

Locating Religion and Nonreligion in Eastern/Central Europe

(Conference of the Visegrád Anthropologists' Network in Konstancin-Jeziorna 02-05.09.2020)

The conference "Locating Religion and Nonreligion in Eastern-Central Europe," organized by Agnieszka Halemba for the Visegrád Anthropologists' Network (V4Net), took place between 2nd and 5th September 2020 in Konstancin-Jeziorna (just outside Warsaw). Thirteen presentations were delivered in person and eight by researchers who participated online.

The aim of this meeting was to explore questions of secular/religious interaction in contemporary Eastern and Central Europe, and in particular, to look for new tools for analyzing the presence in contemporary public spheres of "religion" as it has been historically understood. From "ambient faith" to "public religion," the category of "religion" has been deployed in a variety of configurations: for example, as a field for building relationships with transcendence; as a stage for political contestation; or as a historical, societal and moral force. In particular, participants were asked to consider engaging with Johannes Quack's notion of "nonreligion" to denote phenomena "that are generally not considered religious but whose significance is more or less dependent on religion."

During the opening panel on *Radical Christianity*, Juraj Buzalka analyzed the mobilization of religion within a more encompassing ideology of 'peasantism'; Rafał Rukat looked at bottom-up traditionalist practices within the Catholic Church in Poland as a means of negotiating authority, and László Kürti explored the place of various religious traditions in Hungarian national narratives. This was followed by a panel on *Religion and Morality*, which began with Izabella Main and Izabela Kujawa discussion of the religious motivations of activists working for NGOs that help refugees in Poland; Agnieszka Kościańska presented the history of debates on reproductive rights in the context of Polish Catholicism; and Barbora Spalova and Adam Gajdoš shared fascinating new material concerning the reactions of various religious organizations to recent legal reforms in the Czech Republic. The next panel *Religion and politics* resumed the theme of how religious and national identifications connect with each other. Anna Malewska – Szałygin analyzed how Catholic inhabitants of the Podhale region imagine the state, while István Povedák explored the connections between neonationalism and religion in Hungarian vernacular culture. The first day closed with two presentation under the rubric of *Religion and Memory*: Elena Soler addressed the silences that veil Jewish family history with an example from Hungary, and Magdalena Lubańska analysed differences between religious and secular practices of remembering the murders committed in 1945-1947 of persons returning home from forced labour.

The second day started with a panel on eastern Christian traditions and their presence in secular spaces. Nicholas Lackenby investigated new and old forms of pious practice in Serbia. Giuseppe Tateo's subject was the building of monumental churches by dominant religions, mostly in capital cities. Daria Radchenko analysed the attitudes and

practices that have developed around monuments to saints in public spaces in Russia. The next panel was the first to address the question of nonreligion explicitly. The term is not yet well established in social science studies of religion and can be deployed in a variety of ways. Juraj Majo's presentation (co-authored by Tatiana Zachar Podolinska) focused on statistical data concerning those who opt for 'none' when asked to declare (e.g. in a census) their religious belonging. Jacek Skrzypek analysed public demonstrations of discontent in Poland that contained strong anti-clerical elements. Mariusz Filip showed how some branches of contemporary Pagan movement in Poland are defined (and define themselves) as 'religious' while others are rather 'political' in character. The theme of alternative religions continued in the next panel, which featured an account by Pavel Horák of the profound influence of Christianity on Czech Neopaganism and an analysis by Judit Farkas of the extent to which Hungarian ecovillages match up to their self-designation as 'spiritual'. The last panel was entitled *Beyond Christianity*. It opened with a presentation concerning perceptions of authority among Hungarian Muslims by Bianca Speidl; continued with Monika Soukupová's analysis of how Messianic Judaism and Pentecostalism have interacted in the Czech Republic and beyond; and concluded with Katarzyna Warمیńska's exploration of the 'ethnicisation of religion' among minorities in contemporary Poland (based on research conducted together with Ewa Michna).

In the lively general discussion, participants agreed that the most urgent task was to map the different ways of understanding 'religion' throughout the region. The social processes underlying definitions and redefinitions of the religious and the secular in Eastern and Central Europe show that, even within the same tradition, religion can be present in very diverse ways: in the lives of the people, vis-à-vis a state, and in public space. We need to uncover a multiplicity of understandings what actually religion is, what is perceived as 'religious' or 'religiously motivated' behavior, and normatively, what religion *should* be and why and how it *should* (or *should not*) be present in the public space. There is an urgent need to investigate more closely the roles played by a variety of nonreligious actors. From the heritagization of religious sites, through discussions of how religion figures in national and European identity projects, debates on apostasy, abortion and euthanasia, to discussions of environmental change and NGO activism – all these phenomena thrive by forging links to particular understandings of religion.

There are plans to publish some of the papers in a specialist journal such as *Material Religion* or *Religion, State and Society*, or a more regionally focused one such as *Ethnologia Polona* or *Journal of East Central European Studies*.

Agnieszka Halemba