answer has to be conditional. If the historically dominant Church exercised its privileges in the manner of today’s Anglicans, speaking up for the religious rights of every other faith community on the market place, then who would object? But the religious human rights activists point out that, in reality, the dominant Churches are often highly intolerant of their upstart rivals.

The political, economic and juridical dimensions must be brought together. One very interesting case, studied in our projects by Monica Heintz, is that of Moldova. This is one of Europe’s weakest states in economic and political terms. Its dominant eastern Christian heritage is complicated due to changing political boundaries in recent centuries. The postsocialist revival of a distinct Bessarabian Patriarchate was inevitably experienced by power holders in Chisinau as a threat to the fledgling independent state, since this ecclesiastical jurisdiction was perceived to derive from the era in which the country formed part of Romania, rather than Russia or the Soviet Union. The Bessarabianists won their case at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. But it is doubtful that victories of this

kind have much influence over deeper processes of secularization and conversion in society. In the poorest country in Europe, eastern Christianity has lost a lot of ground to aggressive newcomers, especially those characterized as Pentecostalist. Such groups are omnipresent, but they have made fewer inroads in Islamic Central Asia, and in those Eastern European countries where "the transition" has proceeded more smoothly.

I would like to conclude with the case of Hungary, which did not figure explicitly in the Max Planck Institute projects, but where I have been working as an anthropologist for the last 40 years. Like the other countries I have mentioned, Hungary has its specific national characteristics, but I think we can also identify some features of more general relevance. I paid little attention to religion in my early fieldwork because it was not terribly important in village life, nor, so it seemed, 20 years after 1956, in the life of the socialist nation-state. In the village the churches were poorly attended; parents could enroll their children for Religious Instruction but this did not take place on school premises, and few bothered. The national holiday of Constitution Day on 20th August was celebrated with military parades in the morning and fireworks in the evening, with no trace of religion in the public sphere – even though this holiday had been a prime religious holiday in pre-socialist days, marking as it does the feast of Saint Stephen, who as King Stephen is credited with converting his pagan people to Christianity and founding the Hungarian state in the Carpathian basin.
/Slides to illustrate this section/

Some changes began well before the collapse of the regime. By 1988 it was again possible to process with the holy relic of King Stephen's right hand around the basilica which bears his name in downtown Pest. There are no military parades nowadays, and the Constitution no longer features. Instead, King/Saint Stephen has been restored to his pedestal as the founder of the Hungarian state, the ruler who brought the pagan nomadic magyar tribes into the fold of Christian, European civilization. This celebration of statehood is coupled with public processions around St Stephen's Basilica, in which pride of place is given to the sacred relic. This ritual is a reminder that the Catholic Church remains by far the most powerful denomination in the country, as it was in pre-socialist years under the "national Christianity" of the Regent Miklós Horthy.

IV Conclusion

In this lecture I have asked "what is really going on?" in certain postsocialist countries with reference to sociological theories of public religion and secularization based on experiences elsewhere, primarily "the West". The 20th August holiday in Hungary is nowadays saturated with religion, the final mass is televised on the Duna TV channel, and the Prime Minister himself attends it (although Viktor Orbán has Protestant heritage). However, the politico-religious pomp is mitigated not only by the evening fireworks on Gellért Hill, which remain as popular as ever in Budapest, but by low-key celebrations of the national in local settings all over the country. After all, 20th August is also the ancient holiday of "new bread" (*új kenyér*), which allows a non-nationalistic evocation of the old preindustrial folk culture to infuse this public holiday. It is a summer day without labour, an occasion for a fete, for sports competitions, and/or for drinking and dancing, rather than politics and religion. Does the new

postsocialist “colouring” reflect changes of substance, even “re-enchantment”? Some might be tempted to respond “yes, of course”; it somehow goes without saying that religion is now public than ever under the present conservative government, enlisted in support of its populist ideology. But there are also critics who suggest that it does not actually *work*, that the leading dominations may come to regret their collaboration with the present regime, notably in taking over education provision all over the country, much as they came to regret collaboration with the reform communists in the last decades of the ancient regime (Jakab 2014).

I am an anthropologist and I shall talk a little more tomorrow about my ethnographic work in the village of Tázlár, and the recent transfer of the village school to the Roman Catholic Church. But let me close with some crude quantitative data, as cited by Attila Jakab: all of the main churches lost followers according to self-declaration in the national census of 2011 – the decline was steepest in the case of the Catholics, from over 5.5 million in 2001 to fewer than 4 million ten years later. Whereas 1.1 million refused to answer this question in 2001, 2.7 million declined in 2011. Almost half of the population thus refuses to identify with any of the country’s recognized religious communities.

It seems to me that this Workshop has a promising agenda in seeking to place religious developments in their institutional and spatio-temporal frameworks. The special circumstances of “transition” may after 25 years now be wearing thin; we may even detect signs of a backlash against the ground reoccupied by religion in the public sphere, but perhaps only superficially. As in the West, it will be important to examine the relations between different levels of religious behaviour, the micro, meso and macro. I have suggested that Western secularization theory, including recent diagnoses of “advanced secularization” in countries such as Britain, may offer more purchase on the postsocialist cases than has previously been recognized. Perhaps only at the macro level can we expect significant differences to persist, because in many countries the link to a national collective identity remains distinctive and strong (for instrumental-political rather than faith-based reasons).

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