

Conference Report on "Religion and the Public from 1989/1991"

International workshop, Justus Liebig University Giessen, 27-28 January 2015

Organizers: International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Working Group "Eastern European Identities", in collaboration with the WG "Religion and Culture" and Research Area 7 "Global Studies and Politics of Space"), Giessen Centre for Eastern European Studies (GiZo), Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Marburg

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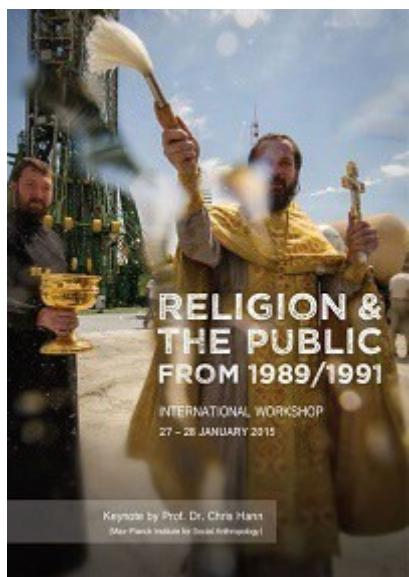
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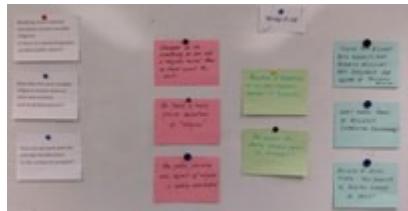


The international workshop "Religion and the Public from 1989/1991" examined the increasing (public) display of religiosity in post-socialist states by focusing on the potential causes of the so-called "religious revival" and its socio-political implications. Organized by three members of the Working Group "Eastern European Identities", in collaboration with the WG "Religion and Culture" and Research Area 7 "Global Studies and Politics of Space", the event gathered a number of international early-career and established scholars dealing with the topic. The two-day international workshop started with a keynote lecture by CHRIS HANN (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology at Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg), a social anthropologist and director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

The distinguished speaker briefly summarized the main theoretical approaches to religion and secularization in Western sociological thought, suggesting that these insights might be useful in describing the post-socialist context. Following this assumption, Hann analysed Britain, Poland and Hungary, with some brief references to the research on religion, civil society, and morality in East-Central Europe and Central Asia, conducted by the Halle Focus Group between 2003 and 2010.

According to the eminent guest, recent developments in Britain are to be viewed in light of the different role in welfare provision assumed by faith communities after the rise of the welfare state. These "faith-based-organizations" are highly bureaucratized and secularized institutions, which do not transmit a religious message. As pointed out by the sociologist Matthew Wood, Britain is a society of "advanced secularization", where micro-level secularism among individuals is strengthened by "faith-based-organizations" at a meso-level. When it comes to Poland, the question is whether the church's increased media visibility and greater presence in the provision of educational and welfare services after 1989 is indicative of a reversal of secularization trends. Or is the church also affected somehow when it takes over institutions traditionally associated with the secular state? Perhaps in socialist Poland family transmission mechanisms remained strong enough, thus creating "ambient Christianity", which is lacking in Britain?

Hann continued his inspiring lecture by posing similar questions about the current situation in Hungary. For instance, the church has taken over the administration of an elementary school in the village of Tázlár, but apart from some "cosmetic" alterations, the curriculum remained the same. Is a greater (public) visibility of religion a clear enough sign that something has changed? The renowned speaker further elaborated his points during the introductory speech on the second day of the workshop, when he shared with the audience some of his research findings on the above mentioned Hungarian rural community and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. Hann's talk was preceded by a short general presentation of the event by the conference organizers, MAGDA DOLIŃSKA-RYDZEK, CORINNE GEERING and KATHARINA KÜHN (GCSC, Giessen). They invited the speakers to reflect upon notions such as "the public sphere", "religiosity," and "post-socialism" and challenged the concept of (post-)secularization. Has Russia (and have other ex-socialist states) ever been secular? What is the relationship between individual religious practices and the public display of religion? To what degree is religion subject to politicization? These and other questions were tackled from different angles in the course of the workshop.



MIKHAIL SUSLOV (Uppsala University, Uppsala), postdoctoral researcher at the Uppsala Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, opened the first panel. Basing his remarks on the analysis of blogs written by Russian Orthodox priests ("Ortho-blogs"), the presenter described the attitude of

Eastern Orthodoxy towards the new, digital communicative environment as "digital skepticism". More specifically, the Internet is often defined as a space of discomfort and insecurity, where the authenticity of the religious experience online, the authority of the Church, and the integrity of the virtual orthodox community are all put into question. Even if this anti-digital attitude is not unique to the Russian Orthodox Church, it exposes the main contradiction of online religion: despite the immense possibilities that it offers, the Web relativizes the Church's "Truth" and knowledge.

HANNA STÄHLE (University of Passau, Passau) expanded the debate with her considerations on church critics and their narratives on the Russian Internet, popularly known as "Runet". The anonymity and "pseudonimity" of Web 2.0, together with its networking and opinion-sharing possibilities has made the Church a prominent object of various discussions and attacks. Ms. Stähle's research for example exposed a rather negative position towards homosexuality not only among prelates, but also liberal-minded and anticlerical intellectuals. The talk she gave was only a minor part of her PhD project at the University of Passau, aimed at mapping the above mentioned discourse, as well as identifying and contextualizing its main events and actors.

The third presenter in the panel was KLAUDIA KALETA (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan) with a presentation on art, the Catholic Church and the state in present-day Poland. Even if the Polish Constitution foresees a separation between religion and the state, the Church took over the role of guard of national values and morality. Article 196 of the Penal Code condemns every activity which discusses religion, uses religious symbols or questions traditional values by banning it from public view. According to Klaudia Kaleta, the cases of Dorota Nieznalska, the exhibition Irreligia and the cancellation of the Golgota Picnic Spectacle, all accused of a violation of religious feelings, are a clear sign of the (im)maturity of the Polish democracy.

The first afternoon panel dealt with politics and space in South-Eastern Europe, with two presentations on Bulgaria and Romania respectively. CENGİZ HAKSÖZ (University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh) presented his research findings on two peripheral Bulgarian towns, namely Smolyan and Razgrad. The PhD candidate motivated his choice by arguing that contested cities tend to be more dynamic and it is in just such "religioscapes" (a term first used by Hayden and Walker) that power relations between majority and minority can be best observed. In fact, (peripheral) "religioscapes" allow us to analyse the dynamics of power and dominance, as well as the narratives and practices surrounding them. Mr. Haksöz focused primarily on the Muslim population in Smolyan and Razgrad, Pomaks and Turks, and the physical manifestations of these religious communities in a landscape.

LUCIAN CIRLAN (Ecole pratique des hautes études-Sorbonne/University of Lausanne, Paris/Lausanne) focused on religion in the public sphere in Romania since 1989 by referring primarily to the project of the Orthodox National Cathedral in Bucharest. With 86% of Orthodox believers and the emergence of new forms of religiosity, Romania is a special case in Eastern Europe. The presenter concluded that, according to the Romanian census, the percentage of Orthodox believers remained stable in the past 25 years, implying that no major changes occurred. He thus posed the question whether an individual secularization process can go hand in hand with an institutional religious revival, promoted primarily by the Church and projects such as the Orthodox National Cathedral.



The case of Romania was also the main focus of ALEKSANDRA ĐURIĆ-MILOVANOVIĆ's (Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade) presentation, which opened the third and last panel. The research associate from Belgrade gave particular attention to religious revival in Romania, namely Neo-Protestant groups,

such as Adventists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Nazarenes, Christian Brethren and others. During her ethnographic research, Ms. Đurić-Milovanović conducted interviews, used participant observation, and analysed the public presence of Neo-Protestants and their religious activities in the Western Romanian region of Banat. She concluded that the visibility of these "new" religious groups, often perceived as "different" from traditional churches and "foreign", is having a considerable impact on inter-group relationships in local communities. Their religious practices are closer to American or European groups and the Romanian Orthodox Church tends to label them as sects.

With ANASTASIA V. MITROFANOVA (Russian Orthodox University, Moscow) the discussion shifted again to the Russian Orthodox Church and the patterns of Orthodox piety promoted by the "new parishioners", who started attending religious service in the 1990s. In particular, the Professor from Moscow scrutinized the ways in which women collectively invent, test, and evaluate their clothing, trying to reconcile the demands of their religious creed with life in contemporary society. While previous parish subculture was transmitted directly, today it is mainly based on extra-liturgical Web-discussions and various forums. Believers seem to regret the inexistence of a living Orthodox tradition in Russia and the impossibility of identifying a living "model" Orthodox woman. Notwithstanding these difficulties, orthodox fashion is failing mainly because it lacks authenticity and functionality.

RASA PRANSKEVIČIŪTĖ (Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Kaunas) closed the last panel with a presentation on environmental communalism and nature-based spirituality in the post-Soviet region, including a special focus on Anastasians in Lithuania. During her fieldwork in Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic countries, Pranskevičiūtė investigated the processes of criticism of contemporary civilization, sacralization of nature and utopian visions of Heaven on Earth, which are the basis for the formation of alternative religious identities and societies. In fact, the Anastasians are just an example of a New Age environmental movement developed in Russia in 1997 as a reaction to an imperfect society or "system".



Each presentation was followed by a lively and intriguing debate, which continued during the concluding session and saw the active participation of those present.