Miklós Tomka

Expanding Religion

Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe

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This book is dedicated to my mother.
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1. Does religion in Eastern and Central Europe matter?

The religious situation in Eastern and Central Europe – to whom is it important?

The religious situation is primarily important to those who are directly involved. There can be two kinds of involvement. For religious people and their churches, the “religious situation” is an expression of their own state-of-being, recognition in society, equality, opportunities and social roles. 1989 represented a turning point in the religious situation (O’Grady 1995, Thériault 2004), the details of which vary according to the country and denomination under discussion. The communist regime persecuted religion for decades (Beeson 1974, Bociurkiw, Strong 1975, Chadwick 1992). Political violence was fiercely employed to impose restrictions on the operability of churches. Anyone who expressed religious convictions was in danger to be punished by social disadvantages. For the centralized Party-state, believers were foreign bodies. Exile, long years of imprisonment or even death was the price that many people paid for practising their religious beliefs. Others were “merely” expelled from their studies or deprived of their hopes for social advancement. The wounds received in previous decades have not yet fully healed. Countries on their way towards democracy can only gradually redress the damage that the Party-state inflicted on churches. Older generations cannot hope to see the process finished within their lifetimes. Even today, religious people and churches have to fight for rights that are self-evident in other parts of the world but were taken away by the Party-state.

On the eastern side of continental Europe, contemporary regime changes were rarely followed by an immediate change of the social elite (Anderson 2003, Plasser, Ulram, Waldrauch 1998) – the only exception being the former GDR. Former persecutors of churches have retained their power to this day. This power is the second type of involvement in the religious situation. In democratic systems, religion and churches cannot be banned and are therefore present and operate in society. Nevertheless, their roles are not to everyone’s liking. Religion and churches are regarded as rivals either ideologically, as a result of their institutions and social influence or even for political reasons. They represent a challenge to those who do not wish to justify their social behaviour in terms of moral norms but rather with personal, business or political interests. In addition, their
presence and influence contradict those who were convinced for decades that religion was dying and often even tried to hasten its death.

It would be short-sighted to regard the issue as an internal affair of religions or churches (or anti-religious groups). The downfall of communism was an event of world history and politics. The Cold War came to an end, and with it a utopian dream collapsed. The influence of 1989 can still be felt all over the world. New life is sprouting up among the ruins, and the societies of the former Eastern Bloc are being reorganised in various ways (Bachmaier, Blehova 2005, Baloban 2001, Burawoy, Verdery 1999). The amount of social responsibility that states are willing to take on, the extent of differences in wages and social conflicts, the rights and opportunities available to minorities and the degree to which nationalism will be intensified are presently emerging. Religion is a part of this transition, and churches are participants in the process. The socio-political transition is still under way, and it is not yet clear where it will lead in individual countries. The final result, however, will be a matter of life and death for people living in these countries. It will also be important for the region as a whole, the EU, Europe in the wider sense of the word and international economic and political life (Polzer 2007). In this whirlwind of change, religion and churches have re-emerged from their underground status and become a factor impossible to ignore in public life, when trying to find the way forward and establishing communal cooperation and civil society (Merdjanova 2002, Michel 1992, Spieker 203). Considerable segments of the populations in the countries of the former communist camp consider the presence of churches to be significant for ensuring peace, democracy, economic growth and the acceptance of social responsibility by the State.

For forty – in the Soviet Union, seventy – years, politics and official expressions in public life in Eastern and Central Europe¹ pretended that

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¹ The European territory of communism in the cold war had two sub-areas: the former Soviet Union and the territory of the satellite states. We distinguish them as Eastern and Central Europe. Eastern Europe with Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldavia is predominantly Orthodox and was historically a part of or under heavy influence from tsarist Russia. Central Europe includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia. Catholic and Protestant countries of formerly communist Central Europe have their own distinct history between Western and Eastern Europe and are often called Central Europe as opposed to the western part of Central Europe, which includes Austria and Germany as well as to the Balkan states (Bremer 2008b, Davie 2000, Halecki 1952, Szücs 1985). Huntington (1993) differentiates according to religion as well and splits Belarus, Ukraine and Romania into a western and an eastern part, indicating basic historical and cultural differences within these countries. Southern European Orthodox or Muslim countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria, which were for hundreds of years parts of the Ottoman Empire, also have a distinct character. They are not the main focus of the present study and are, as far as they are included at all, dealt with in the category of Central Europe. – More detailed reflections cf. chapter 5.
The religious situation in Eastern and Central Europe – to whom is it important?

Religion and churches carried no significance in themselves, as if they were easy to manipulate and could be forced back into private life to await their eventual deaths (Froese 2008). This was always an illusion. Since 1989, it has become evident to everyone that religion and the churches continue to be able to set society in motion. It is obvious that the public activities of churches have not always and everywhere produced positive results. It cannot be denied, however, that religion and the churches have to be taken into account in issues of social existence, culture, self-organising social movements, the governing of countries and even international politics. The situation of religion and churches in Eastern and Central Europe is therefore important to the practice of politics as well.

Furthermore, it is important to assess the theoretical, scientific significance of the above outlined connections. Many claim that 1989 constituted the end of a historical period, maybe the end of the modern age or just of “history” (Fukuyama 1989, Kumar 2001, Wallerstein 2005). 1989 may mark the turning-point at which the period bearing the hallmarks of Euro-American cultural superiority, an infinite trust in science and the belief in unlimited development, definitively came to an end – along with the ideology that modernisation would inevitably bring about religious decline. In the period spanning the last third of the 19th century to the last third of the 20th century, social scientists and the liberal intelligentsia regarded the concept of secularisation as inevitable (Dobbelare 2002, Wilson 1982). According to this idea, the development of human reason would make all irrationalities rootless, especially religion, which was understood to belong in this category. At the same time, the differentiation of the social system would result in the unfolding of the autonomy of its various fields – sciences, the economic system and its institutions, healthcare, politics, etc – together with their becoming independent of any regulatory theory and ideology imposed upon them. “Grand narratives” are a thing of the past (Lyotard 1979). Modern society, as it were, has no use for universal values. Its various segments are guided exclusively by their own rationality – by their search for new knowledge, production and profit acquisition, the constant enhancement of the efficiency of healing, the management of society without creating conflicts, etc. According to this argument, social development and differentiation result in religion being pushed out of more and more segments of society. Turning towards God loses its significance in both the social system and people’s personal lives. Modernisation eliminates religion – at least so the secularisation theory claims. However logical these lines of argumentation may have seemed, reality has proven them wrong. In Muslim countries and several modern countries such as the USA and South Korea, there is no trace of religious decline (Berger 1999, Berger, Davie, Fokas 2008, Sung-Ho 2002). Religion was one of the vital forces behind the national liberation movements of
the 1950s, which in many places acquired a role in national or even world politics (Lanternari 1963). As seen in the examples of India and Pakistan, Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the former Yugoslavia, the role of religion is impossible to ignore in many of the severe political and military conflicts of the world (Juergensmeyer 2000, Lee, Marty 1964, Smith 1996). Religion has also been similarly important in processes of reconciliation (Johnston, Sampson 1994). In the last third of the 20th century, the mushrooming of new denominations and religious movements and the rapid spread of Charismatic-Pentecostal religiosity radically changed the international religious landscape (Cox 1995, Martin 1990). As a result, it became clear to sociologists of religion that the idea of the pervasive effects of secularisation was no longer tenable. Before the debate within the profession could even be settled, changes in Eastern and Central Europe placed religion in a new situation in another part of the world. Many observers view this as a spectacular refutation of the secularisation theory. Others, however, believe that they are witnessing a manifestation of the process of secularisation in the post-1989 development of post-communist countries (Müller 2008, Pollack 2001, 2009). Whichever view proves to be correct, the state of religion and the churches in Eastern and Central Europe has become the focus of an intense debate in social theory. An important aspect of this debate is whether there is religious growth or decline in the region. The answer to this question is made all the more difficult, but the issue even more exciting, because evidence exists for both trends.

Religious growth – the two sides of the coin

It is a peculiar feature of the region that religion, having been artificially pushed into the background by politics for decades, is trying to revive its social role, with at least partial success. Compared to the previous era, this is growth by all accounts. It is common knowledge that the trade union Solidarity in Poland, the Lutheran Church in the former GDR and László Tőkés, a Calvinist bishop in Romania, played significant roles in the change of regime in their respective countries (Gautier 1998, Grabner, Heinze, Pollack 1990, Lensel 1991, Michel 1992, Nielsen 1991). It is equally well known that there was a religious dimension involved in the breakup of Yugoslavia as well as the wars in Karabakh and Chechnya.

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2 Meulemann (2004) argues, however, that religious stability rather than change characterizes the Eastern states in the first decade following the political change.

3 Church beginning with a capital refers either to a distinct denomination or to the theological and cultural concept, respectively the collective name „Church”.

News agencies often report on how quickly the Russian Orthodox Church is gaining strength. Current Russian presidents regularly appear at religious ceremonies and are often shown greeting the Patriarch of Moscow (Garrard, Garrard 2008, Kotiranta 2000). The media is always eager to report on such events as well as a variety of other religious occasions that are considered newsworthy. The Greek Catholic Church, having been banned for decades and only existing – in Ukraine, Romania and Poland – as an underground movement, has also been revived. In five countries (Slovakia, Hungary and the countries listed above), it has millions of adherents (Mahieu, Naumescu 2008). The Greek Catholic Church is attempting to retrieve its churches and other possessions from the Eastern Orthodox Church, a process which has resulted in the two churches engaging in an ongoing battle of varying levels of ferocity.

Another significant element of Eastern and Central European religious transitions has been the appearance of new religious movements (Borowik, Babiński 1997). To satisfy the religious needs that were suppressed for decades, Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Hindu, Buddhist and other missionaries have been flocking to the region from all over the globe. Hundreds of new religious initiatives and groups have emerged and have come into conflict with traditional cultures and churches as well as conservative political groups. On the other hand, in their attempts to restrict the role of traditional churches, the opponents of the main historical churches have found useful allies in the new, smaller denominations. The increase in denominational variety has become a subject of political debate. Within the background of socio-political processes, there are religious events that attract large crowds. Over the course of a few years, a number of pilgrimages have grown into gatherings of tens of thousands of people. Following a Marian apparition, Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a site of pilgrimage visited by millions (Markle, McCrea 1994). There are similar sites of pilgrimage that draw huge crowds in several other countries as well. In most of the countries of the region, both traditional and new forms of religious worship have become widespread and visible. The anti-religious policy of communism – with the exception of a few countries – obstructed the erection of churches everywhere. Since 1989, hundreds of new churches have been and continue to be built all over Eastern and Central Europe to accommodate the faithful. Along with the building of churches, there are also a growing number of denominational institutions with profane functions, such as community centres, nurseries, schools, universities, hospitals and special care facilities for people with disabilities and the elderly. Religion and the churches have again become a part of the system of social institutions. In brief, there are plenty of signs that demonstrate the vitality of religiosity and the strength and public role of churches in
Eastern and Central Europe. The availability of up-to-date information in the mass media and the broadcast of religious services on television as well as religious radio and television programmes are further novelties that can only be interpreted as signs of a spectacular religious revival by those who lived through the era of communism. But is this perspective suitable for a neutral formation of opinion?

Those who question the religious revival in Eastern and Central Europe cite both individual facts and research data. As a result of decades of official anti-religious sentiment, the level of general knowledge about religions is extremely low in most countries. Religious traditions have waned. A substantial number of people have given up regular religious practice, and there is a significant portion of the population who declare them to be non-religious or even atheistic. The spread of crime, the rate of divorce and the number of abortions also cast doubt on whether religiosity plays any role in controlling behaviour. The increased public participation and presence of religion and the churches has resulted in the appearance of significant differences of opinion concerning the retrieval of former church possessions, religious education (Kalkandieva 2007, Pusztai 2008), the political role of churches and the use of public resources to finance churches and their institutions. A comparison of the rates of religious participation among countries shows that where the per capita GNP is lower, religious adherence is usually higher. Moreover, within each country, the rate of religiosity stands in an inverse relation to an individual’s social status; believers are mainly elderly people living in villages with lower levels of education. These facts (although there are opposing tendencies as well, which will be explored later) can be interpreted as evidence for the secularisation theory. We can even add that a religious revival cannot be proven to be taking place until data demonstrating such tendencies has been gathered over time. This is true regardless of whether we suppose the existence of religious growth or decline or even no change in religiosity.

Facts and counterfacts clash. Arguments pass each other by. If we regard all of the different statements as true, we can only reach one conclusion: both religious revival and decline are taking place at the same time. This is not sheer absurdity, providing that we abandon the false notion that the empirical reality of religion and the Church is eternal, unchanging and homogenous. History has proven otherwise. The present empirical form of religion, the “religious system”, has reached its current state through countless transformations. During this process, some of its elements have died out or lost their significance, whereas others have become determinant. The system is in a constant state of reformation in which different elements are declining and gaining strength simultaneously.
New situations create new typical forms. Humanity lived for millennia in communities whose size was easy to control and which provided personal relationships. These relationships existed naturally, without any particular effort on the part of the individual to create them. Religion, embedded in tradition, was a part of the cultural atmosphere for thousands of years. It was practically impossible for anyone to place themselves outside of it. As a result, religion did not require any special consciousness or personal commitments (although the situation did not exclude religious devotion, possibly even to an extreme degree). Modern age is individualised. The current social environment does not make anyone religious. Religiosity has become a question of personal choice and decision. The decision to be religious demands consideration, a confrontation of arguments for and against the choice. In such a context, being religious is an increasingly conscious attitude in which one does not follow a pattern of interpretation or a model of behaviour represented and expected by society but rather chooses a characteristic way of life for oneself. If being religious once meant an alignment with customs, with no independent choice in the matter, the situation today has reversed. Religiosity requires independence from numerous social examples and expectations and often even that an individual turns against them.

A further typical feature of the modern and post-modern era is that we are moving in many directions, both geographically and in the networks of social and geographical mobility. Education relocates people in space and in social structure. People change their residents, their workplaces, their friends. Financial conditions may change. The frameworks of contemporary life become transitory. Such displacements create tension within our relationships and often break them. The security that used to be provided by the community has disappeared. Our culture and our values have lost their taken-for-granted status. Tradition and culture can no longer function as the safe compass in life that they used to be for millennia. Society is no longer the rock-solid environment onto which an individual’s place, rank and opportunities are engraved. The freedom of the modern individual involves the necessity of finding one’s own way for oneself. Moreover, anyone desiring to create and maintain relationships and a community-oriented way of life is required to invest time and effort and make a number of conscious decisions. Religion offers specific values and defines the possibility of making human life complete according to those values. Apparently, many people are accepting this invitation these days. One of the central values of Christianity, especially in Catholicism and in many of the new religious movements, is community. Increasing the stability of relationships and creating a community (together with the unifying ideology that functions as its background) are probably the most important functions of religion today.
At the beginning of our investigation, we cannot exclude the possibility that within any country, the religious system might be changing as a whole, in the same way, in one direction, either growth or decline. In other places, however, it is possible that various religious phenomena are changing in different ways, some of them declining, others growing, and it is the system itself that is changing. Such processes are not uncommon in the natural world. The butterfly lays eggs from which a caterpillar hatches. Then, the caterpillar forms a pupa in a cocoon. Finally, a butterfly emerges from the cocoon. Four transformations. Four times something disappeared and something new emerged in its stead. This is not growth or decline, but the repeatedly continuous revival of life. A metamorphosis of this kind may also be taking place in society or even in religion and the churches.

Changes in religion and the churches were not linear and their pace differed from country to country. Nevertheless, the synchronised nature of communist systems brought about certain similarities. Around the 1960s, a decline in religiosity could be observed. Later, in the 1980s, communism was faced with a crisis, the specific form of which differed from country to country, and the state-party system became uncertain of itself. The strengthening of religiosity and the acceptance of the churches in society became visible at various points in time; depending on how far in advance people sensed the coming changes. In Central Europe, signs of religious growth have been observed since the end of the 1970s (Pollack, Borowik, Jagodzinski 1998, Tomka 2005a, Zulehner 1994). After 1989, the relatively dormant process increased exponentially in most of the countries of the region. One of the reasons for this phenomenon was that in the years directly following the change of regime, as people were trying to find their places in the new social environment, their attitudes were characterised by uncertainty and self-justification. Believers, however, could finally display their religious adherence openly, and many former non-believers turned towards religion in their wake. This signalled a considerable change, especially for countries in which many had turned their backs on religion during the communist era. From the middle of the 1980s, and especially after 1989, counterbalancing the loss of trust in socio-political institutions, the respect for the main traditional churches grew enormously, at least for a time, in the whole of the former communist region. (In most countries, a slight reversion followed later. In the Czech Republic and Slovenia, the reversion was strong.)

This socio-political stability that was reached within the scope of a few years resulted in another new situation by the middle of the 1990s. In some countries, especially ones with a strong middle-class, some people could not find what they had been looking for in religion. After
experimenting for a couple of years, they turned their backs on religion or at least on the Church. Over time, the socio-political institutions have stabilised everywhere, decreasing the advantage of prestige that the dominant big churches previously enjoyed. There was also another significant process at work, namely that in countries and regions with a higher rate of industrialisation and urbanisation, the past few decades saw a marked increase in the independence of people with respect to institutions. Another aspect of this process has been a decrease in one’s subordination to the State and a growing suspicion of formal institutions, resulting in most people keeping a greater distance from them. Trust in institutions has been gradually declining everywhere since the change of regime. People have become more independent, even of the Church, but the churches has still managed to retain a higher level of prestige compared to other institutions.

In the meantime, other events and processes unravelled in Eastern and Central Europe. Former artificial state formations have fallen apart, and new states have been born. The sense of belonging together in a society, the question of national identity, has become vital almost everywhere. To strengthen such sentiments, national feelings have been or are being inflamed in many places. In this process, especially among Eastern Orthodox countries, the prevailing national Church often plays an active role, which casts a rather peculiar light on Christianity. At the same time, modernisation is increasingly taking place in both culture and the economy. A certain modern religiosity is taking shape that has a style of its own, but it characterises less people than the number of those who have turned their backs on earlier religious participation. Nevertheless, this new religiosity may be more distinct and more able than earlier customs to shape the life of both the individual and society. At first blush, it is impossible to decide whether we are witnessing growth or decline, after all. The transitions in Eastern and Central Europe may demonstrate commonalities, but many of their dominant features are combining in different ways, a fact which explains the existence of significant differences among countries. Both the similarities and the differences deserve our attention.

What do we mean when we talk about religion, being religious? – The religious system

Varying interpretations and definitions of religion are deeply rooted in history and ideology (Derrida, Vatimo 1998, Pals 1996, Vallet 1992, Wagner 1986). It is worth noting that until the end of the Middle Ages
the term ‘religion’ was hardly ever used to denote a Christian worldview and way of life (and it was never used in the sense the word has today). Instead we find references to the “adoration of God”. It was only after the Reformation, and especially in the vocabulary of the emerging Enlightenment, that “religion” appeared as an independent field of culture and human behaviour, separate from other forms. The key criterion of this collective name “religion” became faith. In this way, “religion” was categorised as a phenomenon of consciousness and gradually became an individual and, over time, increasingly private decision (Lash 1996). This perspective is problematic in several respects. It does not clarify the way in which religion is individual and the extent to which it is communal; nor does it denote how much it is a question of intellect, emotions or experience and, in fact, what religion is precisely. Unclear terminology is a hotbed for misunderstanding. Apparently contradictory statements proliferate concerning “religion”. They are strangely compatible with each other in some respects, as they refer to different things, although they indicate the same “religion”. Therefore, it is worthwhile to clarify what we mean by the word “religion”. It is also no less important make clear what is meant by the term “religious system”, which describes the social form and development of religion.

It is not our task here to provide another scholarly definition. Therefore, let the following summary serve as a reminder what we mean when we use the word “religion”.

In our own use of the word, “religion”

- is an existential standpoint and a system of experience, emotion and belief, and a specific perspective
- which includes and cherishes (by employing the tools of faith, religious worship, aesthetics and mysticism) references that point beyond experience (“transcendental”),
- which attempts to combine into a coherent unit the whole of reality that the individual, the community and the culture may potentially reach,
- which is a constituent part of the identity of the individual and the community and
- which has an impact on behaviour and human and social relationships; furthermore,
- which is organised into a cultural pattern (namely, it solidifies into a social fact beyond individual persons and even into an autonomous institution organised into a rational system of logic, described and maintained by its own forms of expression and behaviour) and in this way
- may become the object of social expectation (or refusal); and finally,
- which provides a cultural connection – and possibly even real, literal relationships – among those with a similar way of thinking, while,
The religious system at the same time, distinguishing them from others and, in this way, serving as a social organiser, while

- the communities and social networks of those who represent similar attitudes and ambitions establish a church with its own institutional form, building an independent organisation for the management of their culture and sense of belonging (for the expression of the cultural patterns it represents and the ability to pass them on, the coordination of communication among its members, the organisation and fulfilment of common tasks, the control of rights and responsibilities, etc); this institution serves profane functions as well, along with the internal necessities of the institution itself and thus inevitably comes into contact with other social institutions, among them the State.

The truth of the matter is that in public thinking, there are two views on what religion is (Campiche 2004). One view equates religion with a belief, especially the acceptance of the existence of God, which, in fact, has no influence on human behaviour and, because it is no more than the private opinion of individuals, has no competence in the fields of public life and politics. This religion exists in the minds of people and could therefore briefly be called a world-view or an ideology. We must be aware, however, that it is mainly non-religious or slightly religious people who define religion in this way. The other view, held by a majority of those who practice their religion, understands religion to be a way of life, determining all or several aspects of the believer’s life and providing universal guidance on what is good and valuable for the individual and society. Naturally, for those who define religion in this way, it is knowledge, emotion, experience and practice, a simultaneously private, communal and social matter. It would be pointless to argue which approach is correct. Instead, we must accept that people have two different types of views. If, however, in actual fact both views exist in society, then it is wrong to define religion (based solely on one of the standpoints) as no more than ideology and a private affair, especially when for those who practice their religion, it is a part of their identity, an element of the social nature of humanity and, at the same time, a dimension of social organisation.

The three main elements of the religious system are the following: (1) individuals and their communities, searching for and maintaining connections with a transcendental reality either consciously or partly subconsciously, (2) the cultural expression and cultivation of their experience and (3) the securing of these in an institutional-organisational pattern.

On the one hand, in the life of the individual and society, religion is a value in itself, which exerts influence on other spheres of life. It is a
Does religion in Eastern and Central Europe matter?

direct experience, relationship and commitment (such as love). In this way, religion does not depend on any form of effectiveness. On the other hand, it is a means of satisfying human and social needs – in this respect we can talk about religion’s role as a stopgap as well as its dependence on the existence of deprivations (Allport 1950). What is questionable is how efficiently religion can fulfil these functions.

Religion is not a body of knowledge, describing the world and its functioning or its laws. Rather it is a specific way of interpreting and handling the relationship between the individual and reality, which includes a formulation of the meaning present in the world and relevant to individual existence (“why?” and “what use does it have /for me/?”). These questions are answered primarily in an existential and practical and moral sense, and only secondarily in a theoretical-intellectual way. Thus religion provides an answer for the apparently insurmountable problems and questions of the individual and the world: pain, sin, meaninglessness, contradictory experiences and the arbitrariness and finality of human life.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth outlining the process through which religious phenomena become social facts. There are obvious basic differences between Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad and the founders of other religions. Nevertheless, we could insert into the respective fields of Figure 1. any of the following sets: Jesus + Christian community and culture + Christian Church or Buddha + his followers and their faith + Buddhist attempts at institutionalisation or Muhammad + believers of Islam and their culture + the Islamic legal system and theologians interpreting the Quran or the founders of any religion, from the Reverend Moon (founder of Unification Church) to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of Transcendental Meditation) or even Sándor Németh (founder of the most successful Pentecostal community in Hungary, the Faith Church) + their followers + the regulation of their faith and community and its institutional form. The model is universally applicable. The charismatic founder, who advocates the message of God, appears with his way of life and the power of his words and preaches radically new or remodelled teachings on human life, the world, nature and the supernatural and the individual and the community. This opens up a new perspective on the perception of reality, which is accepted by others. The previously private conviction and way of life becomes the shared treasure of the many who are connected by it, while the members of the community of believers also work on the formation of their common belief and their ways of life. The community of believers is a conscious and active social community, which undertakes tasks in connection with its members and others. The growing of the community, the enrichment of their shared belief and the extension of the activities of the community soon necessitates that people become specialised
The religious system

for specific tasks, that spheres of authority be established and that the relationships among the various office-holders and those without any special roles be established and clarified. This stage is the formation of the church organisation. (Figure 1.)

Even in a simplified outline, we can see that the scope of religious phenomena (the “religious system”) still includes:
– the teacher, who advocates and lives out the new view of life, and who may also relate extraordinary experiences,
– people who internalise his words and in this way become a community,
– the shared belief, which soon expands into a universal culture because it touches on the experience of reality and people’s way of life as a whole and
– the regulation (institutionalisation) and organisation (formation of a church) of the common culture and the aspects of belonging to the community.

*Figure 1. An outline of the religious system*

All of this is relevant to understanding the situation of religion in Eastern and Central Europe and changes therein. The question is: what
is the most important element of the whole? Is it the original religious experience? Or is it the appearance of a multitude of new prophets and new religious movements? In the past couple of decades, the greatest interest was aroused by extraordinary and exotic religious phenomena as well as religious initiatives that the main churches have often considered to be deviant. New religious movements and special forms raise plenty of exciting questions and are therefore worth examining. If we measure everything in this way, then a religious boom is indisputable (even if these movements involve no more than 1-2 percent of the population in each country). Focusing on the extraordinary is, however, a sidetrack that leads us away from an understanding of the religious situation in the region.

We might ask if the decisive factor is rather the institutionalised religious culture, its organisation and the extent of popular participation? This image is more controversial. Along with the revitalisation of religious life, we can also see signs of the breaking up of traditions. Interest in religion has increased, but this was preceded by a fall in the level of general knowledge concerning religion. New religious movements and forms are emerging, but the traditional customs of folk religion are disappearing. Within churches, the number of lay theologians and activists is on the rise, but the number of priests, in some denominations, is dwindling. Therefore, when we try to understand the religious state of affairs in Eastern and Central Europe, we must consider all of the aspects of religious communities, religious culture and the institutionalisation and organisation of religion according to their social significance. Our decision to regard any of these aspects as the most determinant implies an ideological standpoint in itself. According to the Catholic approach, an inevitable criterion of Christianity is the centrality of the community and the need to belong to the Church, the institutionalised community of those who believe in Jesus (Tropman 2002). In Protestant practice, the presence or absence of faith ("sola fide" principle) and the word, the preaching push other criteria into the background (Willaime 1992). In Eastern Orthodox culture, along with faith, there is a particular emphasis on worship, rites, icons and religious symbolism. The Charismatic-Pentecostal religious attitude considers the liberated experience of conversion and emotional religious involvement to be the expression of "genuine" religiosity (Cox 1995, Martin 1990). In what follows, we will focus on the extent to which religiosity appears in the thinking, morality and behaviour of people.

Making judgements about the relevance of the community and the group of believers ("belonging") is not an easy task (Boulard 1965, Carrier 1965). Who belongs to a religion/church? Is it those who consider themselves to be believers or members of the Church (the two are not
The religious system

equal!)? Or is it those who pay taxes to their church? Or those who fulfil some required minimum of religious practice? Or anyone whose mother is a member of a specific denomination? Or someone who is a baptised or formally registered member? Results concerning belonging to a church in this sense differ heavily from those that indicate “belonging” to a religion or denomination by attesting “I am a Catholic” (or Jew, or Orthodox, or any other denomination). Many more people identify themselves with a denomination (with its culture and tradition? with the people who are adherents of this tradition?) than with a church. There are as many criteria as there are possible approaches to the question. The assessment of the social basis of religion and/or of a church is a difficult undertaking, and it is no accident that there are enormous differences between the religious statistics of the Vatican (Annuarium 1977 ff), the most renowned Protestant source (Barrett 1982), the data derived from national censuses and sociological surveys (Halman 2001, Inglehart 2004) and other sources. Eastern and Central Europe is a special case in the sense that before the communist era, in the popular religious situation, practically everyone was considered to be a member of a church, de jure, by virtue of their baptism (registration). This membership carried no particular consequences. By contrast, during the Party-state era it was advisable to hide any religious connection. In this period, organisational bonds slackened. Since 1989, however, many people have declared themselves overnight to be members of a church. Meanwhile, belonging has become an unstable issue which can be revoked and re-declared at any time. This will be seen later in the fact that in the subsequent censuses and repeated sociological data collections in the same country, we occasionally found significant differences in the rates of those who claimed to be members of any denomination or believers in any religion – possibly depending on the current political climate or popular opinion about a given church.

It is equally difficult to provide an evaluation of faith and religious culture along with the changes that have taken place within it. What, in fact, belongs here? One of the sociological bestsellers of the 1960s (Glock, Stark 1965) distinguishes five dimensions of religiosity: knowledge about religion (the intellectual dimension), religious belief (the ideological dimension), religious practices (the ritual dimension), personal religious emotions and experiences (the experiential dimension) and the appearance of religion in interpersonal relationships and in everyday life (the consequential dimension). Later, the same authors found several subdivisions, and others developed as many as ten dimensions (Vaillancourt 2008) or more. What, then, shall serve as our yardstick?

The distinction of dimensions is indeed suitable for demonstrating the diversity within and among religions, but no solution has yet been
found for summing up these dimensions. Cultural patterns develop. Religious communities and churches formulate their own systems of criteria. With reference to a historically fixed combination of dimensions, it is possible to examine the extent to which they exist in a population. But because there are various mixtures of dimensions, it appears practically impossible to express a comprehensive and general opinion that would be valid for all forms of religiosity. Modern society is characterised by the presence of a large number of believers who never take part in religious practice (Davie 1994b). At the same time, there are many who practice their religions while harbouring doubts. Belief and worship are not necessarily complemented by religious experience, but in a religiosity rich in emotional outbursts, we may occasionally find a narrow system of beliefs and rituals. There are many who tend to experience their religion as individuals, while others experience it in a community. This is not a sign of a decreasing or damaged state of religiosity. There are socially crystallised and/or “official” church models that have made the requirements of their belief and religious practices clear and in which, as a result, the relative positions of dimensions are fixed. The practices of a pluralist society, however, allow individuals to make use of any elements of religious culture that they consider to be useful or that they simply like. With only a slight exaggeration, we might say that there are as many religions as there are people. In this case, however, no typology would be suitable for making overall judgements about the religious situation based on the extent of its existence.

In Eastern and Central Europe, we also face two specific difficulties. One of them is a peculiar feature of cultural transition. The aggressive nature of the communist regime proved to be an artificial obstacle in the path of the autonomous processes of society. In order to protect themselves against official expectations, people in Eastern and Central Europe guarded earlier forms and elements of religiosity in a “frozen”, unchanged form, which often became obsolete over time. Regime change cleared the way for the changing of religious attitudes. Within a few years, the culture of folk religiosity slackened along with other elements of tradition. In a similarly overnight fashion, the individual and selective religiosity typical of the modern age (“in one’s own way”, “a-la-carte”, “patchwork”, “do-it-yourself” religion) is on the increase.

The other distinctive feature is rooted in the persecution of the churches that took place during communist rule. Because the churches were prevented from carrying out their activities, their former monopolistic position in the definition and structural organisation of religiosity was forcibly brought to an end. People no longer relied exclusively on the guidance of the Church concerning questions of religion. The earlier unity and order of religious culture was shattered.
Since the change of regime, the ensuing chaos has been even further increased by the appearance of new religions as well as the flood of information from the media, which is uneducated in matters of religion. We must repeat, however, that change does not equal decline. Transition necessarily involves moments of chaos. Religion is a living process that is perishing and reviving at the same time. The question is: what are the proportions in this dual process?

One of the cornerstones of the religious system is the institution, the church organisation, meaning the formalised body of the partly spiritual, partly socio-cultural entity Church. The historical models of the Church are well known. In communist countries, newer versions have taken shape (Arends, van Dartel 1989, Calvez, Tincq 1992, Michel 1988). Many of the Church’s earlier organisational forms were banned and destroyed by the Party-state. The operability of the church organisation slackened in all countries of the region. In some cases, as a result of the division of labour between the authorised hierarchical structure and persecuted, self-motivated religious efforts, the huge national churches became “double-track” institutions (Tomka 2007). In other cases, churches survived in a state of relatively free inclusion but was excluded from public life. Elsewhere, in response to persecution, an “underground church” was born, following the practice of conspiracy (De George 1975, Gönner 1995, Liska 2003). These attempts at survival achieved varying levels of success, but two conclusions remained clear everywhere. Some believers realised that the Church does not exist on its own, and that as a social reality, it is not an unchangeable eternal frame but something for which work must be done. Many people started to think about what the Church should be like. At the same time, it also became evident that the efforts of priests were not sufficient and that “making the Church” (Boff 1978), especially in times of persecution and sudden changes, was a task of the laity as well. This resulted in a changed relationship between priests and the faithful.

The change of regime interrupted the experiments that had been going on for forty years, but it could not make the achievements non-existent. The establishment of democracy in the State and civil society offered a political opportunity for the restoration of pre-WWII forms of church structure, which were possibly regarded as antiquated elsewhere. The majority of the clergy was inclined towards this restoration. But social conditions after 1989 are radically different from those before the communist era. The restoration of the churches, therefore, still remains an experimental process. Some forms that could be protected during the years of persecution may now prove to be obsolete. New forms are being born. The vitality of churches – appearing in organisational aspects as well – has been made clearly manifest in the years since the change of
regime. But where and when this signals religious growth or decline can only be determined after a thorough investigation.

In order to see this more clearly, we need to dig deeper in at least seven fields.

First, we need to review public opinion. How is society responding to the changed presence and suddenly increased role of religion? In general, what do people regard as the genuine role of religion? How do they view religious and non-religious people when compared to each other?

Public opinion on religion and religiosity are closely connected to the expectations people have about the Church, how much they trust it and how satisfied they are with its activities. Are there any differences between the way people think of the main churches and their roles? In order to see what the role of religion is in society, this question can be posed in a socio-structural and socio-political perspective as well. If religion has its own organisation and operates independent institutions, then another inevitable subject is how the Church and its institutions fit into the whole of social organisation, and in what way they participate in public life and politics.

A more complex group of questions concerns the visible signs of religiosity and belonging to the Church in the region, within various countries, in order to see which parts of society tend to be more or less religious and how the extent, form and social basis of religiosity is changing. This question involves examining not only people’s self-definition and possibly the question of their formal church memberships, but also an overview of the multitude of beliefs, religious practices and religious sentiments and experiences as well as an interpretation of the links among them – in parts and as a whole, based on the available research data.

The previous topic might as well be folklore research. Its social relevance is provided by the fourth question, namely, how and to what extent religion changes people’s lives. Are religious people different from the non-religious? If there are any differences, how do they manifest themselves? Are the differences similar among various denominations, different age groups, people with higher and lower levels of education or those living in villages and in towns?

The fifth question is a continuation of the previous one, and its extension into the realm of society. Do religion and religiosity play a role

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4 Most surveys did not differentiate between different churches but asked questions about „the Church”. Regarding such data, we are using Church in the singular as well. We can only suppose, that respondents referred either to their own original denomination or the denomination of the majority of citizens in their respective countries. It should be remembered, that in most countries of the region, either Catholic or Orthodox churches represent the overwhelming majority of the population.
in the structure of society, in the shaping of its goals and internal order? If so, what kind of role do they play? Do religious people have a different social self-definition and identity than non-religious people? Do they have a different relationship towards the underprivileged or the nation as a whole? In what way?

The sixth topic is comprehensive in nature: what are the main religious fault-lines characteristic of the region? At least three divisions deserve a more thorough examination: the denominational, the geographical, and the division based on the state of socio-economic development.

The main focus of the seventh, similarly broad question is whether it is possible to reveal any basic types of religiosity and religious change in Eastern and Central Europe, the multitude of dimensions, dividing lines and national differences notwithstanding. If basic types can be demonstrated, then what are the factors of the distinction? And how do the differences manifest themselves in the social structure of the countries categorised into each type?

These seven approaches most certainly cannot cover everything. Analyses of any situation based on experimental facts are always partial and transitory in nature; they can be modified and continued. Nevertheless, the collection, exposure and analysis of the facts is a prerequisite for everything else. This first step needs to be made in order to set off on the journey. What follows should be considered to be such a first step of orientation.

What are our sources of information concerning religiosity and churches in Eastern and Central Europe?

Although it is common knowledge, it is worth repeating that when representing the religious situation, social scientists are concerned with the visible, social manifestations of religion and the Church. The relationship between God and humankind is not a topic for social scientists. That is why theologians tend to remark that in empirical science, it is exactly the “essence” of religion that gets lost. What we consider to be essential, however, is a matter of our point of view. What is certain is that with the tools of empirical science, we can only deal with religion and the churches as a visible, observable and perhaps measurable form of behaviour, mode of socialisation, culture or organisational form. Religion and the churches are social and cultural phenomena (among other things), subordinated to the laws of society and culture and closely connected to their other elements (Godijn, Godijn 1963, Yinger 1957). This connection is an interaction; the characteristics of society shape