

András Máté-Tóth

Freiheit und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa

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Reviewed by Karl Gabriel, Institute of Christian Social Sciences/Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, University of Münster

It could be argued that András Máté-Tóth’s book *Freiheit und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa* was published at the right moment in time. For Germany and other European countries, current cultural and political trends in their Eastern neighbour states are cause for increasing concern and unease. Seeing their recently achieved autonomy and sovereignty threatened mainly by the European Union, nationalist and populist movements are gaining support and spreading anti-European sentiment with some success. How is this possible 30 years after overcoming communism and the partition of Europe, and what are the reasons for this unexpected turn of events? Hungarian theologian and sociologist of religion András Máté-Tóth attempts to answer these and other questions in his recent book. In the first part, he describes East Central Europe as a distinct region and social space (pp. 1–70). Regional specificities shared among the transitional societies located between Russia and West Germany allow Máté-Tóth to speak of the region as a distinct cultural space. In the second part, he develops a distinct cultural theory about East Central Europe, with the concept of *verwundung* (injury) as the guiding idea (pp. 71–159). In the third part, he deals with the consequences of his approach to explaining the current state of religion, the church and theology in the region (pp. 161–297).

Máté-Tóth identifies three main characteristics of East Central Europe based on its history and culture. First, he characterizes the region as being in a state of transition. Historically, he refers to the region being located between East and West, between the Western and Eastern traditions of Christianity and between different dominant political powers. For 30 years now, the region has been dealing with the transition between two opposing political and economic systems. Second, he characterizes the region in terms of its struggle for state sovereignty that has been ongoing since the emergence of the modern nation state in the 18th and 19th centuries. Claims for sovereignty by the states in this area are often not fulfilled. Third, he characterizes the region as having a collective fixation on its emerging identity. Máté-Tóth calls this *identismus* (identicism; p. 20), which he claims spread after a period of euphoria following the end of the Communist era. The region thusly characterized, he wishes to understand and interpret based on independent sources. Máté-Tóth himself states this is the main purpose of his study. To that end, he relies on approaches from postcolonial theory and works critical of modernity. He presents the positions of Dipresh Chakrabarty, Talal Asad and Achille Mbembe. He mainly focuses on the struggle to find categories of interpretation that are independent from

the presumptions of theories of secularity and modernity. Máté-Tóth considers Eisenstadt's idea of multiple modernities an appropriate framework for understanding the region. He emphasizes that religion plays a role in the public debate on a collective identity and therefore has a political function. In further interpreting the role of religion in East Central Europe, Máté-Tóth draws on the theory of 'empty signifiers' (p. 53) by Ernesto Laclau and declares religion in the region one of them. Only through discursive processes and conflicts around hegemony is the empty signifier of religion given substance. He therefore claims that it is necessary to take part in the public discourses about religion, particularly for the churches of East Central Europe. Máté-Tóth claims that the eruption of public discourse in the region's societies after the end of the Communist era intensified the situation.

In the second part of the study, Máté-Tóth develops a distinct theoretical framework for the interpretation of the social and cultural realities in East Central Europe. He bases this on the thesis that East Central Europe could accurately be considered a wounded region. For this, he draws on Judith Butler's philosophy of the body in which she points out the fundamental vulnerability of the human body. For the transmission of Butler's perspective on institutions and collectives, he conflates her philosophy with the theory of institutions by Brian S. Turner. According to Turner, not only the human body is vulnerable but so are institutions. The existence of human rights he justifies with the shared human experience of vulnerability and the consequent necessity for protective institutions. Máté-Tóth makes the following points in support of viewing East Central Europe as a wounded region. Collective historic memory in East Central Europe has been shaped by experiences of injustice and injury. The national demarcations drawn after the two World Wars have widely been perceived as unjust and were often accompanied by expulsion and resettlement. As an extreme and symptomatic example of the region's experience of injury, Máté-Tóth points to its history of local genocides, which leads him to refer to the present time as a 'post-genocide era' (p. 125). He argues that in Western countries, the rise of the idea of human rights after World War II contributed to a cultural recommencement. In East Central Europe, the end of the Communist era left the region culturally and religiously deflated, but instead of the idea of human rights filling the void nationalist thought took over. Máté-Tóth diagnoses the region with a lasting sensitivity to various collective injuries and the suffering they caused and perceives a collective post-genocidal need for healing. At this point, Máté-Tóth introduces a distinct collective theory of Christianity as a reconciliatory and liberating force. For practices like blood revenge, observable in Albania for example, a culture of considering other people's suffering would have to be in place. Here, Máté-Tóth draws on the new political theology of Johann-Baptist Metz and approaches related to it. The political theology for East Central Europe favoured by Máté-Tóth would mainly focus on propositions of meaning in order to permanently heal the injuries the region has endured.

The third part of the study titled *Religion – Kirche – Theologie* (religion – church – theology), begins with a chapter on populism in politics and religion. After presenting different approaches to populism, Máté-Tóth proceeds with an analytical definition of the term that tries to avoid judgement. For him, populism is as much a part of politics as it is of religion. His operational definition of populism is a specific way of motivating and mobilizing the people, characterized by simplification, emotionalism and critique of the elites and references 'common sense'. He distinguishes religious populism from populist religion and religiousness. Religious populism uses religious means in politics, while populist religion and religiousness respond to the religious needs of the population. Máté-Tóth sees religious populism featured in many religious movements. This allows him to characterize the most diverse religious movements and institutions as populist, from Pentecostalism to the spirituality of Father Anselm Grün to the far-right Polish radio station Radio Maryja. He also ascribes populist traits to the First Vatican Council, which was elitist in nature, and the Second Vatican Council, with its metaphor of 'god's people'. With questions and assignments used in surveys, Máté-Tóth approaches

populist religiousness in East Central Europe in empirical terms. Where the level of approval for religion-related items is higher than two thirds, he suspects populist religiousity. Máté-Tóth ascribes the strength of both religious populism and populist religiousness in East Central Europe to the dominant imprint of injury in the region.

In the chapter *Transformation des Christlichen* (Transformation of Christianity; pp. 193–239), Máté-Tóth describes a break in the role of Christianity in East Central Europe between two waves of transformation. During the first wave, after the end of the communist era, he claims Christianity adopted the role of a civil religion as defined by Robert Bellah. During the second wave, beginning in the mid-1990s, two different branches of Christianity starts to take shape. As Máté-Tóth shows with the example of Poland, in the first branch a politicized form of Christianity addresses the want for order, morality and loyalty within society and forms close links with national–religious agendas. In the second branch, Christianity is the guiding concept of observant Christians and church institutions. The more Christianity - according to Máté-Tóth - is churched, the greater the distance to a nationalist political *Kulturchristentum* (cultural Christianity; p. 209). Using the three themes of *Leutekirche* (everyday church), *Volkskirche* (church of the people) and *Öffentliche Theologie* (public theology), Máté-Tóth discusses the consequences of his view of the state of church and theology in East Central Europe.

András Máté-Tóth is one of the most acknowledged experts in recent religious and cultural trends in the transformational countries of East Central Europe. His book is the result of ongoing theoretical and empirical research about religious trends in the region. In collaboration with the recently deceased Miklós Tomka, he has built a bridge between religious research in Eastern Europe and religious research in Western Europe. The core of his book—the theory of injury—deserves great respect. Using comprehensive arguments, he manages to define a specific region and elaborate its distinct cultural and religious features. With an ambitious theoretical framework, he makes a plausible argument for why East Central Europe can be considered an injured region. Observant readers will improve their understanding of current political and cultural processes in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and other countries in the area. The author achieves his goal in finding a distinct framework of interpretation for the cultural and religious trends in the region that is also independent from categories of traditional Western research. This remains true, even if Máté-Tóth from time to time stretches his arguments and employs some exaggeration. His characterization of the time period as a *post-genozid ära* (post-genocide era; p.125), for example, is not obligatory in making his argument convincing. More problematic is his colourful definition of populism. He sees populism less as a threat to democracy and more as one of its constituting elements. To get to this conclusion, he follows a definition of democracy that completely lacks normative arguments, while also blurring the lines between the terms *populism* and *folkloric* and *popular*. This is true for the political populism drawing on religious means as well as populist religion and religiousness. The risks in misjudging the role of populism in politics and religion are evident. However, this hardly impairs the overall quality of the work. From a theological point of view, it should also be mentioned that Máté-Tóth submits the groundwork for a public theology of East Central Europe. His work stands alongside various approaches from all parts of the world that have in common the goal of achieving a distinct public (liberation) theology. With this, the book is a document of Eastern European theology that has caught up with its Western European counterpart.

(Translated from German by Katharina Wegmann)