

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: Unchurched Religion in Central and Eastern Europe**

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*Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the sociology of religion has focused on whether there was a revitalisation of religion or continuing secularisation in Central and Eastern Europe after four decades of anti-clerical and anti-religious repression under Communist rule (Tomka 1995; Greeley 2004; Pollack 2006; Müller 2009). Far fewer studies have addressed other aspects of the sociology of religion, in particular, the significance of religious individualisation (Borowik and Babinski 1997). The implicit assumption of most studies has been that if a religious revival was to occur it would take place within a traditional religious framework and within an established church.*

*Narrowing the focus of research to the question of secularisation vs. revitalisation risks overlooking other trends within the religious arena in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, the discussion on religious individualisation has centred on Western Europe and North America (Luckmann 1967; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Knoblauch 2003). It is clear that the specific social and cultural heritage of Eastern Europe must influence religious individualisation there (Tomka 2006). A number of important questions have not yet been addressed. For instance, an obvious question would be whether the holistic beliefs that exist in Western Europe (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Houtman and Mascini 2002) have also emerged in the Eastern part of the continent.*

*The three contributions to this special issue each address a specific aspect of the religious field and thus help widen the perspective on unchurched religion in Central and Eastern Europe.*

*The first contribution, “Outside Conventional Forms: Religion and Non-Religion in Estonia”, by Atko Remmel and Marko Uibu, sheds light on the current situation in Estonia with regard to religion. The authors challenge the conventional wisdom that Estonia is one of the most secular countries in the world. The data they present confirm that conventional religion is of marginal importance to Estonians. Unconventional beliefs, inspired by New Age thinking and animism, are, however, widespread within Estonian society. This finding challenges the image of Estonia as a largely secularised society and highlights an important difference between Estonia and other highly secularised societies such as that of Eastern Germany. It underscores the fact that Estonian beliefs resemble those of a large minority of people in Western European countries who mix secular attitudes together with holistic or metaphorical beliefs.*

*The second paper, by Petra Tlcmukova, “Buddhist Memories of Normalisation in Czechoslovakia”, takes an historical look back to the time of Communist rule. The author traces how the historical memory of Communist rule was constructed within Buddhist groups. The paper gives important information about the condition of religious minorities practicing their beliefs within an unfriendly environment. It*

is interesting to note that Buddhists in Czechoslovakia not only perceive themselves as having been in opposition to the ruling system during communism, but also see themselves as being in opposition to the subsequent capitalist regime. Thus, religious practice is linked to a specific position in the political system (and not the religious arena) that is independent of the regime.

Finally, Monica Grigore's paper, "Tamara's Illness. Pilgrims, Fate, and Lived Religion in Post-Communist Romania", offers a perspective from within recent Romanian Orthodoxy. The analysis is based on the concept of lived religion (Orsi 1997; Ammerman 2010), which challenges the distinction between institutional models of religion and unconventional beliefs. In their everyday life, individuals compose beliefs and practices according to their specific disposition. The author analyses the discourse on fate in relationship with health issues, which is prevalent during Romanian pilgrimages. Despite the emphasis on the lived religion perspective, the paper also reveals the tensions that occur between institutionalised models of religion and individual practices.

Overall, the three contributions address important issues at the boundaries between institutional and unconventional forms of religion. They reveal that the question as to whether secularisation or religious revival has occurred in Central and Eastern Europe is probably not the most important issue. In addition, the papers suggest new research questions. In particular, the emergence and social significance of alternative beliefs within and beyond the established churches deserves more attention. Further country-specific (qualitative or quantitative) case studies on single Eastern European countries that draw encompassing images of the current religious fields (including religious minorities, alternative religions, and the fluid boundaries between conventional and unconventional forms of religion) would be a welcome first step towards enhancing systematic knowledge on unchurched religion in Central and Eastern Europe.

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