

# RITUAL DIMENSIONS OF CIVIL RELIGION

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**Abstract:** The main goal of our paper is to elaborate an adequate framework of interpretation for the public events in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. In order to achieve this aim, first we will present some typical public events in our region – focusing on Hungary. Afterwards, we offer some possible interpretations, which may supply us with important insights concerning the role of public events in contemporary societies.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** civil religion, Central Europe, ritual, democracy

## Ritualization of Public Life

Rituals and public life always existed in a very strong interrelation in CEE during the communist era. The communist party used mass demonstrations to assert its power. All central official holidays were celebrated with marches accompanied with flags, demagogic slogans, proletarian hymns – and not least with humility towards the party leaders standing on huge grandstands. This kind of mass demonstration has been used by all totalitarian regimes to demonstrate their hegemonic power and to include big masses of the population into a unified social class. We can easily recall images from the Nazi regime, or from the era of Stalin, Mao and Franco. In all societies of CEE, mass demonstrations were organized by the leadership of the communist party. Older people have very vivid memories of these mass demonstrations and may ask themselves whether there are differences between demonstrations during the former regimes and those of our times.

## Religion as Public Event

Observers of the contemporary religious scene underline the importance of public religious events, which seem to be not that different from profane mass demonstrations. It is enough to think of the big mass events of Međugore, Lourdes, Częstochowa or Guadalupe; and also the regular masses on Saint Peter's square in Rome; or the youth camps organized by the community of Taizé or by the Vatican. On the surface, mass demonstrations of political life and of religious life – or to put it in a very simplistic way – profane and sacral mass rites are very similar; they are composed of the same elements. Big masses of people march

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<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by the TÁMOP-4.2.4.A/2-11/1-2012-0001 National Excellence Program.

together, similar use is made of symbols and gestures, speeches are made and emphasis is placed on the representatives of the – profane or sacral – power and authority. But there is not only external resemblance in the characteristics of this kind of public events. Perhaps participants have similar feelings and impressions of unity, being together, having faith in the same truth, pursuing the same target and being guided by a trusted power.

Religion indisputably has the dimension of masses and of mass events, but the analyses and interpretations of religious phenomena have been interested in the religious truth, persons, historical facts and its other factual dimensions. In the last two or three decades increasing scientific interest in the performative character of religion and religiousness has been shown in cultural anthropology and religious studies. In order to have an appropriate interpretation of mass demonstrations, it is useful to have a thorough look at some theories which approach religion primarily not as an ideology, a personal world view or a sacral institution.

## Homeless Democracy

We try to come up with a plausible thesis and offer it for further discussion. The thesis is based on the idea of ‘homeless mind’ coined by Berger and Kellner,<sup>2</sup> and states: mass demonstrations in CEE have as their primary function the protection of home for homeless democracies.

To understand our thesis we summarize the original notion of ‘homeless mind’ and as a second step we allegorize and apply it to young democracies in CEE. ‘Homeless mind’ is a metaphor for the basic situation of modern thinking, characterized by the loss of a solid point of reference, a settled homogeneous and religious universe. People used to orient themselves with the help of symbols and – until the modern age – with one unbroken universe in mind. In the past the main overarching symbol system was religious, supplying a symbolic world and affecting consciousness; however the overarching symbolic world has been replaced by the plurality of meanings. The determining plurality in the late modern era broke up the former localities and relativizes the tradition-filled places of individuals. Modern plurality disrupted the stable link between the mind and local symbolic order. The mind becomes homeless in the dislocated market place of numerous different symbols. In the old world of overarching meaning, identity was given and taken for granted, but in the modern world it has to be designed by everybody. So it is extensive and free, but rootless and anomic. The mind migrates openly through different social worlds.

Applying this homelessness metaphor to the population of new democracies in CEE, we can in a parallel way trace how in the former time of centrally guided society with a clear and homogeneous world view people had a well-ordered

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2 BERGER and KELLNER 1974.

cosmos at their disposal. Independently from the quality and content of this symbolic order, they were in a way saved by it and enjoyed the 'sacred canopy' as a home for their mind. With the fall of the wall, suddenly this stable symbolic order also fell, and people of the new democracies became homeless. The pluralistic market of symbols has not yet become capable of promoting the feeling of home for people. In public mass events people can subconsciously experience this feeling for a short time.

## **Civil religion – The Case of CEE**

After the regime change in CEE, sociologists observed the re-emergence of several symbols in the societies under transformation. We argue that this phenomenon can be analyzed within the theoretical framework of 'civil religion'.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of 'civil religion' – coined by Robert N. Bellah<sup>4</sup> more than 45 years ago – was first described as an American phenomenon (referring to a general national faith of Americans, which has no direct connection with one specific religious tradition), however this clearly does not preclude the possibility of its presence in countries other than the US. In a particular pilot research project, we supposed the existence of a social desire for symbolic entities which would be able to establish new societal cohesion in a time of deep change. In general, scholars of this cultural and political region argue mostly for fundamental diversity and tensions, but we will focus on the other side of the coin, on cohesion according to the Durkheimian paradigm.

## **Civil Religion in CEE – a Working Definition**

The basic idea of the civil religion thesis is that in advanced industrial societies, which are increasingly secular in terms of institutional religions, civil religion now serves the same functions as institutional religions once did in prescribing the overall values of society, providing social cohesion, and facilitating emotional expression. In other words, civil religion offers a "functional equivalent" or "functional alternative" to institutional religions, since they meet the same needs within the social system.

Our working definition is the following: civil religion is the cultural pattern that enhances social cohesion, provided that a significant proportion of the society accepts (or even identifies with) its theorems and its symbols, and has a strong, but not absolute affection towards it. Civil religion – in radical contrast to

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3 MÁTÉ-TÓTH and FELEKY 2009.

4 BELLAH 1967.

religious traditions – is not dogmatic and universal, but is the contextually peculiar summary of certain characteristics of a given society.

## **Religious Symbols on Banknotes – a Proof of Civil Religion?**

In order to prove our theses – inspired by the work of Tim Unwin and Virginia Hewitt<sup>5</sup> – we analyzed pictures and symbols on the banknotes issued in CEE. Our results show that numerous (about 50) banknotes issued in CEE in the 1990s had images or motifs related to religion. This means an average of around 3, but the distribution is far from being even. While the number is as high as 10 in Croatia, in some countries (even in Poland) no banknotes were issued with these characteristics.

## **Civil Religion in Szeged**

In order to find a more conclusive evidence, a survey was carried out. The sample used (more than 2600 persons were interviewed) can be considered representative for the population of the city of Szeged. As a result of the research, it was proved that even in an urban setting our concept was applicable. However it also became evident that American and Hungarian civil religiosity have distinctive features.

On the average, 85% of the population approved civil religious statements focusing on the nation – for example, 89% stated that the flag of Hungary is sacred for them, while 77% agreed that ‘Nation is the most important community’ and 76% said that ‘Hungary has always been a Christian country’.

On the level of the relationship between religion and the state or the government (e.g. considering whether defending the religious traditions of the country is a duty of the government), this rate dropped significantly (to 65%).

And only about 23% connected Christianity and morality to politics: only one fifth (20%) of the population agreed that ‘If politicians don’t believe in God, they can’t be of good moral character’. On the other hand, in a broader context, moral character and religion are in interplay: 81% agreed that ‘The world would be better if everyone kept the Commandments’.

These results clearly illustrate that civil religion and traditional religion are not of the same kind. They also show a specific character of the Hungarian civil religion: a strong belief in the nation itself, but without belief in the political leaders, or the necessity of them being religious.

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5 UNWIN and HEWITT 2004.

## **God in the Texts of Inauguration Rites**

This does not mean that political leaders in CEE refrain from using the power of civil religion. While Bellah in the US discovered how frequently the name of God is used in political speeches, we can do the same in post-communist CEE. In several European countries, the form of oaths finished with the closing form: So help me God. This closing form is usually used by politicians without reference to personal religiosity or belonging to one particular religious tradition. The closing form: 'So help me God' can be seen as a ceremonial act to highlight the seriousness of the oath. It must be noted that according to the original Christian interpretation, only God grants the success of human plans. So help me God can also be interpreted as the speaker remembering the cultural heritage influenced by Christianity.

In CEE, inauguration ceremonies also show some civil religious elements. In Ukraine, the President-elect is sworn inside the Ukrainian parliament in Kyiv. He stands at the front of the chamber and reads the oath of office while placing his hand on both the constitution and the Bible.

In Hungary, the Prime Minister is sworn in in the upper chamber of the Hungarian Parliament. He stands at the front of the chamber and takes his oath with one hand over his heart and the other holding a small corner of the Hungarian flag, a symbol of the nation.

## **Religious Symbols on Flags and Coats of Arms**

The flag is an important element of all political rites or ceremonies, since it is highly visible, or even plays a role during official ceremonies. In the case of Slovakia, both the coat of arms and the flag of the Slovak Republic include a double cross. However, as it was seen in the Hungarian example, even a flag without religious symbols can evoke deep emotions and the feeling of community. As it was revealed as a result of the aforementioned survey, 97% of the population agreed that 'national symbols should be respected'.

## **Theoretical Approaches**

As it was previously shown, the concept of civil religion can be fruitfully applied to the societies in our region, and the idea of understanding a particular dimension of societal transition in CEE as being 'civil religious' turned out to be an appropriate explanation. But for deeper understanding and interpretation of the inherent dynamics of the societies after the fall of the wall we need other approaches

and other theoretical frameworks. The main question to be formulated concerns the kind of societal actions that will help to rebuild societies in post-communist CEE. Or in other words, how we should understand the main characteristics of the societies in CEE, in the function of renewing the societies after the change of regime. While working on civil religion we were still confronted with the ritual or performative dimensions of these particular societies. Therefore, we turned our attention to public ritual events and to scholarly interpretation of public rituals. We will show very briefly four important approaches: Durkheim, Turner, Bell and Schechner.

### **Durkheim – Collective Effervescence**

For Durkheim in his famous classical work, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,<sup>6</sup> the central answer to the question of how society is built up is through collective effervescence. Durkheim explains that in case of bigger consistency of people, from a mere crowd they become a society. Durkheim called the experience of intensive being together as collective effervescence, which bears the idea of society.

Mass demonstrations in the region can be interpreted as a laboratory for experience about emerging society. After isolation and after total control over the full population, in the period of newly found freedom people are to experience the new kind or the new type of society.

### **Turner – Communitas**

Victor Turner<sup>7</sup> in his work on societal drama elaborated a particular type of societal transition that he called *communitas*. In the transition, both smaller and bigger societies undergo a special period characterized by normlessness and lawlessness. During this very intensive period the renewed community is created, already with solved conflicts and with new and stable inner structure. Turner reckoned that this special type of community – that he called *communitas* – is the nodal point of transition from the ancient regime to the new one.

Mass demonstrations in CEE can be interpreted as events like Turner's *communitas* in which people witness oneness and capacity, trust and hope for solving all problems. They become sure that the former regime is over and a new one is coming.

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6 DURKHEIM 1915.

7 TURNER 1969.

## Bell – Ritual Power

Catherine Bell in her works on rituals<sup>8</sup> – particularly in her book *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice* – elaborated in a well-grounded and very informative way the interrelation of ritual and power. She distinguishes between personal intentions – that is, being part of a public mass ritual – and the power used by the organizers of the event. She offered among others four questions or a fourfold perspective to analyze mass rites:

- How ritualization empowers those who more or less control the rite;
- How their power is also limited and constrained;
- How ritualization dominates those involved as participants; and
- How this domination involves a negotiated participation and resistance that also empowers them.

Using her questions, it seems to be possible to understand mass demonstrations as elements of power and empowering. Mass demonstrations are appropriate tools for the unstable hegemonies of new democracies to become more stable, but – in the already democratic structure – it is not possible to achieve everything by involving the people. Participants of mass demonstrations are involved and reinforced in loyalty to the hegemony, but only regarding the general aims of the new regime it is possible to bring together big circles of people. Mass demonstrations cannot compensate for detailed negotiations in the style of democracy.

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<sup>8</sup> BELL 1992.