Thy Will Be Done?
Religious Nationalism and Its Effects in East Central Europe

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Levels of both religiosity and of religious influence on public policy vary enormously across the countries of post-communist East Central Europe. This variation poses a challenge to existing explanations, which have focused on religious competition and alliances with political parties to explain religious participation and policy influence, respectively. The legacy of religious nationalism instead helps to explain both the vibrancy of religious participation and the influence of churches on democratic public policy. This variation also calls for greater scrutiny of “historical legacies”: while some patterns are durable and reach back centuries, others are recent innovations.

Keywords: religion; nationalism; historical legacies; coalitions

Religious loyalties and church policy influence in East Central Europe vary enormously—and these differences are persistent, surviving regime transformations. The patterns of popular religiosity and policy influence challenge existing theories that rely on religious competition and partisan alliances. They also call for an examination of the joint effects of pre-communist and communist legacies; specifically, religious nationalism. Contemporary church influence on democratic politics in East Central Europe has its roots in the careful construction of national myths and the concessions made by autocratic regimes. And here, we need to be very careful about identifying relevant historical legacies: many durable and powerful “historical” patterns (such as the identification of national groups with religious loyalties) are relatively recent inventions.

Below, I first examine the variation in both religiosity and in religious nationalism. I then show how this variation is rooted in pre-communist historical legacies (and myths), and their reification by both church and state in the communist era. Where churches successfully fused national and religious identities, they gained a great deal of moral authority. I then briefly discuss how churches with this authority could gain access to policy making—and thus policy influence. Finally, I show how these patterns of religiosity, the fusion of national and religious identities, and religious influence on public policy defy extant theoretical expectations of powerful partisan coalitions and enervated religious monopolies.
In East Central Europe, levels of religiosity vary from country to country, religion takes on very different roles in national identities, and religion influences policy in diverse ways. First, the region contains the world’s least and most religious societies (Czech Republic and Estonia in the first category, Poland and Croatia in the other), whether measured by belief, practice, or affiliation—see Table 1 for a brief illustration. While this article focuses on Western Christianity, chiefly Roman Catholicism, there are sizeable Muslim populations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria, while the Orthodox Church is the dominant denomination in Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and Serbia. Throughout this article, however, the focus is the Roman Catholic Church: the dominant player in both the monopolies of Poland and Lithuania, and the more religiously diverse Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Second, there are important differences in the relationship between nation and religion, which spans the spectrum from fusion of national and religious identities to hostility between nation and church. These differences in “religious nationalism,”2 in turn, are summarized in Figure 1, which reports the percentage of respondents who claim that to be [national identity], one has to be [dominant religion in country.] The gamut runs from Poland to Latvia, with Hungary roughly in the middle. And here, while religious and national identities remain conceptually distinct,3 such differences are often lost in practice: for many Poles, being Catholic is an obvious and expected aspect of national identity.

Why do we see these differences in the level of religiosity and religious nationalism? They are not simply “inherited from the past.” Rather, they are the result of both pre-communist historical legacies of church–society relations (and the myths

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Profiles</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Lithuania</th>
<th>Croatia</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>European Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% believing in God</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>73 (17.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% belonging to a religious denomination</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>78 (19.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% attending services &gt; 1/ month</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Catholic</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% agreeing churches should <em>not</em> influence politics</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72 (8.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

thereof), and communist-era policies, exemplifying the kind of interactions discussed by Grigore Pop-Eleches (2015). Communist policies reified and inadvertently transmitted religious nationalism.

At one end of the spectrum, where the secular state was a historically foreign imposition of a regime on an existing nation, churches could serve as protectors of national identity against the state. They could do so through informal education, sheltering the opposition, providing physical and spiritual space for opponents to gather, and by imbuing religious symbols (such as icons and saints’ relics) with national meaning. Public religiosity became a political act, and patriotism blurred with religious loyalty. Thus, “major national communities or else national sub-communities have experienced alien and external rule, and have found their major resource and identity in an historic faith.”5 Such fusion of nation and religion took place to differing degrees: from an equation of nation and faith in Poland, Croatia, and Lithuania, to a more tenuous connection in Hungary and Slovakia.

Yet even where they have powerful consequences, these historical myths do not necessarily have deep roots in the past. Thus, Poland before World War II was a multination and multidenominational entity, and the Church often sided with the Austrian or Prussian (though not Russian) imperial administrations rather than with the populace. Catholicism was only one strand of Polish national identity, and one
that began in earnest only in the late nineteenth century. Interwar Poland saw massive anti-clericalism, and the contestation of the Pole-Catholic equation by important political forces, including the man who dominated interwar politics, Marshal Józef Piłsudski. Anticlerical parties gained in popularity as the Church began to side with successive interwar governments. Neither an elite nor a popular consensus existed about what “Pole” meant or its link to Catholicism, despite a strong National Democratic wing that equated the two.

It was the ethnic and religious homogenization of Poland, the result both of the devastation of World War II and the population transfers that followed, which made possible the fusion of national and religious identities. Postwar Poland became a uniformly Catholic nation—one where communism was seen as an alien imposition that violated tenets both of sovereignty and faith. This fusion of nation and religion became politically salient when the Church explicitly sided with the nation against the communist state in the 1970s and began to speak out more forcefully in favor of human rights. It became more identified with the “true” Polish nation as a result of both the rise of the anti-communist mobilization, and two other events: the peregrination of the icon of the Black Madonna around Poland in the 1960s and 1970s and the triumphal return of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1979. These reinforced the notion that Polish identity was inextricably linked to Catholicism. Subsequently, in the 1980s, especially after the collapse of the opposition trade union Solidarity and the military crackdown, this identification strengthened, since churches offered physical protection for individual dissidents and broader opposition activity. The church became the protective umbrella for the opposition, and attending Mass became a political act.

Both the communist party and the opposition recognized the Church’s authority and legitimating power: while Solidarity sought the church’s shelter, the communist party repeatedly entered into negotiations with the Church, easing restrictions in exchange for the Church exercising its capacity to stabilize the political situation. Critically, to facilitate such dialogue, church representatives were invited to a special Joint Episcopal and Parliamentary Commission, which acted as a forum for policy consultation and coordination, and eventually, for legislative proposals. By the late 1980s, the Church’s moral authority meant it had become the fulcrum of the political scale. Its representatives participated in the Round Table negotiations, and acted to mediate between the two sides. Its support was critical to the success of both the Round Table negotiations between Solidarity and the communist regime in 1989, and the new democracy that followed.

In many ways, Lithuania resembles Poland in its patterns of religiosity and religious nationalism. As one analyst argued, “the Catholic Church in Lithuania was vital to sustaining a sense of national identity, especially in preserving the language.” The Catholic Church under communism increasingly served as a site for nationalist mobilization, “propagating nationalism and democracy in questions of regime, and clericalism in the sphere of worldly relations.” First, it was the antithesis of Russian Orthodoxy and thus Soviet domination, and thus a focal point for nationalist
sentiment. Second, it had consistently acted to defend national and democratic (if not liberal) interests, both under the authoritarian interwar Voldemaras regime, when it became the “only organized, legal force that could oppose the actions of the government,” and subsequently under communism. This fusion of nation and religion was not seamless. Catholicism implied Polish clergy and secular rule, which sullied its role in Lithuanian national consciousness. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that tsarist anti-Polish and anti-Catholic policies led to a greater tie between Lithuanian national identity and Catholicism.

Both its own earlier persecution by the communist regime and its embrace of the 1968 law that allowed petitions to government authorities (which resulted in an avalanche of petitions on behalf of religious freedoms and human rights) lend credibility to the Church’s support of the dissident movement that culminated in Sajudis. By the 1970s, the anti-communist movement blended appeals in defense of the Church and the rights of believers with its advocacy of national rights and self-determination. Two-thirds of all protests in the 1970s were religious in nature, and a 1989 survey showed that 91 percent of Lithuanians polled believed that religion “fostered the development of national consciousness”.

Nation and religion became fused closely under communism, although the protective umbrella of the Church was much more of a physical safety net for Solidarity than for Sajudis (partly for lack of opportunity: the latter had emerged in 1988, eight years after Solidarity). By the late 1980s, “the church came out of the ordeal of almost half a century of suppression strong enough to command attention. Both Sajudis and Communist party found it advisable to vie for its support.” Accordingly, the Lithuanian Communist leadership sought with and obtained meetings with the church hierarchy in late 1987, and church representatives participated actively in the Sajudis dissident movement. Sajudis, for its part, carefully noted that the Lithuanian movement did not develop around the church, but nonetheless reserved a number of seats for the clergy at its founding meeting in October 1988. Over the decades of communist rule, then, Lithuanian Church thus became a “guardian of nation’s cultural heritage.” Yet the Lithuanian Church did not gain direct access to the communist state, stymied both by federal Soviet policies, and by the late hour at which the dissident movement arose. No institutionalized channel of influence, such as the Polish Joint Commission, was established.

Where two or more religions coexisted, fusing one nation with one denomination was necessarily more difficult. Slovaks linked the Roman Catholic Church to a defense of the nation against forced (Protestant) Magyarization under the Dual Monarchy. The brief period of Slovak sovereignty in World War II was directly associated with the Catholic Church: a Catholic clergyman, Monsignor Jozef Tiso, was the President. The nation-building aspect of the independent wartime Slovak state was paramount: “quite apart from the specific ideological content of the clerical regime, the Slovak state was a watershed in the consolidation of Slovak national self-affirmation.”
However, the Tiso government collaborated with the Nazis, and the popular 1944 Slovak National Uprising was to end that regime. As a result, the Church could not unequivocally claim the mantle of a moral representative of Slovak national interests. Further, under communism, the Slovak church did not mobilize society or served as an opposition umbrella. This was thanks partly to a more oppressive communist policy in Czechoslovakia: but such a policy was possible because the Church was not as powerful a social actor as it was in Poland or in Lithuania. While some Catholic activism began in the 1970s and public activities began in earnest in the 1980s with petitions and pilgrimages, these were never as widespread as in Poland, nor were they supported by the church authorities. In contrast to the ten million members of Solidarity, the most visible Slovak prayer meeting in March 1988 gathered around ten to fifteen thousand. The church had less moral authority than in Poland, Croatia, or Lithuania.

At the other end of the spectrum, nation and church opposed each other in the Czech Republic, a key site of conflict between a Catholic imperial and Protestant domestic national ambitions. Rather than reinforcing national aspirations in the Czech Lands, the Catholic Church actively fought them in the nineteenth century, leading Czechs to reject the Catholic Church as a collaborator in national oppression. This explicit rejection of a Catholic identity had its roots in the seventeenth-century loss of sovereignty at the Battle of White Mountain, and the subsequent imposition of a politicized Catholicism by the Habsburgs. The Catholic Church became synonymous with Austrian imperial rule and the defeat of an independent Czech national project. The communist era did little to rehabilitate the Church’s image. Churches did not participate in the 1968 Prague Spring, nor did they shelter the few dissidents. The result was that public opinion polls conducted in the 1990s show churches to be one of the least trusted and most poorly evaluated Czech institutions, ranking lower than the media, president, political parties, unions, the army, etc. This was not a communist legacy per se, but an older antagonism deepened both by low levels of religious commitment and by the Church’s seeming passivity in the communist era.

Two forces reproduced these patterns of religious nationalism over time and across regimes. The first was conflict (or lack thereof) with the secular state. Across East Central Europe, communism was seen as an alien and unwelcome imposition: but only in some countries did churches and the anti-communist opposition form an alliance. The more the communist authorities tried to repress societal protest, and the more the Church stood in defense of the opposition, the more nation and religion could fuse. Here, education and indoctrination within the family and religious community, often in the face of considerable political repression from the state, also reproduced the equation of nation with religion. Where the Catholic Church under communism came to the political (and even physical) defense of the anti-communist opposition, it sustained religious-national fusion in the communist era and beyond. Ironically, communist regimes turned to these influential churches, as in Poland and
Lithuania, to keep societal peace under late communism, relying on the very moral authority that earlier communist repression of the churches helped to create.

A second factor was religion’s unique ability to withstand secular onslaught. Religious organizations are much harder to repress than unions, newspapers, political groups, or student organizations. The clergy often have little to lose: for them, the benefits of participation are far greater than the costs of inaction, since the latter means they stand to lose their congregations. This may be why the more public the protest of local clergy under communism, the greater their authority and legitimacy. And, if the church(es) represent the nation, rather than a specific constituency, they make secular “divide and conquer” strategies even more difficult. If a domestic national movement is under church protection, eradicating such movements means crossing over into the sphere of the sacred: a move that communist leaders, whether in Poland or in Lithuania, were reluctant to make. The power of informal reproduction and religion’s resilience meant that these differences in religious nationalism would persist across regime transformation—all the more so since the forces responsible were not tied to the communist regime per se.

Continuity across Regime Types

One of the ironies of the Church’s clout is that its roots lie in supposedly very inhospitable soil: the communist period. For all the talk of enmity between “godless communism” and popular Catholicism, the Roman Catholic Church was able not only to play an important role in stabilizing communist rule and to obtain policy compromises from the communist regime but to achieve the institutional access that would make its influence in democratic politics both significant and surprisingly immune to popular disapproval. Roman Catholic clergy and institutions did suffer, especially where they were earlier already marginalized, as in the Czech Lands. But the image of lasting and heartfelt enmity between the Catholic Church and the communist regime belies frequent negotiations, compromises, and shared goals of social stability.

Both under communism and under democracy, churches could obtain policy influence by dint of their moral authority. Communist rule, after all, was hardly stable or unopposed: instead, to (highly) varying degrees, it was subject to popular contestation and protest, as it was in Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and Lithuania. Where such protest threatened to destabilize the system, churches with moral authority could step in to calm down the protest in the name of the nation. In exchange, communist governments both provided short-term policy concessions—and longer-term institutional access to churches that could ensure social peace and the stability of the communist regime. The church could not hold the communist government hostage—the balance of formal power always favored the communist regime. Nonetheless, even if the Church had no army divisions at its disposal, it could still extract
significant concessions with an unexpectedly powerful long-term impact during times of regime crises when the incumbents feared they could lose office.

The collapse of the communist regime and the emergence of democracy in 1989–1991 opened up even greater opportunities. The new democratic governments were inexperienced, unstable, and often uncertain about their ability to establish durable democratic regimes. Unlike the communist regimes, they were not ideologically hostile to the Church, nor did they have to prove their commitment to atheism and anticlericalism to a foreign sponsor. These new democratic governments sought Church support to build broad popular backing for democracy, since both analysts and policy makers feared massive social unrest due to parliamentary fractioning and conflict, painful economic reforms, and the negotiation of new international relationships. In exchange, governments could include clergy in formulating policy, give discretion in naming and vetoing secular officials, and seek out church representatives to secular institutions. Such institutional access gave the churches a direct stake in the new democratic states and rewarded them for advocating public patience. It was also largely covert: neither the Church nor the governments called attention to it, and it remained largely under the radar of the media. Churches could thus gain considerable access during times of potential instability—precisely when institutional and policy frameworks could be transformed.

As a result, church influence on public policy after the collapse of communism reflects the differences in religious nationalism inherited from the communist era. In areas as varied as education, abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland has been the most influential. After the fall of communism in 1989, it successfully and publicly lobbied for a ban on abortions and the introduction of religious education into the public school system, and continues to denounce stem cell research, same sex marriage, and no-fault divorce as immoral and unacceptable, finding considerable political purchase. Its most effective channel of influence was the communist-era Joint Commission, which the Church used to push through both restrictions on abortion and religion in schools in the early 1990s. In Lithuania, the Church was not as successful and failed to restrict abortion—without a covert channel of influence such as the Joint Commission, the Church had to rely more on partisan coalitions and popular mobilization. Among mixed Protestant-Catholic countries, the Slovak Catholic Church had made gains with religion in schools and same sex marriage, but abortion remained legal and available. These gains were not due to Church demands or mobilization, but thanks to political parties eager to score political points. The Czech Catholic church, for its part, failed to exert any influence on politics after 1989.

This variation is not attributable to religiosity or to a popular demand for church influence. The Church influenced politics in very Catholic countries such as Poland but failed to do so in similarly religious Croatia. As Table 1 shows, nowhere in the region do we see majorities approve of church influence on politics (nor do we see such demand anywhere else in the Christian world, for that matter.)
Nor do we see popular attitudes that could support the variation in religious influence on politics. For one thing, whether Catholic or not, whether religious or secularized, the countries of the region show consistently conservative attitudes in comparison to other Europeans. East Europeans, and post-communist countries more broadly,
tend to adopt far more conservative stances on many morality issues, such as abortion, divorce, or homosexuality. Figure 2 shows the relative stances on homosexuality, but the same patterns appear for abortion and divorce: views on these three issues are closely correlated.26 These differences survive even when controlling for religiosity.

Instead, religious influence on post-communist policy is traceable to the earlier fusion of nation and religion, and the moral authority it produced, making churches into arbiters of not only morality but of public ethics and national norms. The study of the region thus affords another opportunity: the study of how some phenomena persist across regime types. These patterns also allow us to confront existing theories.

**Challenging Existing Theories**

These patterns—the fusion of national and religious identities, the importance of moral authority, and church influence on policy—challenge two prominent bodies of theorizing about church and state. First, the influence of religious groups on policy is not the result of either popular demand or coalitions with political parties. Such coalitions have been posed as a powerful explanation for church influence on politics. In these accounts, churches effectively mobilize the faithful to support political parties during electoral campaigns, and in exchange, obtain desired policy concessions from the government parties they helped bring into office.27 In another version of this explanation, secular and religious actors contract over time. Where the churches protected the democratic opposition under a previous authoritarian regime, new democratic incumbents pay back “debts of gratitude” to their erstwhile religious sponsors once in power.28 Simply put, earlier alliances translate into contemporary policy influence. Where the churches were either neutral, or on the side of authoritarian governments, we would expect little church influence on politics once democratic governments are in power.29

Yet the post-communist, and specifically East European cases, show that alliances between parties and churches face three potential difficulties. First, partisan coalitions erode the churches’ moral authority—the very authority that makes them attractive to political parties in the first place. Party alliances are overt and, naturally, partisan affairs, and churches are easily accused of being more concerned with narrow political (and self) interests than with saving the souls of the nation and pursuing the public good. Second, the partisan partners for organized religions are not as obvious as one might suppose. Christian Democratic parties might seem “natural” candidates for a church alliance, but in fact these parties have had a historically uneasy relationship with churches. Voter support for Christian Democratic parties in any given country is not tied to either the policy influence of the churches or to popular religiosity.30 Christian Democratic parties succeed where there are few observant Christians, as in the Czech Republic—and fail to do so in Poland, where high levels of popular religiosity have not translated into support for either Christian
Democratic or clerical parties. Even if a church can find a political partner, that party may simply not get elected. Third, such agreements are difficult to enforce. Once churches mobilize their support on behalf of parties, there is little to keep the party from reneging; it may well decide that it can find other means of mobilizing voters in the future. Political gratitude is notoriously short-lived and fragile, and once church protection is no longer needed, there is no need to heed church preferences. In short, coalitions with political parties can clearly achieve policy concessions—but these concessions come at a high price, when they come at all. As a result, as Figure 3 shows, partisan coalitions do not seem to have a conditional impact on policy influence (nor do they have an independent one). As the figure shows, the 95% confidence interval (shown by the dotted line) always includes 0, making it unreasonable to conclude that partisan coalitions have an effect at any level of the fusion of religious and national identities.

Second, the role of national fusion helps to explain why some religious monopolies remain so lively. Such vibrance runs counter to the expectations of a set of scholarly approaches labeled the “political economy of religion” (see Clark 2010 and Gill 200032 for stimulating and concise overviews). In a quest to provide individual-level and finely grained explanations for religious behavior, scholars working in this tradition have argued that vibrant religious marketplaces are the sources of religious vigor and influence, and religious monopolies are inherently weak. They have found that where the religious market can freely offer diverse alternatives to meet the demand for diverse religious beliefs and preferences, rates of religious participation and denominational affiliation increase.33 Competition among religions leads to better meeting consumer “demand,” and subsequently to innovation and efficiency.
Religious pluralism thus breeds religious fervor. In contrast, where the state regulates religious markets (by financially or politically supporting a state religion), the levels of religious pluralism and participation decrease. Religious monopolies, such as those found in Poland, Croatia, Lithuania, Ireland, or Italy, are cast in a harsh light, as artificially propped up by states: the theory predicts that they cannot occur “naturally,” in the absence of state mandate.34

Yet as we have seen, religious monopolies can thrive—but thanks to the historical fusion of national and religious identities, rather than to the careful tending and preferential regulation of secular states. The relevant processes are historical and societal, rather than economic and legal. Moreover, Catholic monopolies have greater influence than the more competitive Protestant-Catholic markets (and in turn, there is considerable variation in influence among the Catholic churches themselves). Rather than sickly plants in need of state support, then, monopolies can be hardy perennials with deep roots in national soils.

Moreover, the political economy of religion has difficulty explaining why the absence of regulation does not result in greater observance. Low rates of religiosity in states continue with no state support for a particular religion, such as the Czech Republic or Estonia. In these free markets, we should see high rates of observance, yet religious entrepreneurs have not successfully moved in and the rates of religious observance have not gone up. If the assumption of a universal and varied need for religion is true, then “the sacred should have returned . . . where secularization had gone the furthest and the absence of religion created the greatest need. . . . Yet the public resurgence of religion took place in places such as Poland, the United States, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Iran, all places which can hardly be characterized as secularized wastelands.”35 The answer given by the political economy of religion is that historical state support for a given religion precludes current conversions to other religions.36 Yet if state-supported religions are so inefficient in satisfying consumer demand, how could they bind adherents so successfully?

We are thus left looking for an account of why some societies might be more receptive to religious mobilization or church attempts to influence politics. Here, religious nationalism, or the fusion of national and religious identity, provides one answer: it can both underpin policy influence and keep religious monopolies vibrant, as it did for decades in religious East European countries such as Poland or Lithuania.

Notes


2. Barbara Rieffer defines religious nationalism as “fusion of nationalism and religion such that they are inseparable.” Barbara-Ann Rieffer, “Religion and Nationalism,” Ethnicities 3, no. 2 (2003): 225. In this article, such fusion is a spectrum, rather than a constant: nation and religion fuse to differing degrees,
and often in distinct ways.

3. Rogers Brubaker cautions that the intertwining of religious and nationalist does not mean a full fusion. “Languages of religion and nation, like all forms of language, can be intertwined pervasively. But even when the languages are intertwined, the fundamental ontologies and structures of justification differ.” Rogers Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches,” Nations and Nationalism 18, no. 1 (2012): 17.

4. Poll respondents claiming that it is important or very important to be [dominant religion] in order to be [respondent’s nationality] in 2003. Data from International Social Survey Programme. The full range ran from 13% (Netherlands) to 84% (Philippines), for a mean 43% of and a standard deviation of 19.6%.


11. Ibid., 314.


14. Ibid., 117.


26. Opinions that abortion and gay marriage are justifiable correlate at .83, \( p = .000 \), and divorce and gay marriage correlate at .88, \( p = .000 \). Divorce and abortion are also strongly correlated, at .88, \( p = .000 \), WVS 6th wave data, 2010–2014.


34. Gill, “Religion and Comparative Politics”.


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