

RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Four Models for Examining Contemporary Processes

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According to Nietzsche, “there are no facts, only interpretations”. This notion has been frequently quoted from the philosopher’s *Notebooks*¹ from the 1880s by those who identify with the hermeneutical turn in the 20th century. Hermeneutics has replaced metaphysics: while philosophical thinking in previous centuries focused on discovering, expressing and protecting truth, the greatest challenge today lies in negotiating through the multiplicity of interpretations. This paradigmatic shift has influenced not only philosophy, but also the social sciences. But before leaving behind the dynamics of plural interpretations – the cliché “everything is relative” springs to mind – in the hopes of gaining the sense of safety that facts can offer us, we should consider the liberating effect of hermeneutics on communities and on ways of thinking by admitting that facts in a given community are produced through waves of interpretations repeatedly re-defined in the course of social discourses. Therefore, neither facts nor interpretations are permanent. The only permanent factor is the community that constitutes meaning. Thus hermeneutical thinking does not allow for despotism, but acknowledges the diversity of possible interpretations and the essential feature of communities: that they are interpretative.

Four possible interpretations of religious change

This point was important to clarify because religious change is often discussed, at times fiercely debated, on the level of so-called facts. As a result, interpretations are often left un-reflected, as are the communities and their interests that determine these. In this study, I elaborate on four possible interpretations of religious change. I have chosen models that have been successfully used in analysing contemporary religious processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Of the four models, the first one, the secularisation theory, seems to be the most widely known, although some basic misunderstandings about it still prevail. The second one is the theory of social drama and liminality developed by the English anthropologist Victor Turner, which is particularly appropriate for analysing social turns. The third model is related to the concept of civil religion proposed by the American Robert Bellah, which is suited to elucidating religious changes and the political processes within the region in the past twenty years. Finally, the fourth theory is connected to the concept of the empty or free floating signifiers by the Argentinean Ernesto Laclau, developed within the context of critical discourse analysis, which has only recently been applied to the analysis of religious

¹ Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht* 481. Cf. Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>

dimensions. These are all social scientific theories, yet as changes occur not only at the social, but also at the individual level, in the innermost personal sphere, as expressed in the arts, for example, research into this latter area requires other theories and approaches (e.g. psychological). It must be noted, however, that no single theory can capture the diverse nature of religious phenomena and thus only an interdisciplinary approach that integrates various methodological and theoretical considerations can lead to a balanced and thorough understanding.

1. Secularization

Religious Studies turned to the investigation of the reasons for the decreased number of believers in European countries in the 1960s. Research at the time only managed to focus on Western European countries because data gathering in Eastern Europe using proper sociological methods could only begin in the 1970s – in which Miklós Tomka took the lead by conducting studies first in Hungary and then in other countries of the region. The ideas of Bryan Wilson and Peter L. Berger² led to the composition of the original secularisation theory. They maintained that secularisation is a natural concomitant of modernity, in the course of which the traditionally religious legitimacy of the world had lost its plausibility. This thesis – which Thomas Luckmann wrote off as “a modern myth” – has spread very rapidly within sociology, triggering fierce debates with a lasting impact that can be felt even today.

Debates about the theory turned towards institutional religions in the 1990s, focusing on various changes within Christian churches. American researchers in particular called attention to the fact that in the US – unlike in Europe – religions had been highly institutionalised. As a result, European scholars also turned their attention to the institutionalisation of various religious activities, surveying the religious scene outside the US. This interest, however, has remained within research focused on Christianity.

For our purposes, three layers or aspects of the secularisation process must be considered: (1) areas of the profane have become independent of and emancipated from religious institutions and norms; (2) religious beliefs and forms of behaviour have lost their significance; and (3) religion has become restricted to the private realm. While these features have developed in parallel in the various European countries, they differ significantly in their particulars. In some cases it can be observed that the strengthening of secularisation in a society does not necessarily indicate a decline in religious belief. In fact, religion as a societal subsystem may gain strength – especially if traditionally it is a non-Christian, syncretic, esoteric, and pluralistic one – and traditional Christian religious teachings and world views may emerge as significant social factors to be considered on the local and global levels.

² Cf. Peter L. Berger et al., eds., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

Secularization on the macro and meso levels

In his discussion of secularisation, Dobbelaere³ distinguishes between three dimensions: macro, meso and micro. He understands macro to refer to the overall societal level, meso to the level of subsystems, and micro to the individual level.

On the macro level, which refers to the whole of society, secularisation is not the reason behind the development of modern societies and their current characteristics, but is the consequence of functional differences between societal subsystems. In fact, with regard to religion, secularisation simply points out the relation of religions to other subsystems that are becoming or have become autonomous throughout modernity. The secularisation theory in this sense captures nothing more than the segmentation of societies. This is so much the case that Dobbelaere agrees with Wilson and cites his argument that in modernity religion simply begins functioning as a subsystem. As a result of the operational logic of functional subsystems, religious authority has suffered considerably: religious authority and morality, for example, are partly or fully disregarded in the economy and the education system, which operate in accordance with their own logic.

On the meso level, the plurality of religious supply has created a type of religious marketplace, where religious communities compete for the souls of people, occasionally making agreements about proselytising. New religious groups have appeared on the supply side of the religious marketplace, which is considered by many as a sign of religious revival as well as a counter-balance to secularisation. These groups, however, signify a change in the social position of religions, which Dobbelaere identified as a mid-level manifestation of secularisation.

Secularization on the individual level

Micro or personal-level secularisation can be captured statistically by individualism, bricolage religiosity, lack of churches, and the increasing passivity of church members. These members relate to their community as a result of choice, which determines their activities and goals within the group, as well as allowing them to switch between different religious communities. Personal needs enjoy priority, and members' opinions of their church are based on their level of personal satisfaction. As a result, in response to the utilitarian attitude of the members, churches and religious communities in general move in the direction of services. These changes cannot simply be explained by secularisation, as they form part of broader social processes characterized by changes in values, the individualization of choice, the loss of traditions, an increase in mobility, and utilitarian individualism. The rising power of rational choice manifests itself in changes in attitude towards religious dogmas: many international studies from the past 30 years confirm that faith in the so-called conventional Christian dogmas has been weakening,

³ Cf. Karel Dobbelaere, "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 229–247.

while other traditional beliefs seem to have emerged as essential segments of religious doctrine in Europe, such as the belief in reincarnation. Extremely powerful and seemingly persistent debates over faith characterize modern societies: the debates about abortion and euthanasia, for example, indicate high social relevance of particular religious convictions.

Rational fictionalisation of modern societies

It is important to underline that the emergence of the secularisation theory in the 1960s was enhanced by the recognition that the number of people seeking religious experience had been decreasing in modern societies as had the impact religious institutions exercised over social life. The theory, however, does not criticize religion, nor does it predict its decline. It exercises a wider scope: it contextualizes the ways in which rational fictionalisation has taken place in modern societies, influencing religion in the process as well. To illustrate this with an example: this theory is able to explain not only why the number of people attending churches decreases, but also why the number of people defining themselves as religious in some way remains the same, or why more young people with degrees claim that they believe in God than in previous decades.

Secularization and de-secularisation

The phrase “secular society” has become quite widely used, suggesting that religiosity and religious influence in various areas of society nowadays are waning more than in previous periods. Trends in the opposite direction, such as a steady growth in desire for spirituality, the increasing influence of religion on politics, and the boost of esoteric and neo-pagan religions are often described as de-secularisation. Secularization processes and secularisation theory, however, should not be confused. The first refers to a certain direction, while the second reveals and explains reasons and correlations related to it.

The former socialist bloc

Based on secularisation theory, it can be seen that – similarly to other post-socialist countries – religious changes in Hungary have not taken place in the same manner and in the same direction in the past two decades. Based on data collected by Miklós Tomka and Paul M. Zulehner,⁴ it can be concluded that on the macro level the relations between church and state have been adequately settled in most countries in the region, even if occasionally serious or seemingly serious conflicts have emerged along the way. Religious supply has increased on the meso level in all countries, and the various religious institutions have thoroughly integrated into the newly emerging civil society – either on their own or through the personal motivation of their members. Moreover, in certain cases, these institutions are among leading advocates for change. As for personal religiosity, the unevenness that characterized most

⁴ See their two surveys of the *Aufbruch* from 1998 and 2008.

countries immediately after the regime change in the 1990s has by now disappeared. Data collected in the past ten years show no major changes in this regard: they indicate no significant rise or decline in personal religiosity.

This can be concluded within the interpretative framework of the secularisation paradigm based on the various data available. At the same time, people familiar with the turbulent political and cultural situation that has characterized the various societies of the region may argue for a theory that is capable of explaining radical social change. Turner's theory of social drama and liminality provides the framework for such an investigation.

2. Social drama

While observing the African Ndembu tribe, Turner⁵ noticed that tribesmen dealt with conflicts that had emerged for various reasons according to their own rhythm, based on which he developed his theory known as social drama. This theory distinguishes between four phases in the process of conflict management and, by extension, in the management of major social changes:

1. Breech: specific groups break away from the norms of the majority or the former society;
2. Crisis: the resultant conflict gradually widens and deepens;
3. Regressive action: an attempt to resolve problems, often by group leaders through mediation and arbitration;
4. Reintegration of the disturbed social group or recognition of an irreparable break or schism.

Of these four phases, Turner primarily concentrated on the middle two, in the course of which preceding relations no longer apply, while the new ones replacing them have not yet taken shape. He labelled this middle period the liminal phase. As his attention turned towards complex societies, he began to use the term liminoid instead of liminal. Reaching beyond the formality of rites, this concept captures the matrix of basic structures in complex societies. Turner calls the structures characterized by liminality anti-structures. Based on the concept of liminality, he argued that societies are capable of developing. He contended that societies are characterized by a dialectic relationship between structures and anti-structures that are manifested in liminality and *communitas*.

Rites of passage and liminality

Rites of passage accompany or produce the transition from one state to another. Turner called the condition of being in-between two states liminality, or the threshold state, which is characterized primarily by a void – although Turner himself did not use this term. “Liminal entities are neither here, nor there,”⁶ he stated as he described this paradox situation. People in this state

⁵ Cf. Victor Turner, *A rituális folyamat: struktúra és anti-struktúra* [The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure] trans. István Orosz (Budapest: Osiris, 2002).

⁶ Turner 1969, 95.

are structurally invisible; they are neither alive nor dead, but both alive and dead at once. Both individuals and groups can find themselves in such a paradoxical situation and can be characterized by the nudity of neophytes, who may as well be called abominations, because they are alien in every possible way both to the previous state and to the next one. Their behaviour is passive, and they are receptive to punishments with the power of purification and transformation. Subjects existing in this betwixt state are connected through intense comradeship and egalitarianism; differences in social status disappear, a process accompanied by homogenisation.

Communities emerging through liminality

Turner contrasts communities formed through liminality with organized societies structured in terms of the law, politics and the economy, in which words such as more or less and up or down tend to make sense. On the other hand, a liminal phase is characterized by the lack of law and sacrament. Communities in this phase are barely or only rudimentarily structured. Although the *communitas* model is powerfully related to religion and the sacred, it signifies the sacred that has no status in the transitory phase, and not the sacred that is connected to the social status of religion in complex societies. Passing beyond this threshold of the sacred, therefore, can lead to a higher level of religious and social strata.

The three types of *communitas*

Turner distinguishes between three types of *communitas*: existential or spontaneous, normative and ideological. Existential *communitas* is characterized by complete spontaneity, immediacy, and lack of structure. Regardless of the historical period in which it emerges, it soon integrates into the broader social structure. In normative *communitas*, the existential *communitas* becomes structured and organized into a social system. The ideological *communitas* delineates the utopia of the social system, relying on the set of spontaneous experiences rooted in the unstructured, immediate relations characterizing existential *communitas*. Each type of *communitas* is essentially temporary in nature, as structure is inevitable after all. Turner illustrates this – besides his observations of the Ndembu society – through certain examples: the grey friars, who initially represented a *communitas* and then became the Franciscan Order, a regulated and structured community; the hippie movement of the 1960s; and the *sahajiya* movement of Bengal. Based on Turner's works, it may be presumed that he would have applied his theory of social drama to describe the regime change in Central Eastern Europe.⁷

Theory of social drama and the regime change

⁷ See also Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

In 1990, institutions – including religious denominations – gained independence in Hungary as did the public realm. This resulted in a series of perplexing upheavals not only in politics and the economy, but in the religious arena as well, motivated not only by a wide variety of fantasies and interests, but also deep conflicts submerged for numerous decades as history had not allowed one to process them. The painful loss of much of the country's territory and population as a result of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), the highly conservative and nationalist Horthy era that followed (1920-1944), the communist political takeover after World War II, the Revolution that challenged the government in 1956, and the regime change in 1989-90 all represented traumas to be dealt with, primarily not in terms of specific data, but rather in terms of their meaning, significance, and status in the shrine of social memory. With regard to Christianity, this could be observed through the debate that emerged in connection with agents in churches reporting to the authorities under socialism.

III. Civil religion

The system of social relations that rapidly evolved after the regime change – and that in some ways has not been settled since then – presented people in power, including politicians, scientists, intellectuals and the media with the challenge of locating the force that could establish symbolic cohesion in society. This is distinct from the uniformity which dictatorships have attempted to achieve, fortunately without much success. In terms of social sciences, social cohesion simply refers to the ability of the society to operate functionally – although this may seem a distant and hardly attainable goal in Hungary, one may rightfully note. Social cohesion is also a form of unity, through which the members and institutions of a society agree upon the most essential values and objectives, even if these are constantly debated because of the plurality of views and interests. With no fundamental consensus regarding the most basic human and social issues, we see the chaotic and unmanageable situation that Tomka – in applying Durkheim's theory – rightly called anomie, or a lack of orientational norms.

The representation of these basic norms has been traditionally considered to be the duty of religion and churches. In Europe, it has been Christianity and the Christian churches that have primarily guaranteed the metaphysical relational matrix behind human regulation as well as ensuring for many centuries that these norms determine socialization, especially through educational institutions. Many people today believe that in modern societies, in the age of irreligiousness and religious pluralism – especially in the Central Eastern European region – this anomie may be improved by strengthening national identities. Whatever religion is unable to achieve because of secularisation, nationhood may be able to do. After the regime change, the motivation to revitalize national pride intensified in the societies of this region and powerful forces were mobilized through nationalist rhetoric all over Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, etc. – especially in countries with orthodox majorities in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe. National and nationalist ideologies do have their own symbolic systems, rites, heroes, and sacred texts

– which scholars of religions consider as being religious by nature, but not religious in the traditional sense. Thus, they call these civil religion, which is separate, but not in conflict with religions proper.

The main elements of civil religion

Civil religion in Robert Bellah's⁸ understanding – drawing rather on Durkheim and Parsons than on Rousseau – is a symbolic referential system that unites societies. The main elements of this system are: one, a general belief in the existence of a God – not specifically defined – which is reminiscent of the Protestant *fides fiducialis*, a form of faith that establishes a sense of general belief in a deity – as opposed to the intellectual acceptance of particular tenets. Two, civil religion operates an extensive system of symbols through which one can relate to one's society. With his focus on the United States, Bellah defines civil religion as “the institutionalised collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation.”⁹ These national sanctities include parallels between the nation's history and the history of biblical Israel; the partially divine nature of the power of the American President; the absolute applicability of the Ten Commandments; and finally, the universal mission of the American people to spread and to protect freedom to “the edge of the world”.

National religion

By elevating the notion of nationhood above society itself, that is, by transforming it into a meta-concept, into a kind of religious concept figuratively, the theory of civil religion is applicable not only in the case of the US, but also to describe changes in other societies. In every place where the existing power structure attempts to achieve social cohesion and integrity through an idea or where such ideas are being referred to regularly in general social discourses, the theory of civil religion may provide a relevant interpretative framework. Since civil religion is not highly dogmatic, it appears, or may appear, not as a challenge to the various denominations in a given society, but rather as a symbolic system of the basic values and most common goals in which they all tend to share. As a consequence, non-religious members and organizations in society do not feel that they are absorbed by a particular religion or denomination, as their national religion is civil in nature.

Civil religion in the region

In Hungary as well as in other Eastern and Central European countries, political activity regarding civil religion has escalated and then subsided in different waves throughout the past two decades. Sanctities, which would

⁸ Cf. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21; Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁹ Bellah 1967, ???

have been able to express and to protect national integrities in 1990, soon became instruments of political struggles and thus have lost this potential. The concept of the nation itself was sacred for various circles and prophets of the second public space as of the 1970s but then was transformed into a tool to divide societies soon after the regime change. While in Poland and in Slovakia, the Catholic faith plays the integrative role of civil religion, and in France this is achieved through *laïcité*, or secularity, Hungary, like other countries in the region, has seen all symbols and concepts in this regard become desacralized. Identifying and utilizing the elements of civil religion through which the most basic social consensus may be achieved represent a major undertaking, and it is impossible to predict when and how well this may work. At the same time, the logic of civil religion warns us that it must be approached in terms of functionality and the level of its substantial content must be kept at quite a low level.¹⁰

IV. The empty signifier

Social integration and the maintenance of social cohesion are achieved through extremely complicated processes. In the last 20 years, countries of the region were faced with the task of dealing with the explosion of the public realm, among other things. After the gradual disappearance of censorship, the overall presence and power of the global media presented one of the greatest challenges. Undertaking social responsibility and practicing power in the widest possible sense in fact represent nothing more than a multi-layered, complex process of communication, identified as discourse in Communication Studies. The founding figures of the classical theory of social discourse were Jürgen Habermas and Thomas Luhmann, among others. As for critical discourse analysis, the most prominent authors to outline the specific relationships between concepts and hegemony are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹¹ A central concept of their theory is that of the empty, or floating, signifier.

The term was borrowed from semiotics. While in their early works Saussure and Wittgenstein as well as others following their lead presumed a permanent link between the signifier and the signified, postmodern linguistics in particular see a loose connection or none at all, because various meanings can be assigned to the same concept. The emphasis, thus, falls on the signifier. Empty, or floating, signifiers can be described as having a non-existent or an unspecific, rather vague signified – like a circle without a focus.

Social field and political discourse

¹⁰ Grace Davie, "Global Civil Religion: A European Perspective," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 4 (2001): 455–473.

¹¹ Cf. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemonie und radikale Demokratie zur Dekonstruktion des Marxismus* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1991); Ernesto Laclau, *Emanzipation und Differenz* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2007).

In discourse theory, the social field is always open by its very nature, and political efforts are aimed at filling up this field. None of the existing societies possess completed and closed social dimensions, but are characterized by the constant desire to close and complete these. Promising images of this finalized stage represent inherent constitutive elements of political discourses. Empty signifiers play a crucial role in this process. Political discourse is structured solely around these empty signifiers that operate as junction points. Emptiness is an essential feature of these points, axes or focal points; otherwise, they would not be able to fulfil their role, which is to mark or signify, which does nothing but to make the creation of hegemony possible.

In order for an ideology or political view to be able to emerge as a hegemony, it is necessary to generate a shared political identity between the social actors with different identities and value systems. Hegemonic ideology is able to bring the various social actors into the same system of identity by setting a boundary as the result of which the former social plurality is reduced to a simple dichotomy. This boundary can be created through the empty signifiers. The actors are not interested in the boundary *per se*, but rather in the oppositional contents of the two segments into which the political field was divided. The empty signifier, therefore, is a tool in the political discourse through which transitory forms of hegemonies can emerge, and through which actors in the political field can define themselves in the new discourse.

Social discourse on religion

The concept of the empty signifier introduced by Laclau and Mouffe can be adopted in social discourse on religion. If religion plays the role of an empty signifier, the concept must be empty, undefined, fluid and general. Thus, neither a particular religious tradition nor a specific type of tradition can exist in this discursive status. Religion with no specific content can be an empty signifier only if the members and groups of a given society articulate their self-definitions in such a way that they define their own understanding of religion along with their relations to it. Whenever there is a moment or time in the course of social processes when heterogeneous social actors articulate their identity by referring to religion, it functions as an empty signifier in the discourse.

Debates and invalidation

This concept of discourse theory offers the possibility of understanding social debates about religion. In the region, public discourses on religion are usually amplified before national parliamentary elections and they abate after subsequent local elections. The level of general social awareness regarding issues of religion is quite low, but religion still seems to an appropriate means through which various cultures, personalities and political powers can express themselves. and at the same time, religion is also an adequate tool for the different cultures, individuals and political forces to express themselves. Discourse events like this can be observed as of the beginning of the 1990s, in

debates that took place, for example, in connection with the presumed introduction of “compulsory religious education” in state schools or with the return of a primary school in the town of Dabas-Sári to the Catholic Church. Religions and their various institutions and educational components were not substantively represented in these social debates, but as a means of political disavowal. Discourses on religion have become an instrument for enforcing political interests.

Continuing the discourse

None of the four theories discussed contains a concrete message, upon which a safe bastion may be erected against other theories or interpretations. Still, it is worth becoming acquainted with these along with other theories as well because the plurality of social realities and their religious dimensions allow for a multiplicity of interpretations, each displaying a segment of the cultural and political spaces of the region, the understanding and operation of which are of concern to everyone living here – and perhaps not only to them. The brief discussion of these theories above, naturally, would not prepare one for their application. It might have been sufficient, however, to illustrate for readers interested in the contemporary religious processes the kind of knowledge that is required to consider these in a complex way and with a sense of responsibility and, for those in power, to discuss these issues.

I started the discussion of the spectrum of these social theories by referring to hermeneutics, and I would like to finish it with a quote from the same discipline: “In matters of post-metaphysical contemporary thinking, it has become gradually clear that the truth value of a statement does not depend on whether it has satisfied the subject. Moreover, when we talk about correspondences, we rely on statements that become meaningful in certain discourses defined through certain paradigms and the truth value of which lies primarily in the fact that a particular community considers it to be true”.¹²

¹² Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *Die Zukunft der Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 62. Translated by the author (??).