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## Relationship between Religion, Politics, and Society in the First Postcommunist Decade

### The Cases of the Czech Republic and Poland

Tomáš Bubík

#### Introduction

In the course of the last two centuries, religion was gradually banned from participation in public life in European countries. Political elites believed that churches had already finished their historical role, and the dominant position in society was to be now occupied by the state. Churches were kept within legal limits that made them "harmless" in the public sphere, and religion as such was supposed to assume a strictly private role. It was also believed that the state has come out victorious from the last century's battle between religious and secular worldviews. Historically, the most dangerous enemy of Christianity turned out to be the states that adopted the communist ideology, which have had similar social ambitions as the churches traditionally had (Maier 1999: 9–17). Communism in Eastern Europe, especially in the 1950s, followed the example of the Soviet Union and enforced the principle of separation of state and church. All concordats and treaties with churches were renounced, religious ed-

ucation at schools was forbidden, and the clergy was restricted in their activities. However, the regimes did not succeed in their attempts to completely deprive churches of their influence upon public life. Since the 1960s, the communist antireligious offensive was gradually letting up, particularly due to the events in East Germany, Hungary, and Poland, and later on – in Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, doubts were cast upon the concept of the eventual “death of religion.” Moreover, during the communist era, religion became a taboo subject, not only in everyday social life but also in the academia. Consequently, beginning with the 1950s, the study of religions was discontinued, in fact forbidden, at Czech universities, until political freedom acquired in 1989 opened the possibilities for research and academic study of religion without official ideological interference. In the course of the 1970s, communism was no longer perceived as a progressive movement but rather as a totalitarian ideology and, if believed in at all, it was approached with a growing skepticism (Michel 2000: 24–42). The year 1989, which denotes the end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, was important not only for the study of religions but for religious freedom as well. Religion has survived the communist persecution, and at the end of the 1980s Christian churches were particularly strong contributors to the ongoing political change. As Miklós Tomka says, the political change that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe was also a response to the ideological crisis suffered by the majority of population under the communist rule, the ensuing moral vacuum, and the disappearing trust in state institutions. However, “religion and Churches were great exceptions. ... We may suppose that Churches functioned as substitutes for other social institutions for a short time” (2001: 13). Undoubtedly, this social change was also connected with the quest for a new identity in the whole society (Maier 1999: 71) as well as within the churches themselves. The article focuses on two democratic and postcommunist countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, and concerns the situation of churches and societies in the time of political, ideological, and cultural change, as both countries underwent the transformation from socialism to liberalism and to democratic politics. They are closely related in terms of their history, culture, and language; in the past one hundred years, they both have a very similar political experience, such as the encounter with fascism, communism, and – eventually – democracy. However, the position of religion in both societies has been essentially different.

### **An Outline of the Situation of Churches and Religious Societies in the Czech Republic after 1989**

The most decisive change in the situation of churches and religion in the Czech Republic could, of course, happen only after the revolution of 1989, when churches and religious communities gained their religious freedom. The new political orientation of the Czech Republic after 1989 has been based on democratic values, including the principle of denominational neutrality and of no interference into personal and civil rights, such as religious rights. In 1990, diplomatic contacts between the Czech Republic (Czech and Slovak Federal Republic as it was then) and the Apostolic See were renewed. In the course of the 1990s, in order to compensate religious communities for the past injustice, the Czech state issued a series of legislative acts concerning such issues as the abolishment of the so-called religious offense, the gradual restitution of some of the church property, and religious freedom. Religious rights are, in a fundamentally new way, guaranteed by the “Charter of Fundamental Rights and Basic Freedoms” which became part of the Czech legal system in the year 1993 (Tretera 2002: 53–56). Among others issues, it defines individual and collective rights to exercise religious freedom, particularly in the articles 3, 15, and 16. It also guarantees every citizen the right to freely profess his or her religious faith, either alone or together with a community, by means of religious service, teaching, religious rituals, and other forms of observance. Besides, churches and religious societies have the right to organize their particular institutions, install their priests or pastors as well as to establish their monastic orders without any interference on the part of the state. Those individual and collective rights based on the Charter were further specified in 2002, in the “Act on Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Societies” which regulates the relationship of state and churches in detail. The Act is based on respect for religious freedom, for the autonomy of churches and religious societies, and on the consistent application of the denominational neutrality of the state towards churches. It also provides regulations for the registration of churches and religious societies at the Ministry of Culture.

Nonetheless, today the Czech Republic belongs to countries with the lowest levels of religiousness, which was clearly corroborated by the 1991 and the 2001 censuses. In the latest census, about 59% of the population declared to have had no religion (nonbelievers) and only 32.1% identified themselves as religious. For example, the number of registered

members of the Catholic Church declined between the years 1991 and 2001, oscillates around the figure of 33%, which makes 2,7 million inhabitants of the Czech Republic. The three largest churches, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, had lost all together 1,644,528 members between the years 1991 and 2001. The two largest churches had both lost about one third of their membership each, while the third one almost a half of it. On the other hand, the largest increase in membership (by 8,685 individuals) was registered by the Jehovah's Witnesses, which makes it today the fourth largest registered church, with a total membership of 23,162. However, the attendance at religious service has not dropped as dramatically as the total church membership because, as the sociologist Jan Spousta explains, "churches lost only their least enthusiastic members" (1999: 77). An opposite tendency could be observed in the past decade within several smaller churches and religious associations whose membership almost tripled between the years 1991 and 2001. Thus, according to these two censuses, the amount of respondents identifying with alternative religious movements increased rapidly. Such a dramatic decline in membership of traditional churches indicates not only a lack of interest in the traditional forms of spirituality but also demonstrates that there was a unique, but hardly sustainable, religious euphoria in the beginning of the 1990s. Another reason for that tremendous decrease is also the fact that churches lost many members simply because of their death, as the degree of religiousness is much higher in the older generation. The difference in the total amount of church membership between the Catholic Church and other churches is therefore considerable. Furthermore, it is estimated that only some 5 to 10 per cent of those who declare themselves as believers, participate in services regularly. An analysis of the 2001 census data issued by the Czech Statistics Bureau also points to the fact that – considering the seven nationalities living in the Czech Republic – the religiousness is the highest (79.1%) among the Polish minority, and the lowest (30.9%) among people of the Czech nationality.

There exists also a variety of other churches and religious groupings, including a Muslim and two Hindu associations, but only some of them are officially registered by the Czech state. In the year 2011, there were 32 registered churches and religious associations in the Czech Republic. It is also important to stress the fact that the registration is not a necessary prerequisite for the legalization of a church's activity. That is the reason why many

groups show no interest in such registration. Nevertheless, the state registration allows for certain privileges or benefits, and provides the registered organizations with certain rights. That is why, while referring to the new "Act," certain religious groups denounce the tendency of the Bureau of Churches at the Ministry of Culture to gradually limit the freedom of confession and to introduce state control over this sphere. They also argue that the existing legal system seems to favor 21 out of the 32 registered religious bodies. Specifically, the "privileged" organizations have a number of special rights, such as the right to provide religious education at state schools, to establish church schools, to work with prisoners and in the army, to conduct marriages recognized by the state, and to receive financial support from the state. As such, the new legislation has become a topic of a serious public debate in the Czech Republic, whose main topic is the equality of all religious organizations before the law.

#### **An Outline of the Situation of Churches and Religious Societies in Poland after 1989**

In today's Poland, more than 90% of the entire population are registered members of the Roman Catholic Church. The second largest religion is the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (6,000–7,000 members). The Jehovah's Witnesses have more than 120,000 members, although the dynamic increase in membership seen in the early 1990s has recently stagnated. Contemporary Polish Catholicism is not a monolith. On the one hand, it contains a conservative current that is opposing Western lifestyle and pluralism of values, while on the other side of the spectrum there is a very open, tolerant, and liberal tendency. The spirituality of the Polish Catholics is specific, particularly because of its strong cult of Holy Mary and – particularly in the course of the past decades – the great influence of the personality of the Pope John Paul II.

Considering the legal position of churches and religious associations in Poland, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that despite the legal equality guaranteed by the Constitution, there exists a differential treatment of various churches by the state. The relationship between the state and the 15 largest churches is regulated by a number of specific decrees, while smaller churches and religious associations are simply registered by the Polish Ministry of Inner Affairs and Administration. Thus, the largest churches are financially supported by the state Church Fund that covers the areas of social welfare and health insurance of the clergy, contrib-

utes to churches' social work, educational activities, and the upkeep and reconstruction of churches' historical monuments. Apart from those special laws, a concordat, agreed upon in 1993, regulates the relationships between the Polish Republic and the Holy See. Formal registration, however, is not a necessary prerequisite for religious activities, as religious freedom and the right to profess a religion is guaranteed by the Polish Constitution.

The issue of registration has become a subject of hot debates both in Poland and in the Czech Republic. In Poland, between the years 1989 and 1991, all religious groups were registered without restriction or control, which resulted in a rampant increase in the number and variety of religious groups and associations. At the end of the 1980s, there existed in Poland about 30 officially registered churches and religious associations. Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, the number has increased, and nowadays there exist more than 150 churches and religious associations registered by the Ministry of Administration and Digitalization, responsible for the relationships between the Polish state and religious organizations. This fact was considered alarming by the Catholic Church as well as by the public opinion that successfully pressured the government into making the rules for registration stricter. The main change is that now, in order to qualify for the registration, a church or a group must submit one hundred signatures of its members (while previously 15 signatures were enough). At the same time, some of the benefits resulting from the state registration were restricted. Statistics on the official webpage of the Ministry shows a rapid decline in the number of granted registrations, from the previous 20 a year to just two to three a year.

Due to the changes in the registration requirements, particularly the increase in the number of signatures needed for the registration, some new Christian movements have since then preferred to connect with the traditional churches as their filial parishes (congregations), and thus to preserve their congregational autonomy. However, it is important to stress the fact that there are hardly any feelings of discrimination or intolerance on the part of the state felt by the religious minorities (Pasek 2002: 149–152). On the other hand, the situation is different when it comes to social acceptance and evaluation of the new movements. Some new religious movements prefer not to be considered as religions or they openly refuse institutionalized forms of religious life and thus, obviously, do not want to apply for registration. Among the reasons for not registering, however, is the generally held judgmental attitude of the Polish people who consider all church-

es and movements other than the Roman Catholic Church as sects. The term “sect” (Polish *sekta*) is today most commonly used to denote new religious movements and associations. Certain stereotypical and derogatory attitude toward these organizations is common not only among the Catholic clergy in Poland but also in certain public media and as well as in literature. The majority of Polish people also believe that these movements are dangerous not only for the society as a whole but also for the individual's physical as well as psychical well-being. Mass media are the main source of information about the “sects,” even more frequently consulted on the issue than the clergy (Beźnic 2002). The discriminatory attitude is stronger with those who feel closely connected with their own church, and regularly participate in religious observance and the life of their religious community (Doktór 2001: 160). Interestingly, a similar negative labeling of the new religious movements as “sects” exists also in the public opinion in the more secularized Czech Republic.

#### **Search for a New Identity – Religion and the National Awareness**

Academic debates in the early 1990s were also concerned with the issue of what should become the basis of a new national identity in the postcommunist countries, whether it should be based only on political ideologies and concepts, such as the notion of Europeaness, or on the Christian tradition (the last one having been particularly discussed in Russia). These concerns were frequently expressed negatively through the slogan “We know what we do not want,” which meant “No” to the political orientation toward the East, “No” to the stately planned economy, “No” to any state-supported ideology. On the other hand, the political and ideological break-up with the Soviet Union led to an almost naïve and unconditional acceptance of the West. In Poland as well as in the former Czechoslovakia, the looking-up to the West was, particularly since the 1970s, a central part of all antiestablishment political programs. The newly gained freedom has become a political opportunity also for the churches, now free but organizationally decimated by the previous communist regime (more in the Czech Republic than in Poland). The time of repression was too long and the churches in the Communist Bloc frequently lost touch with what was happening, ideologically and socially, in other churches worldwide. Furthermore, the ecclesiastical authorities were frequently not trustworthy due to their real or alleged collaboration with the regime, and sufficiently trained and

experienced functionaries were on demand. On the other hand, there was a great enthusiasm among the clergy as well as lay people about being able to put the church life back on its feet.

Furthermore, in the Czech Republic most of the property of various churches was devastated and has not been fully restored yet back to former owners. Consequently, the churches have to rely financially on solidarity of their counterparts abroad. The religious life focused perhaps too much on inner problems that had accumulated over the decades, while current problems were not given any sufficient attention. After the decades of isolation, churches in the former Czechoslovakia did not manage to change their organizational culture in a fundamental way. This, however, had considerably diminished their reputation gained in the early 1990s. The first decade after the collapse of the communist regime can be therefore considered as the period of institutional consolidation and stabilization. The isolation of the churches from public life and their inadequate and often unintelligible communication with the non-believers remained an unfortunate heritage of the communist era.

For a very long time, the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic had not provided any ideological frame for national identity as it was historically considered as a foreign, imposed religion. The situation of the Catholic Church in Poland was radically different, even before the 1990s. As stated above, the Catholic Church, having been one of the most important opponents of the communist regime, the cornerstone of Polish national identity and the most influential institution in the country tried, in the 1990s and later, to influence politics of the state. The church's self-esteem is grounded in a different historical experience. It was, therefore, assumed that Catholicism could or even should provide the dominant system of values in a society demoralized by the decades of communist rule. Undoubtedly, the Catholic Church in Poland remains to be one of the most respected institutions in the country, although its success in influencing parliamentary politics is not directly evident.

### **Traditional Values *versus* Freedom and Democracy**

During the communist rule in Czechoslovakia, the Christian churches were, paradoxically, viewed as guarantees of freedom and democratic values. Compared to communist institutions, they were perceived as trustworthy partners which, in hard times, stood by the oppressed. In the hard times following the Soviet intervention in 1968, a simple statement

that traditional values should be also considered in political life was viewed as a pro-Western attitude and a demonstration of pluralistic thinking. The established churches also demonstrated a great deal of courage during the Velvet Revolution by morally supporting those public figures who openly declared their Christian faith. Immediately after the collapse of the communist regime, the churches, in particular the Catholic Church, were regarded as advocates of justice, freedom, truthfulness, and human rights, as well as champions of moral values, and adversaries of their relativization in political life. In general, the churches, indeed the entire Christian tradition that they represented enjoyed a considerable respect, even on the part of those who did not identify themselves with Christianity. Nonetheless, the political elites of the still fragile democracies that emerged in East Europe in the course of the 1990s frequently interpreted church's moral teachings as an attack on the newly gained liberal values. As a result, the public engagement of the Catholic Church, especially in Poland, underwent important modifications, although it still aims at demonstrating ethic criteria to "immoral" politicians (Michel 2000: 45). Similarly, the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic intends to be socially active by focusing on urgent public issues, such as church property, abortion, euthanasia, and "sects" (Lužný 1998: 223-225). Still, the Catholic Church in Poland is far more visible in the public sphere than its counterpart in the Czech Republic. On the other hand, paradoxically, vast sectors of population in the Czech Republic and in Poland disapprove of any direct interference of churches in the personal sphere.

### **The Relationship of the Post-communist State to Churches and Religious Associations**

The prestige acquired by the Catholic Church during the communist regime and the first years after the restoration of democracy in the Czech Republic did not last long, however. At the end of the 1990s, the demand for the separation of church and politics intensified, and the historically strong anticlericalism of Czech society became more evident (Spousta 1999: 88). The bone of contention became the sensitive issue of restitution of the church property in the republic. The original support of the church's hierarchy for a separation of state and church had been gradually withdrawn precisely because of the lack of political will to solve the problem of the property. On the other hand, the concept of the poor church devoid of property appeals particularly to the non-believing public, which constitutes a large ma-

jority of Czech society. It is in this sector, where the church lost some of its previously acquired moral credit. Furthermore, due to the long-lasting economic dependence of the established churches on the Czech state, individual church members are not motivated enough to support their churches financially. This fact worries the ecclesiastical authorities, should the general separation of state and church occur.

Going back to the issue of registration, one could consider the limits set by the Czech state in this regard as beneficial for society as a whole. The reasons for such restriction are mostly economic. On the other hand, some authors (Ivan Štampach 1999) argue that this tendency is antiliberal because it preserves the denominational status quo while strengthening the role and position of the state. As for Poland, the Catholic Church in that country exerted successful political pressure that led to favorable for the Church modifications in the registration policy. The decline in the number of granted registrations in Poland, since the new policy was introduced, is quite dramatic. Apart from influencing the registration policy, the Catholic Church in Poland has intended to exercise its political influence, especially during parliamentary elections (Marczewska-Rytko 1998: 154). However, such political activism of the Catholic hierarchy has lately become “more cautious and less aggressive than in the 1993 and 1997 elections” (Eberts and Torok 2001: 147), and today the hierarchy puts clear limits to political activity of priests (Doktor 1999: 184). Similarly, in former Czechoslovakia the church hierarchy openly called for the support of the National Party during the 1990 elections, with a hope to build up a Christian Democratic political front. The call proved unsuccessful, however, which seems to indicate that Polish and Czech citizens have been, in general, critical toward any direct involvement of the Catholic Church in national politics.

### **Conclusion – Possibility of Repolitization of Religion in a Postcommunist Society**

Since the 1950s, many intellectuals in Western Europe accepted the thesis that social space is radically pluralistic and hence social subsystems have no right to interfere with one another. Parliamentary democracy is the only system capable of sustaining and perpetuating such political pluralism. On the other hand, any ideological unity was viewed negatively as the first step toward totalitarianism. Such ideological unity was frequently identified with systematized religious, in particular Christian, cosmology

and moral codes, which, in consequence led to strong criticism and refusal of those ideological and ethical conceptions. Furthermore, secularization was conceptualized as a linear and inevitable process of universal validity. Such views, obviously, strongly influenced religious studies over the past five decades. The fact that the modern state has modified its relationship to the church, and not the church towards the state, does not imply that it is not the ambition of churches and religious associations to continue to participate in public or, with some restrictions, political life. Consequently, the assumption that the social importance of religion, particularly in industrialized democratic societies, will diminish, is no longer sustainable. On the contrary, churches can, and do participate in social life as subsidiary components of their societies, although today they have to compete with other participants for their position in various social fields. Moreover, in post-communist Eastern Europe the relations between states and churches, in particular the Catholic Church, are today driven no so much by emotions and expectations as by the law and pragmatism. On the other hand, even liberal democratic politics is not free from Christian influence, not only in Poland but also in other countries of Eastern Europe, for example in Slovakia, Ukraine (Yelensky 1999: 145 f.), and in Russia, where religious values contribute to the process current process of redefinition of national identity. The events in former Yugoslavia also demonstrate that religion has been an important factor in the strengthening of national consciousness.

Not only Catholicism but also Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam play an increasingly important social role in Europe, in particular in Russia, and even become involved in politics. Some scholars even argue that “today, the post-Communist states, with the greatest regulation of the church, turn out to be the most religious, not the least” (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 131). This, in turn, speaks against the thesis that the importance of religion will diminish along with the progressing secularization of society, as the recent failed attempts to remove religion from the public space, for instance in France, clearly demonstrate (Fiala 2006: 17). As such, therefore, religion in Europe is not entirely a “lost paradigm” for social and political life.

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## Nationalism and Ethnicization of History in a Serbian Festival

Waldemar Kuligowski

Looking at the political situation in the world at the beginning of the 20th century, the immediate impression is that most of all serious armed conflicts have had also a national or ethnic dimension, in the sense that many of those conflicts have concerned political independence and/or control over territories. On the other hand, ethnicity does not necessarily entail conflict or competition – it may be also expressed in less dramatic ways – namely, through image management, religious cults, civic festivities, and other peaceful forms.

As the British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm stated, the “national question” (as Marxists would call it) should not be considered in separation from its extra-political context. Specifically, the national question emerges today at the intersection of technology, administration, economics, and other social phenomena of critical importance. Furthermore, Hobsbawm argues, national identities are “constructed essentially from above, but ... they cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below,” that is in terms of the “assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist” (1990: 10). Hobsbawm’s views certainly fit within the important, 20th-century tendency to analyze nationalism in a way that questions the precedence of ethnicity. Authors such as Ernest Gellner (1983), Carlton J. H. Hayes (1966), or John Comaroff (1991) convincingly argue that the aspect of ethnicity does not suffice to explain the problem, and they challenge the statements on ancient, original ethnic identities that gave way to national iden-