

Miklós Tomka

Expanding Religion. Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe

Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011. 258 pages. ISBN: 978-3-11-022815-1. 69.95 € (hard-cover)

REVIEWED BY **Gert Pickel, University of Leipzig, Germany**

Until his unexpected death in 2010, which is a grievous loss for our scientific community, Miklós Tomka was one of the most influential authors and experts in the sociology of religion of Central and Eastern Europe. It is a challenge to review his recently published book without being deeply emotionally affected. However, since Miklós Tomka himself would have asked for a neutral, scientific and objective review, in the following, I will not refrain from criticism but will rather weigh the pros and cons of his book. This is by no means intended to belittle the appreciation of his superb works.

In his book “Expanding Religion”, published in 2011, Tomka once again discusses the question which occupied him for decades: “Does Religion in Central and Eastern Europe matter, especially under the circumstances of political change?” (p. 1). Combining theoretical thoughts and empirical analyses, he tries to answer this question as comprehensive as possible. Tomka refers both to his previously published empirical research results as well as to systematic analyses of more recent data. His analyses focus on Paul Zulehner’s and Miklós Tomka’s *Aufbruch/New Departures* studies (1998, 2008). In the present book, he mainly uses the survey wave conducted in 2008. These results are complemented by results from different international comparative surveys (EVS, WVS, ISSP, RAMP; 24-25). The presentation of such a great range of survey data by itself makes the book a worthwhile reading. In addition, Tomka takes into account a number of theoretical and practical explanatory models with regard to the observable state and development of religion. He refers to the secularization theory as well as to the individualization thesis and the market model of religiosity. Consequently, the book not only presents a wide variety of quantitative empirical data, which can be rarely found, but also a great range of inspiring interpretations of the religious situation in Central and Eastern Europe.

The study mainly focuses on a comparative interpretation of the state and development of religion in Central and Eastern Europe. The public opinion on religious institutions and their use in providing answers to practical questions of life (p. 51) are presented alongside the people’s views on the development of religion over the past decades (p. 65). Tomka’s fields of interest are religious beliefs (pp. 83-104) as well as religious worship (pp. 105-129), the role of religion in the organization of life (pp. 130-189) and assortments of religion (pp. 190-227). These thematic blocs are complemented by four case studies about Latvia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. One additional subchapter deals with the spatial structure and the geographical distribution of religiosity (pp. 228-237). Here Tomka detects two models of the organization of religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe: “In Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania and Serbia religiosity was clearly dominated by official church religion”, whereas the other countries are characterized by a more heterodox religious landscape (p. 233). All of the empirical analyses reflect the author’s interest in gaining an in-depth understanding of the different development trajectories of religion in many of the Central and Eastern European states since 1989.

Again and again, the data highlight these differences in development. “The colorful plurality with respect to religious beliefs” (p. 104) results from varying initial situations and develop-

ments across countries in terms of the religious, as for example in Eastern Germany (on-going erosion of the religious at an already low level), in Poland (decrease in religiosity from a high level), or in Russia (revitalization of religion). However, not all of the explanations concerning the observed discrepancies are compelling. Tomka frequently uses arguments derived from the individual level and country-specific explanations but does not always relate them to the overall explanatory models described in the book (like the secularization thesis, privatization thesis or the market model; see for example pp. 124-125). This partly affects the readability of the book and undermines the coherence between the empirical results and the conclusions derived from it. In this context, the use of some indicators is also debatable, e.g. when he takes the proportions of those respondents who perceive (or even expect) an increase or decrease of religious people as a proof for religious revitalization (pp. 67-69). For this indicator, Tomka's own doubts should have been considered: "Public opinion is not a neutral mirror of reality" (p. 69).

In general, throughout the book, Tomka assesses the future prospects of the trajectories of religion in this region rather optimistic (p. 239). According to him, there is a high demand for religion in most Eastern European states which results from the diminishing ideological consequences of socialism and the end of the abolition of political repressions of religion and the churches. But even if this assumption was right, Tomka's prognosis concerning the future development – a "further growth rather than decline" (p. 239) – seems worthy of discussion (apart from the fact that Tomka argues here in a way that was criticized by himself with regard to secularization theorists). Indications for a "new religious departure" are seen particularly among younger age cohorts (p. 203); at the same time, he points out that modernization and socialization (indicators usually used as causes of secularization) play a major role in determining the development of the religious landscape (pp. 122, 201, 238). In some parts of the book it seems, as if Tomka's focus on the return of religion in Central and Eastern Europe would obstruct his attention for counteracting processes; e.g., the Czech Republic and Eastern Germany are treated as exceptional cases, although he does not provide particularly sound reasons for their "special" status.

However, it has to be acknowledged that Tomka also takes the possibility of alternative scenarios into account. According to him, the current return of religion could indeed be a temporary process which depends on the changes in the social environment. Is it possible, once religion has regained the ground lost in the course of socialist repressions, the Eastern European countries will follow the Western European trajectories? Tomka prefers another direction of the future development but also bears such possibilities in mind.

Despite the criticism, I would like to strongly recommend the book to readers seeking to get a broad overview of the development trajectories of religion in Central and Eastern Europe. It relates many astute ideas to a profound wealth of empirical data. Many questions Tomka discusses highlight new aspects which differ from the common standard survey questions and thus permit a new perspective on the religious situation in the region. In general, Tomka's work underlines the need for larger, coherent studies following a broader perspective in this area. This is worth mentioning since there is a current trend away from larger, comparative studies towards studies dealing with "smaller", particular problems. Swimming against the stream, "Expanding Religion" clearly stands as a prime example for an attempt to address and to answer the "big questions" of our discipline.