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Problems with the (de)privatization of religion

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1. For wide-ranging discussion of post-socialist manifestations of religion in Eastern Europe see Borowik and Babitski 1997.

2. This project was carried out in co-operation with Dr. Stanislaw Stegini of the Pohodziowo-Wuchodni Instytut Naukowy and financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (R 236071): The politics of religious identity: The Greek Catholic Church of Central Europe). For further details see Hann 1998, 2000.

3. For interviews with members of the minority see Hann and Stegini 2000.


5. See these authors' contributions in the valuable collections of Tapper 1991 and Bouddogin and Kasaba 1997.

6. See e.g. Tapper and Tapper 1987. For a somewhat different emphasis see Bellfit-Hann and Hann 2000.

Privatization is a fundamental feature of the dominant liberal model of modernity in at least two senses. First, private interest and ownership of the means of production are the dominant principles of capitalist economic organization. Second, though strong versions of secularization theory are untenable and religion does not disappear, it is largely confined to the 'private sphere'. These two dimensions of privatization are historically intertwined, as shown most famously by Max Weber (1930). More recently, privatization has figured prominently in the rhetoric of neo-liberalism in many Western countries; but denationalization programmes have not empowered individual entrepreneurs in Weber's sense. Poland's 'shock therapy' is an early and extreme example of this sort of privatization. The highly centralized redistributive states of socialist Eastern Europe have been exposed to neo-liberal ideology in the 1990s. What has this entailed for the religious dimension of the classical liberal model?

The underlying issues are by no means specific to the post-socialist countries. What is new is the application of the decentralized model of market economics to the field of religion itself. Competition on the religious marketplace is nowadays monitored by organizations such as the Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers. At present in Europe religious minorities have less formally standardized international protection than secular ethnic minorities. As an early and extreme example of this sort of privatization the neo-liberal ideology has produced practically the same results in all Western European countries. The 'revival' of 'private' as a political concept in the religious field has produced the same results as the same sort of privatization in the social field.

Constitutional religion and deprivation

What is the place of religious faith in the modern world? The question was posed and answered in characteristically abstract, theoretical terms by Ernest Gellner (1992). Gellner, the self-confessed 'enlightenment Puritan', could not endorse fundamentalist claims to possess a unique revelation. He acknowledged, however, the limitations of secular rationalism for binding human communities. His solution, drawing an analogy with constitutional monarchy, was 'constitutional religion'. Traditional institutions are preserved for their symbols and their rituals long after the cognitive foundations of society have moved elsewhere and the enthusiasm of the Puritans has been channelled into commerce. The retention of a 'lukewarm' faith offers the best chances for tolerance and freedom. Few would disagree with Gellner's claim that ambiguous consensualism of this sort will produce more attractive outcomes than its rival in the East, the 'secular counter-revelation' that took the form of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Gellner does not tell us if churches such as Roman Catholicism in Poland or Orthodoxy in Russia might now be in a position to move towards this Western model of constitutionalism. He does not theorize privatization as such. A more elaborate and empirically grounded framework has been outlined by the New York sociologist José Casanova (1994). Casanova identifies a 'deprivatization' of religion in the 1980s, when churches in various parts of the world patently could not be confined to the space assigned to them in classical secularization theories. He distinguishes between three dimensions of privatization: institutional differentiation, decline in beliefs and practices, and the confinement of religion to a private sphere. In the first of these, he finds that secularization claims are essentially correct, for developed countries do indeed demonstrate greater compartmentalization of social life; religion is progressively separated from the spheres of politics and law. In the second dimension of secularization there is great empirical diversity and Casanova notes that religious practices may remain buoyant in highly developed societies such as the USA. In the third dimension he finds the claims of secularization theorists not borne out, since religions are everywhere influencing public affairs in the contemporary world. On the whole Casanova well describes the religious inroads that are being made in the West, and defends the values of the community as a whole, and indeed ultimate human values, in a world dominated by individualism and market capitalism.

The preconditions for this endorsement of religion, rather unusual for a New School sociologist, is that the churches must give up the monolithic, 'hierocratic' aspirations of the past. Instead, they must embrace pluralism and
democracy and become actors in civil society. Civil society is understood here as part of a public sphere, as a space between persons and families on the one hand and the state on the other. In line with a tradition that he traces from Hegel and Tocqueville down to Jürgen Habermas and Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, Casanova distinguishes civil society from political society. Ultimately, he holds out the possibility that public religions active in the ‘undifferentiated public sphere of civil society’ can ‘save modernity from itself’. Religions can compensate for the alienating forces of post-enlightenment societies, based on brittle rationalism. In order to do so (and here lies a possible divergence from Gellner’s constitutionalism), it is imperative that they distance themselves from ethnic or national collectivities, which can have no place in civil society. For example, the Polish church cannot sustain the claim it has made since the nineteenth century to speak for the entire Polish nation.

Civil society is the crucial concept that enables Casanova to transcend a simple public-private dichotomy, since religious activity in civil society provides a continuous conduit between the private individual conscience and the public affairs of the community. In effect, civil society is a deus ex machina for transgressing the categorical boundaries of liberal modernity.

Casanova supplements these theoretical ideas with suggestive case studies sketched primarily in historical and macrosociological terms. What can the anthropologist contribute?

I see three possibilities. First, we can correct a strong Western bias, acknowledged by Casanova himself, and apply his notions and typologies to a wider range of societies. Second, we can use ethnographic methods to shed more intensive light on phenomena that Casanova paints only with the broad brush. We can explore local understandings of the various dimensions of secularization, e.g. by observing whether or not the public-private dichotomy has local resonance. Third, I suggest that anthropological studies may point to a critique of Casanova, whose view of public religions as capable of transcending the fragmentation of neo-liberal capitalism leans heavily on a reading of certain trends that climaxed in the 1980s. He himself concedes that the ‘hour of civil society’, when authoritarian regimes democratize, may prove to be ephemeral. But what happens next? Presumably privatization, the third dimension of secularization, will resume its course. The alternative would be the permanent institutionalization of civil society, but what would this look like? Casanova comes close to saying that it would have to be current American practice and to recommending this model, which is essentially the market model of the religious human rights watchers. This brings us back to our starting dilemma, for if the ground rules of civil society must offer the same protection to all churches, not just those with traditional influence, what happens when a dominant church is suddenly challenged by aggressive competitors? The theoretical issue of whether a commitment to civil society requires a commitment to the market model and religious humanism.

Poland

From the perspective of the dominant liberal model the socialist states were an anomaly. The means of production were socialized and there was no religious market. Yet these states largely respected the principle of separate spheres. Despite strong pressures favouring ‘militant atheism’, only Albania actually tried to abolish religion (not entirely without success). Elsewhere the secularization theories developed for capitalist industrial societies offer at least some purchase. In East Germany, for example, the number of practising Christians declined very sharply. However in other cases, notably Poland, religious practice held up better and the influence of the
A crucifix hangs in the Polish parliamentary chambers (left) and in many public buildings, as here above the national eagle emblem in the Town Hall of Tarnów (right).

dominant church in the life of the nation did not weaken at all. It is hardly appropriate to speak of deprivation in this case, for this hegemonic church was never private to begin with. Together with the Solidarity movement, it was a vital vehicle for political opposition. It was itself an expression of ‘civil society’ and it provided an umbrella under which many secular groups could take shelter. Religion was much too important politically to be left in the private sphere.

What happens to such a church in post-socialist conditions? Contemporary Poland has 14 churches which enjoy special status as ‘historic churches’, as distinct from hundreds of other religious communities that are officially recognized. Of course the Roman Catholic Church continues to outstrip all the others. In the post-socialist years it has demonstrated its political power, notably by intervening to influence abortion policy. Its privileged relationship to the state, tacitly recognized under socialism, has been embodied since 1998 in a Concordat between Warsaw and the Vatican. The Roman Catholic Church enjoys privileged access to the media, of which the strident populist nationalism of the station known as Radio Maryja is the most intolerant example. A crucifix adorns the parliamentary debating chamber.

Yet, just as the Polish economy suffered when privatization was introduced in the early 1990s, so the dominant church has had to undergo ‘religious shock therapy’. Not only have its social and political messages been regularly rejected (as when voters re-elected the atheist and ex-communist Aleksander Kwaśniewski to the presidency in October 2000) but it has had to accept that all kinds of new religious groups have a right to organize and to recruit followers. New sects and cults are perceived as a dangerous threat and an influential bishop has written a comprehensive account in which he distinguishes ‘pseudo-religious movements’, such as New Age groups and the Christian Science Association, from ‘destructive sects’, such as Scientology and Satanism. The bishop, apparently unsure how to distinguish religious bodies from other organizations of civil society, concludes his survey with a motley list including Freethinkers, Atheists, Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs and the YMCA.

Somewhat different issues arise within the group of 14 ‘historic churches’. When a country with a dominant religion has politically sensitive relations with a neighbouring country in which other traditions dominate, then religion can be a powerful force of political mobilization and those on the wrong side of the border are likely to find themselves vulnerable. The main goal of my recent research project in Przemyśl, near the Ukrainian border, has been to understand the conditions of the city’s Ukrainian minority, which numbers no more than 2000 of a total population approaching 70,000. This minority is also mostly Catholic but it follows the Byzantine or Greek rite, not the Latin rite that dominates among ethnic Poles. In the early twentieth century Przemyśl was the chief Habsburg military outpost of central Galicia. It was genuinely multicultural, with approximately equal numbers of Roman Catholic Poles, Greek Catholic Ukrainians and Jews. The two Christian congregations participated in each other’s public rituals, notably Epiphany celebrations on 19th January in the case of the Greek Catholics and Corpus Christi Day for the Roman Catholics. The Germans destroyed the Jewish community in its entirety and the Polish authorities expelled most surviving Ukrainians in 1947. Gradually, however, the softening of communist power allowed Ukrainian deportees to return. After 1956 Przemyśl had both a Club for secular cultural activities, and a Greek Catholic parish that operated under the auspices of the Roman Catholics in the so-called Garrison church. In short, limited consolidation of a minority community was tolerated by the communist state, but it was obliged to maintain a very low profile in the public sphere. The Greek Catholics were unable to reclaim the many buildings confiscated from them in the 1940s.

The situation was transformed in 1989-90 following the Pope’s appointment of a new Greek Catholic bishop, who promptly applied for restitution of their former cathedral, in Roman Catholic hands since 1946. Pope John Paul II himself indicated his approval for this property transfer in advance of his visit to the city in 1991. However, Polish nationalist activists insisted that they were the rightful owners of this building, which had been originally constructed for Roman Catholic use before being transferred to the Greek rite by the Habsburgs. For these activists, the Greek Catholics were simply the religious wing of Ukrainian nationalism, which it was the patriotic duty of all Poles to resist. With the support of some Roman Catholic clergy, they waged aggressive and ultimately successful campaigns of direct action to protect Polish cultural property. Controversy then focused on the cathedral’s central tower and dome, a nineteenth century feature of the skyline of Przemyśl: after the building was appropriated and transferred to the dominant Roman Catholic church in 1946, in the 1990s nationalist Poles resisted its restitution to the Greek Catholics. In 1996-7 they secured the replacement of its cupola with a new spire intended to emphasize the Western character of their city.
addition which was perceived by the Polish activists as an ‘Eastern’ intrusion on their skyline. Contrary to the instructions of conservation authorities and ministerial officials in Warsaw, the offending features were demolished in 1996 and replaced by a slender spire allegedly in keeping with the building’s Western essence. These were years of considerable tension in Przemysł. When the Warsaw authorities arranged to hold a Ukrainian cultural festival in the city, local extremists obstructed events and carried out arson attacks against the Ukrainian Club. From the point of view of the minority, post-socialist freedoms brought them nothing but trouble. Exploiting the freedoms of the new civil society, extreme nationalist groupings were able to dominate the public sphere, even though they had no significant electoral base. The state in Warsaw was unable to prevent highly uncivil outcomes.

The Greek Catholics have been left with no choice but to make do with the church still popularly known as the Garrison church. The military allusion is apt background for today’s embattled minority. The drawing of a sharp border and consolidation of national religious cultures in a region that was formerly a fuzzy borderland between eastern and western Slavs has contributed here to a long-term decline in civility. Roman Catholicism has remained prominent in the post-socialist public sphere, but not in the positive way sketched by José Casanova. The dominant church was no longer a means to express popular discontent with socialist powerholders but an instrument in the aggressive assertion of national identity.

Przemysł is a border city and, although the literature on ethnicity has long shown that research at the boundary can reveal more general truths, the details of this case study are exceptional. It is important to stress that not all Roman Catholics in Przemysł were embroiled in anti-pluralist tendencies against fellow Catholics of another rite. Some clergy have dared to criticize nationalists and engaged in ecumenical causes, such as the restoration of Jewish cemeteries. The dominant church may come under more pressure to curb its monopolistic aspirations when Poland joins the European Union. For the time being, however, no far-reaching privatization of religion seems in prospect. The very existence of the Concordat, the crucifix in parliament, and the broadcasting privileges, are all inconsistent with the criteria of religious humanism.

Turkey
Let me turn to Turkey for a comparative case which is neither Christian nor post-socialist. At the end of the First World War, when Poland reappeared on the map and the Roman Catholic Church resumed what it considered to be its rightful place in the life of the Polish nation, the Ottoman Empire finally disintegrated, to be followed shortly afterwards by the Istanbul Caliphate. One of the basic principles of the new republic established in Ankara by Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, was the privatization of religion. In 1937 he adapted the model of French laïcité to convey his vision of the republican state. Henceforth, though the overwhelming majority of the population was Muslim, laïklık was a guiding principle and religion was to play no role in public affairs. Echoing not only enlightenment secularists but also influential strands in modern Christian theology, Kemalist ideologists were even more adamant than Marxist-Leninists that this separation was an essential condition of modernity; privatization was supposed to create the opportunity for genuinely

A statue of Kemal Atatürk, the soldier who founded the republic of Turkey in 1923, occupies the central symbolic space not only in the major cities but in every small town, as here in Pazar on the east Black Sea coast (left). Usually, however, an imposing mosque is close at hand, as in nearby Rize (right).
religious values to play an enhanced role in social morality.

Formally and legally this separation has remained a cardinal principle of Turkish politics and society to the present day, but a great deal has changed since the revolution of the 1920s. The softening that began soon after Atatürk’s death in 1938 allowed political party competition. Politicians explicitly sympathetic to Islam were soon elected to high office and the müezzin was once again allowed to perform the call to prayer in Arabic. Despite upsets and even executions, it later became possible to establish parties explicitly committed to Islamic policies. Such parties have performed well at the polls and the military intervention of 1980 initiated a further surge of religious deprivatization in the form of ‘re-Islamization’. In the general election of 1995 the religious party topped the list and went on to form a coalition government; this proved to be short-lived but, although this party was dissolved at the insistence of the military in 1998, a new religious party was quickly established in its place.

Leaving the intricacies of electoral competition aside, how are we to understand the deeper social consequences of the changing position of religion in Turkish society? One view, associated particularly with the distinguished Ottomanist historian Serif Mardin, but also found in the work of the American anthropologist Michael Meeker, is that the Kemalist revolutionaries were cultural vandals, Jacobins who, through their attacks on Islam, struck devastating blows to the micro ‘life-world’, the constitution of the person and popular intersubjectivity. According to this view, the renewed strength of Islam, including sects or mystical orders, is best understood as a response to aggressive secularization. The struggle to maintain and develop the faith is about spiritual meanings, but it is also about personal and social identities in times of rapid social change. The modernizing state could not, despite the construction of a cult around Atatürk himself and the strong emphasis on nationalist ideology, establish a secular religion capable of rivalling the traditional religion in meeting these needs. In this respect Kemalism has been no more successful than Marxism-Leninism or the original campaigners for secular religion in revolutionary France.

Many Turks describe their society in terms of a polarization of religious and secular world-views. Those with strong religious commitments often argue that the Kemalists do not practise what they preach, since Islam in
A village ceremony in which secular officials from the county capital present certificates to those who have successfully completed a sewing course organized by the state’s Adult Education Directorate. Some conservative men are opposed to these courses but among rural women they are very popular.

 Atatürk abolished the Istanbul-based caliphate and founded a new modernist capital in the small town of Ankara in the Anatolian interior. Three generations later its population has swollen to over three million, the religious party provides the mayor, and the new Kocatepe mosque is as grand in scale as the classical mosques of the old imperial capital. (As represented in the brochure Ankara Kocatepe Camii: 1967-87 by Hamdi Mert).

Turkey, unlike Western churches, is subject to heavy political and bureaucratic controls at every level. On the other side, those more sympathetic to Kemalism allege that the power of the clergy has seriously undermined the principles of secular education, and they call for more restrictions on religious practice in public places. Contrary to the polarization thesis, however, some anthropological observers emphasize not so much deadly rivalry but accommodation between the forces of religion and of the state. As in other European countries, observing and measuring secularization is far from straightforward. The proportion of committed atheists is probably smaller in Turkey than in Poland, and the number of highly committed activists perhaps greater. In between, for the great majority religion is one major element in their profile of identities, but it varies situationally and temporally. For example, some residents of the east Black Sea coastal districts became more assertive of their faith when they were exposed to an influx of trader-tourists from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The religious party took the lead in organising protests over the failure of the secular authorities to control prostitution, previously unknown in this region. Gradually, however, things returned to normal. The year and the life-cycle are primarily punctuated by Islamic rituals and there are occasional conflicts, e.g. concerning the wearing of the headscarf in public places, but the principle of laiklik is overwhelmingly accepted (Beller-Hann and Hann 2000).

In what sense is it possible to speak of civil society in this case? If one follows Western definitions which privilege the individual subject and secular associations then, outside a few large cities, civil society in Turkey is weakly developed. If on the other hand one adopts a broader definition in terms of social activities autonomous of the power of the state, then civil society has shown astonishing vitality all over the country in recent decades. Its most dynamic units are the associations (dernekler) and foundations (vakiflar) linked to Islamic schools and mosques which, according to their critics, often camouflage fundamentalist brotherhoods (tarikatlars). Funding is
often provided by those who have benefited conspicuously from recent economic privatization.

As in the Polish case, the hegemonic traditional religion is unlikely to embrace ecumenism and to welcome competition. The Turkish secular authorities have respected the status of minority communities of Orthodox Christians and Jews in Istanbul even since the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). These communities have, however, often complained of state interference in matters which they see as falling within their own jurisdiction. The authorities have been consistently harsh in hindering the activities of foreign missionary organizations. In this respect the religious marketplace is effectively closed down, though this will presumably have to change when Turkey becomes a member of the European Union. In the meantime it is not only non-Islamic minorities who may feel vulnerable. The position of Alevi Muslims might be considered analogous to that of non-Roman Catholic Christians in the Polish case, except that the Alevis are estimated to constitute as much as 20% of Turkey’s total population. It seems that many of them, like the much smaller numbers of principled atheists, are concerned at the recent depiaritization tendencies of the Sunni mainstream and would like to reverse them.

Civil society and civil religion

In my introduction to the volume of papers that I co-edited with Elizabeth Dunn, following our workshop on civil society at the Oslo meeting of EASA in 1994, I argued in favour of shifting the discussion to more general explorations of civility, tolerance, trust and democracy (Hann 1996). I was and remain sceptical about the imposition of a specific, allegedly universalist model based on Western individualism, market ideology and formal organizations, especially the fashionable promotion of non-governmental organizations. Today I would argue even more strongly that the naive pursuit of civil society by international agencies, of the sort which counts up the number of non-governmental, voluntary organizations and treats this figure as a measure of the democratic health and integrative capacity of a population, can be positively harmful for civility and the common good. The field of religion is important terrain for testing this suggestion. Just as NGOs are increasingly recognized as sources of state-like power (but usually even less accountable), so new religions are everywhere mobilizing material resources to convey their spiritual messages and challenge old monopolies of faith. In this context it is instructive to link the notion of civil society to civil religion\', a term deriving from Rousseau which was given fresh currency when applied in the 1960s to the United States by Robert Bellah (1970). Bellah argued that American political society had, from its inception in the age of Rousseau, a public religious dimension which drew heavily on the dominant Christian tradition, but was distinct from all church religions and fully compatible with the freedoms these enjoyed in the private sphere. It was a special kind of transcendent, rooted in American history but with universal aspirations, not mere societal self-worship but the elevation of the nation’s destiny to a higher ethical plane. It is still easy to find illustrations of Bellah’s argument in presidential election campaigns, but the discussion he generated soon fizzled out and in recent years, greatly influenced by the collapse of communist systems in Eastern Europe, the term civil society has been more prominent in our journals.

How can these terms be fitted together and how can anthropologists contribute to the more general social science debates? We are unlikely to come up with blueprints or standard solutions. Even if France and Germany could agree on what exactly constitutes a cult or sect that is unacceptable to their civil societies, it is by no means obvious that this definition could be transferred to Poland and Turkey. Yet some criteria are obviously needed. Even the religious human rights watchers acknowledge that forms of Satanism which lead directly to ritual murder, as happened in a well documented case in Poland quite recently, are unacceptable. They tend, however, to defend the claims of Scientology, even though the Roman Catholic Church in Poland lumps this group together with Satanism.

Ethnographic work is likely to make most anthropologists sceptical of neat dichotomies such as religious versus secular, and public versus private. They will emphasize instead the blurring through, the local syntheses that people achieve in everyday life. For example, it has been well documented that many Polish communists continued to attend church services when it was safe for them to do so, just as many loyal Kemalists in Turkey continue to observe the Ramadan fast.

There may, however, be occasions when anthropologists have to acknowledge clashes, dichotomies and polarization. They may sometimes feel the need to take a stand themselves, and make it clear in their work if they consider that a traditional religion is infringing norms of tolerance and respect for other religious communities. For example, in certain popular religious media in both Poland and Turkey one sometimes comes across forms of anti-Semitism that most scholars would consider distasteful. Anthropologists are likely to object to such representations and to plead instead for civil society as the basis for a tolerant, liberal, pluralist community. In this they may share common ground with neo-liberal enthusiasts of globalization.

However, as Gellner pointed out, secular rational principles are never sufficient. It is clear that both world civil society and world civil religion are still a long way off. In the meantime many things are bound to remain muddily, as they certainly are in the cases I have discussed above. Sunni Islam in Turkey has often been a vehicle for local empowerment, rather than a negative reaction to modernity. It is even more clear that Roman Catholicism has been a powerful emancipatory force in Poland. At the same time, both of these public religions remain marked by exclusionary tendencies that are incompatible with ideals of religious tolerance and the equality of citizens in this domain.

I suggest tentatively that in such cases it will usually be preferable to help the dominant religion to contribute to the formation of a civil religion, rather than give unconditional support to religious human rightsism and the currently fashionable model of civil society. The dilemma may not exist in the United States, where the civil religion of the world’s dominant capitalist economy remains, despite occasional strains, compatible with the world’s most open religious market. José Casanova generalizes from this model to argue that all churches must compete on a level playing field as ‘denominations’. Yet he conceives that traditional churches lacking a strong salvational doctrine are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage when facing more aggressive Protestant and sectarian rivals. Is it inconsistent to suggest that hegemonic churches deserve a measure of protection against foreign competition from such sources, whilst simultaneously exhorting them to respect the rights of minorities according to the modern standards of civil society? This ambiguous prescription for civil and constitutional religion is the ‘viable compromise’ recommended by Gellner. It is justified if it leads to more civil outcomes than the adoption of the supermarket model favoured by the lawyers, which allows any group to propagate its message to the limit of its financial abilities.