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An Introduction to Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe

There are certain periods and certain places when the study of religion is particularly exciting. One such time and place is Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Having undergone several generations of the oppressions of state-imposed secularism under the atheistic regimes of Marxist socialism, the area became, almost overnight it seemed, open to all kinds freedoms and, in particular, religious freedom. The expansion of religious activity of all times was arguably without precedent in the world's history. But the traditional religions had few resources (either material or human) with which to meet the new challenges that faced them. Property had been confiscated; the clergy were inexperienced in theological, pastoral, educational and other skills. Their erstwhile flock were untutored in religious knowledge, concepts and ritual—most were too concerned with coping with economic and social problems that faced them; furthermore those who were eager to find a spiritual home were frequently suspicious of the role that the traditional churches had played during the years of socialism and so they turned elsewhere, sometimes to indigenous new religions, but, more frequently to one or other of the foreign religions (mainly from the West) that had seized the opportunity of proselytising to those who had, it was believed, been brought up in a spiritual vacuum.

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It was not long before the enthusiasms greeting the new religious freedom turned into a war of competing faiths. Soon the media, legislatures and law enforcement agencies and other sections of society were drawn into the battles – sometimes these were literal wars, as in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, but more frequently more subtle means were invoked, with governments finding themselves under pressure to compensate for past abuses—and to regulate, in some places to outlaw, minority religions.

The situation has been exacerbated through an abundance of both ignorance and misinformation. Only a few scholars of religion existed during the Soviet period, and although some of these produced remarkable work, there were enormous gaps in our knowledge. Initially it was difficult to get a good training in the study of religion, let alone to publish in scholarly journals, but as the 1990s progressed, an increasing number of young scholars showed an interest in studying the rapidly changing religious scene. The founding of ISORECEA provided a forum whereby a network of young and older scholars could come together and exchange information and theories about the changes that were taking place. Comparisons over time and between countries were undertaken; the beliefs, practices, organisation and fortunes of traditional and new religions were explored in depth.

The arrival on the scene of an on-line academic journal, *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, can only enhance the work of ISORECEA and make the work that is being carried out in this exciting field more widely known, not only in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but throughout

the whole world. The phenomena that will be described, discussed and debated in this journal are of crucial importance for our understanding of the functioning and processes of religion and, indeed, society in general. This is a venture to be welcomed with open arms by all serious scholars of religion everywhere.

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 [Contents](#) | [Main Page](#) 