

INTERPRETATIONS OF RELIGION

Four models for Central and Eastern

Europe's contemporary processes

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“There are no facts, only interpretations” – repeatedly state Nietzsche in his 1880's notebooks¹ and many others after him, that were thinking by the hermeneutical turn in the 20th century. Hermeneutics took over metaphysics, and while in previous centuries, founding, expressing and protecting truth meant the excitement of thinking, today, the biggest challenge is puzzling oneself out from the diversity of conceptions. This paradigmatic turn does not only apply to philosophical fields, but to social sciences also. But before we turn our backs to the dynamics of interpretations, alluding the cliché „everything is a matter of view”, trusting the confidence of facts, we should dive further and deeper in hermeneutical thinking, and its liberating impact for community. The truths of given societies are in fact, the waves of constantly redefined explanations in social discourses. Neither facts, nor interpretations are permanent. The only permanent factor is the interpreting community. Thus hermeneutical culture does not give freedom to despotism, but exposes the diversity of possible explanations, and the explanatory quality of all-time society.

Four possible interpretations of religion

It is important to anticipate these thoughts, because changes in religions are often discussed, and severely disputed at the level of so-called facts, while interpretations are not reflected, even less the communities, and communal interests, who are referring to facts in their interpretations about the subject. Thereinafter, I will demonstrate four possible conceptions of religious changes. I choose models which the contemporary Central and Eastern European religious courses are successfully analyzed with, often or just by way of experiment. From the four theories, the first one seems to be the most notorious, even if man can find major misconceptions about it: the *secularization* theory. The second is the *social drama* and the *theory of liminality* of the English anthropologist Victor Turner, that is most capable of analyzing social turns. The third one, that can show the area's religious and political processes together by the past twenty years, is the *civil religion* theory of the American Robert Bellah. Finally, the fourth theory, which arose in the context of critical discourse-analysis and exercised in religious dimensions just recently. These are all theories of social sciences, although religious changes do not only occur in fields of society, but also in the inner world of the individual, or creation of arts.

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

Secularization

These need further theoretical models – like religious psychological – which we cannot discuss right now. But it cannot be overemphasized, that the examination of the diverse phenomenon of religions can never be fully assured. Forming a balanced and detailed supposition requires multiple approaches, and to integrate various scientific and theoretical considerations.

Religion scientific attention dealt profoundly of explaining the observation, that there are a descending number of religious followers in European countries since the 60s. In this time, the attention could only reach Western-European countries, because the data gathering, using professional sociological methods could only be done since the 70s related to the topic, in which Miklós Tomka undeniably had credit in Hungary first, then in numerous countries of the region. The ideas of Bryan Wilson and Peter L. Berger² led to the composition of the original secularization thesis. Accordingly, secularization is a natural attendant of the process of modernity, in which the world's traditional religious legitimacy loses its plausibility for the modern man. This thesis had speeded in unbelievable speed in sociology, and triggered arguments active even today, Thomas Luckmann downright called it “modern myth”.

The argument of the thesis turned towards institutional religions in the 90s, studying the changes of Christian churches. Especially American researchers drew attention to the fact, that unlike in Europe, the religion institutionalizes in America, and following them, other European researchers noticed the institutionalization of different religious activities outside America. This interest had still remained beyond christian lines, so we have to account this frame further on.

We definitely have to consider three layers, aspects of the process called secularization. Profane grounds move and emancipate from religious institutions and norms; religious beliefs and behaviors lose their significance; religion falls back to the private life. In European countries, these aspects come along, but their nature of presence make very different impressions. The emancipation of worldly fields of society does not necessarily provoke the retreat of religious attitude, furthermore, religion, as a social subsystem – especially it's not traditionally Christian, but syncretistic-esoteric-pluralist form – could strengthen, moreover, conventional Christian religious teachings and views could become local and global social factors not to be ignored.

Dobbelaere³ stresses to distinguish three dimensions discussing secularization: macro, meso and micro. Macro is the overall societal level, meso stands for societal subsystems, and micro is for the individual. At macro level, which we can call societal level, secularization is not the reason behind the birth of modern society and its characteristics, but the consequence of

2 Cf. Peter L. Berger: *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. *Ethnicity and Public Policy Center*; W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Washington, D. C. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999.

3 Cf. Karel Dobbelaere: *Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization*. *Sociology of Religion*, 1999, 60:229–247.

functional differentiations of societal subsystems. Actually it just points out the same for the religious dimension, that for it states about other subsystems becoming and became autonomous. Secularization thesis thus explains nothing more of society than segmentation, so much so that Dobbelaere conformingly quotes Wilson, who thinks religion simply started to function as a societal subsystem. Religious authority got serious loss by the operating logic of functional subsystems: economy, education, morality barely or does not care about the religious authoritarian component, but it works by its own rationality.

Plural religious supply in meso-level has made a sort of religious market, which in biddings of religious communities competes for souls of people, occasionally by making deals of proselytism. New religious communes can be listed to the religious market's offer dimension, which are considered to be the counterweight of both religious revival and secularization by many authors, but the change of social position of religion, which Dobbelaere named the middleware manifestation of secularization, are partly portrayed by these communities.

Micro-, or personal secularization can be apprehended statistically by individualization, bricolage religiosity, ignorance for churches and by members of churches. These members are in relation to their community as a matter of choice, which defines their activity and goals among them, and at the same time, allows them to switch between different religious communities. Personal needs come in priority, and their accomplishment became the benchmark of the opinion about the church. Accordingly, in answer to the utilitarian claims of members, the church, and generally speaking, the religious communities called upon for service strategies. These changes cannot be simply charged for secularization, as they are a part of a broader social process and alteration of values, which have other decisive elements, like the individualization of choice, losing of traditions, increase of mobility and opportunist individualism. The increasing caliber of rational choice manifests in the changes of attitude towards religious dogmas, many international studies of the past 30 years confirm, that faith in the so-called conventional Christian dogmas is decreasing, while other tradition-founded dogmas are becoming elemental parts of religious doctrine for Europeans, so to say – especially belief in reincarnation. Remarkably potent and seemingly persistent arguments of faith characterize modern societies, for example the debate about abortion and euthanasia, which have high social relevance in relation of certain beliefs.

It's important to underline, that raising the secularization theory in the '60s was induced by the experience, that in modern societies, lesser and lesser people seek the religious supply, and the religious institution's impact on society's life is weakened, but at the same time, the theory is neither criticizing religion, nor does it forecast the decline of it. Far more universally, it applies to the context that a rational functionalization happens in modern society, which effects religion too. Illustrating with an example, the theory can not just explain, why the people visiting churches for religious reasons show a descending tendency, but also why the population defining themselves as

religious in some way are equal, and compared to the previous decade, more young graduates state, that they believe in God.

The phrase “secular society” became common, which suggests, that compared to an older era, today we meet less or weaker religiosity or religious influence at various areas of society. Antagonistic progresses, for example the constant growth of so-called desire for spirituality, the crescendo of the impact that religious dimension weights on politics, and the increase of esoteric and neopagan religious offer are mentioned as desecularization. Secularizational process and secularizational theory are however not to be confused. The first indicates a certain direction, and the second reveals and explains reasons and correlations.

It is apparent by secularization theory, that in our homeland – like in most of the post-socialist countries – the religious change did not happen simultaneously or even parallel in the past decades. Based on Miklós Tomka’s and Paul M. Zulehner’s data (primarily we are talking about the two surveys of Aufbruch – 1998 and 2008), we can say about the area’s countries, that in most of them, the relation between church and state have blissfully settled, although here and there serious or seemingly serious conflicts emerge. Religious setout flourishes at meso-level in all countries, and various – specifically or not specifically speaking of the personal motivations of members – religious establishments fit organically in the rebuilding civil society, or even can be found in the frontline. In the field of personal religiosity, outbursts after the ‘90s political turn are no longer can be seen in most of the countries, and the past 10 years of studies show, that there has been no significant changes in either the way of decline or rise for religiosity.

These facts appear in the domain of secularization theory, but anyone aware of the area’s turbulent political and cultural state of the society are entitled to say, that these intense changes cannot be defined with these information, or more specifically, alluding to these information, we need a viewpoint, that expressly focuses on these radical changes. This is guaranteed by the theory of social drama and liminal phase, tied to the anthropologist Victor Turner’s name.

Social drama

Victor Turner⁴, cultural anthropologist observed at the African Ndembu tribe, that they treat their conflicts emerging for various reasons in a peculiar way, which supported his theory, became known as “social drama”. This theory defined four phrases in the process of conflict, then in the sweeping changes of smaller and greater communities, later on in a wider sense:

1. determinate groups break up with the general, and the previous society’s norms;
2. deepening and expansion of the conflict, spawned by the break;
3. onset of arranging and problem solving mechanisms, managed by the group leaders;

4 Cf. Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Trans. István Orosz.) Osiris, Budapest, 2002.

4. reintegration of the deranged social group, or acceptance of the irreparable break, or splitting

From these phases of ritual course, Turner particularly concentrated on the middle two, the liminal state, where the previous status is invalid, and the following one is not yet clear. He labeled this middle period liminal phase. When later his attention turned on examining complex societies, he began to talk about liminoid phenomena instead of liminals. Beyond formal grounds of rites, the idea is the pattern of the basic structures of complex societies. The structures, which are characterized by liminality he calls anti-structures. Based on the liminality conception, he stated that society is capable of development. He perceived society as dialectic forces of structures and anti-cultures, which manifest in liminality and *communitas*.

Rites of passages follow or produce the transition between one state to another. Turner named the state-less state in between liminality, threshold-state, where the most typical feature is deficiency – although Turner did not use this term in the description. “Liminal entities are neither here, nor there” – he describes this paradox situation. People inside it are structurally invisible, neither living, nor dead, but both living and dead. Individuals and groups can also be in this paradox situation, either of them can be characterized by the nudity of neophytes, who could be called abominations, because they are alien in every aspect for both the previous and next states. Their behavior is passive, and recipient for purifying and transforming punishments. Between subjects dwelling in this nowhere-state, intense comradeship and egalitarianism arise, social-hierarchical differences vanish, the participants homogenize.

Turner contrasts the community formed in liminality with the organized, legal, politically and economically structured societies, where more and less, up and down has a meaning. In this phase on the contrary, the most relevant feature is the lack of law and sacrament. We are talking about barely structured *communitas*. The *communitas*-model however has more to do with religion, sanctity and holiness, but not with sanctity in a sense of social status of the religion, but with the stateless sacred position in the transitional position. Passing through this sacred threshold however can lead to higher social-religious status.

Turner discerns three types of *communitas*: existential\spontaneous, normative and ideological. Characteristics of existential *communitas* are complete spontaneity and directness, which truly spares any kind of structure. These acts soon melted, “decayed” into the environment’s structure, whichever age of history they were born. In normative *communitas*, the existential *communitas* structuralizes, and forms into a social system, and the ideological one outlines the utopia of a social system, leaning on spontaneous experiences based on the formless, direct relations of existential *communitas*. All of the recited types of *communitas* are temporary, and the structure is inevitable after all.

III. Civil religion

Aside from his explorations made in the ndembu society, Turner mentions the example of grey friars, which were a *communitas*, then becoming Franciscan Order, a community with regulation and structure, furthermore the '60s hippy movement, or the bengaline sahayija movement. Reading his works, we cannot really be wrong to suggest, that he adapted his social drama theory to the Middle-Eastern-European revolution.⁵

In Hungary, institutions gained open roads, so did religious communities, furthermore publicity become free. Aside from the political and economical life, an incomprehensible fizzle has began in religious fields too, whose motives are not just the colorful vortex of fantasies and interests, but decade long oppositions too, which history did not allow to digest. Trianon, Horthy-age, communist takeover, 1956, regime change – traumas, that need to be clarified, but not by the side of formal data, but by their meaning, significance, and their occupied status in the shrine of social memory. For Christianity, this fizzle is perceptible in the argument in line with parochial agents.

The system of relations, evolving after the social turn passing off quickly 20 years ago (but in some sense not yet settled) challenged authorities, politicians, scientists, intellectuals and the media to find out, what will be the symbolic cohesion, that will keep the society together. Not in the form of uniformity, as dictatorships tried to forge it with more or less, thankfully less success. In a sense of social sciences, the unity of society only means a functional operability – in Hungary though, the issue is rightfully raised, that this basic thing is among the great and hardly accessible goals. This is a form of unity though, where the members and institutions of society agree upon at least the importance of essential values and objectives, even if there are ongoing arguments about them in the plurality of views and interests. Nevertheless, without any sort of unity in basic human and social questions, the chaotic and unwieldy situation remained, that the above quoted Miklós Tomka (applying Durkheim's theory) rightly called "anomy", the lack of orientational norms.

Representation of these basic norms is traditionally the duty of religion and churches. In Europe, primarily Christianity and the Christian Church guaranteed the metaphysical points of reference behind human control, and ensured for many centuries, that the socialization goes under these norms in society, mainly under educational organizations. A lot of people believe today, that in modern societies, in the age of irreligiousness and religious pluralism – especially in the eastern-middle-European region - , the fortification of national identity would cure this anomic situation. Whatever the religion cannot do anymore due to secularization, national thought could be capable of it. After the regime change, the motivation to revitalize national pride broke open intensely in these societies, and serious forces can be mobilized with national rhetoric all over Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, etc. – especially in the

⁵ See also Catherine M. Bell: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1992.

countries with orthodox majorities in the Balkan and Eastern-Europe. National ideology has its own symbolic, rites, heroes, sacred texts – which religion researchers consider as religious, and discerning, but definitely not opposing them from conventional religions, they call it a sort of meta-religion, “civil religion”.

Civil religion in Robert Bellah’s⁶ conception (which rather relies on Durkheim, Parsons than Rousseau) is a symbolic referential system converging society, that has the following elements. The first one is the generic faith in a - not exactly definable – God, what slightly suggests the protestant *fides fiducialis*, a belief, what’s main point is – contrary to the intellectual acceptance of beliefs – the feel of general confidence in a deity. Another essential part of civil religion is the extensive symbolic system, what makes connection with society possible. With Bellah’s words: the institutionalized compilation of sacred beliefs related to the American Nation. These national sanctities include the parallels between the national history and the history of biblical Israel, the partially divine source of the American President’s power, the absolute validity of the Ten Commandments, and finally, the universal mission of American people, spreading and protecting freedom up to the “last boundaries of Earth”.

The theory of civil religion is not only valid in America, but in describing the changes of any other countries too, by the means of raising the national idea above concrete society, or to be exact, forming a meta-idea, a religious idea in a figurative sense. Everywhere, where the actual authority tries to maintain social cohesion and integrity through an idea, and where these ideas are mentioned regularly in the general social dialogue, the theory of civil religion is an acceptable frame for portraying the phenomenon. Since the “dogmatism” of civil religion is in a very low level, it is (probably) suitable for it, that the smaller and bigger religions in the specified society do not see competitors in each other, but the symbolic system of their more or less alleged values and common ambitions. For the same reason, non-believing members and organizations of society will not feel that a certain religion or religious community devours them, because the “nation-religion” is civilian.

In Hungary and other Eastern-Middle-European countries in the last two decades, the politics’ activity towards civil religion escalated, and then subsided in different waves. “Sanctities”, which were capable to express and defend the nation’s integrity in 1990, soon became the tools of conflict, and lost this ability. The phrase of nation itself was a common holiness for different circles and prophets of the second publicity after the ‘70s, but after the regime change, it soon became the token of dividedness. Like the Catholicism in Poland or Slovakia, laicity in France filled an integrative role for civil religion, and in many countries in our cultural region, including ours, all these symbols and expressions of this kind had desacralized in a sense of civil religion. Finding and exploiting the elements of “civil religion”, capable of creating an essential social compromise is a great task, and the time and extent of the results are yet unpredictable. The logic of civil society warns us,

6 Cf. Robert N. Bellah: Civil Religion in America. Daedalus, 1967, 96:1-21.; Robert N. Bellah: The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial. Seabury Press, New York, 1975.

that we must think about it along functionality, and keep the plane of indispensably crucial substantial material low.⁷

IV. Empty signifier

Integration of society and the maintenance of its cohesion happen in incredibly complex procedures. The last 20 years imposed the job for the countries of the district to tackle with the boom of publicity among many other vital innovations. After the gradual vanish of censorship, one of the biggest challenges is the presence and supreme influence of global media. Undertaking responsibility and practicing authority in the widest sense in a matter of fact is nothing but a very manifold communicational practice, which the communication science calls discourse. Among others, the establishers of the classical social discourse theory are Habermas and Luhmann. In addition, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe belong to the most significant authors of critical discourse theory, which specifically deals with relationship between concepts and hegemony.⁸ The central piece of their theory is the “empty signifier”, which deserves a more detailed analysis.

The expression originates from semiotics. Whilst Saussure, the early Wittgenstein and the authors following them presumed the unbreakable link between the **signifier** (significant) and the **sign** (significatum), postmodern linguistics in particular saw the necessity of a loose connection, or no connection of all, because a lot of content could go with the same expression. So the emphasis falls on the signifier. “Empty” or “floating” signifiers can be described as significatums without content, or a not yet existing significatum with a very doubtful content – symbolically speaking: circle without a center.

In discourse theory, the social field is open all the time according to its own nature, and political ambitions are tending to fill this potential space. We cannot find finished, closed social dimensions within any of the existing societies, but also a desire for sealing and completion is constantly noticeable, and assuring images of this completion are the elemental components of political discourse. This is the process, where empty signifiers are playing a role. Political discourse merely differentiates by these empty signifiers, as junctions, otherwise would not even be possible. Emptiness is the essential property, feature of quality of these junctions, axes, focal points, because otherwise they could not fill their function to mark and signify which, in a matter of fact, makes creating hegemony possible.

For an ideology and political view to become hegemony, it is necessary to generate a mutual political identity between the social actors with different character value system. The hegemonic ideology nonetheless can draw different social actors in a common relation in a way that it draws a borderline, through it simplifies plurality to dichotomy. This borderline can be drawn by empty signifiers. The actors do not care about the borderline

7 Grace Davie: *Global Civil Religion: A European Perspective*. *Sociology of Religion*, 2001, 62:455–473.

8 Cf. Ernesto Laclau – Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemonie und radikale Demokratie zur Dekonstruktion des Marxismus*. Passagen Verlag, Wien, 1991.; Ernesto Laclau: *Emanzipation und Differenz*. Turia + Kant, Wien, 2007.

though, but rather the opposing contents among the divided political field. So the empty signifier is a tool of discourse, which through temporary hegemonies can be born, and actors of the political field can define themselves around a new discourse.

The term “empty signifier” by Laclau and Mouffe can be adapted to social discourse about religion. If religion plays the role of empty signifier, the expression must be empty, undefined, fluid and general. Thus it cannot be any specific religious tradition in this discursive status, or an exact type of religion. Religion with unspecified content can only be an empty signifier, if members and groups of society articulate their self definitions in a way that they define their own conception of religion, and their attitude towards it. Whenever there is a moment or time, when heterogenic actors of society articulate their identity by referring to religion in the course of societal process, religion plays the role of empty signifier in the discourse.

This idea of discourse-theory gives us a good chance to examine the social arguments about religion. In our area, frequency of public speech about religion usually increases in the time before parliamentary elections, then turns down after **local elections**. The level of general knowledge about religion is really low, and at the same time, religion is an adequate tool for the different cultures, individuals and political forces to express themselves through occupying a stance about them. Events of discourse like this can be observed since the beginning of the '90s, like the reputed initiation of “compulsory bible class”, or the arguments about Dabas-Sári school. Religion, and various institutions and educational components of religions often do not operate in conformity with their own contents in social arguments, but as instruments for political devaluation. Dialogue about religion is often a tool of political enforcement of interests.

None of the four featured theories contain a concrete message, which we can build a secure bastion relying on, against other premises and conceptions. It is not worth and rewarding to get acquainted with these and other things, because the colorful social reality, and the included dimension of religion offers an opportunity for a wide variety of readings, and all of them show something from the area's cultural and political territory, which every local and perhaps non-local is able to comprehend and operate. Flashing the above mentioned theories does not give enough material of knowledge for the practice. It is maybe enough however to demonstrate for the enquires of contemporary religious courses, what kind of information is required to think about, or if it is their duty, speak about them in high standard and with valid responsibility.

I started the social cyclorama above by referring to hermeneutics, so let there be a thought deriving from this inspiration as a final keystone: “It is becoming clear in reasoning after contemporary metaphysics that the truth of some statements does not depend on the fact, does it match the subject or not. And when we talk about adequacy, we lean on statements, which gain

meaning in discourses defined by certain paradigms, and its truth mostly depends on groups that consider them as true.”⁹

⁹ Richard Rorty – Gianni Vattimo: Die Zukunft der Religion. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, 62.