

## Does Religion Matter?

Tomka, M. 2011. *Expanding Religion. Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.

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Miklós Tomka (1941-2010) was without doubt one of the most distinguished social researchers of religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe. The main focus of his work was not only the religious situation in his native country Hungary but also its broader geopolitical context, the entire former Soviet bloc. M. Tomka was among the very few scholars who had the opportunity to scientifically study the changing religiosity already during the communist era. From the beginning on, in the early 70s his research on secularization theory and process was the main topic that stood out in his studies. His leading question was: Is there indeed an unstoppable, irreversible process of religious decline resulting from social modernization and fostered by the atheistic ideology and anticlerical politics of the socialist regimes as it was indicated by the secularization theories? His conclusion was a resounding “no;” a view that was not quite obvious considering the circumstances during times of late socialism but that became current after the fall of communist regimes and with the rise of anti-secularization positions within the sociology of religion.

The new democratic era after 1990 not only allowed M. Tomka to dedicate himself exclusively to the research topic that in many former communist countries was entirely banned or, like in Hungary, at most marginally tolerated. It was also the dawning of a systematic empirical study of religious changes in this region. International comparative longitudinal studies like the EVS/WVS or the ISSP provided a broad basis to follow the different courses of religious development in former socialist countries. However, it soon became obvious to numerous scholars of this field that a profounder study of a completely new religious situation after forty or even more years of dictatorship and church

persecution required new formulations of questions, too. The recognition of this need led to the *Aufbruch/New Departures Study*, a survey initiated and accomplished by Paul M. Zulehner and Miklós Tomka. In 1997/98, ten former socialist countries were involved in the first wave of the study that resulted in a row of volumes and numerous articles. Ten years later, the second wave of the study was extended to fourteen countries, including some orthodox countries of the region, too. The results of this second survey provide the major part of the empirical basis for the last book of M. Tomka, the object of this book review, which was published only after his sudden death in November 2010.

The core question of “Expanding Religion” refers to the role of religion and religiosity as well as to its change over time in Central and Eastern Europe. The book discusses the possible answers in six chapters. Its basic perspective is empirical and comparative, providing a huge range of data on different dimensions and indicators of religiosity and analyzing them by conducting both chronological and cross-country comparisons.

After a theoretical introduction about the diverse interpretations of religion and religiosity (Chapter 1), the following three chapters give a systematic overview of different aspects of the religious situation in Central and Eastern Europe. The sequence of the presentation might seem surprising since M. Tomka does not start the second chapter with a description of the religious situation itself, but rather with the reflection of it through the perception of religion and the churches in the public opinion. This allows him to give a historical summary about the impact of the communist one-party system on the religious field and to point out its Janus-faced nature: next to the obvious negative effect of the suppression and persecution of churches and religious people, the lack of democracy and pluralism also hindered the process of social differentiation and secularization. M. Tomka demonstrates with several figures that “the term ‘religious’ had strong positive connotations” (p. 36) after the fall of the anticlerical communist regimes and that churches in general enjoyed above-average trust. Nevertheless, there were considerable country specific differences. In the light of this fairly favourable climate it is especially interesting to look at the religious development itself in the next parts of the book.

The title of Chapter 3 poses the core question of the book: “Revival? Crisis? Metamorphosis?” (p. 61). Besides a brief presentation of the perception of religious change, M. Tomka studies the question concerning the nature of religious change in Central and Eastern Europe mainly upon four dimensions: (1) self-classification, (2) faith, (3) practice and (4) emotions. The latter three categories, combined with the role played by religion in other spheres of life (Chapter 4), follow quite precisely the typology of Charles Glock and Rodney Stark with the exception of religious knowledge, which did not appear in M. Tomka’s work. The central messages of this key chapter are the following: the former communist bloc is by no means a homogeneous region in terms of religious change. Behind the “colourful plurality with respect to religious beliefs” (p. 104), however, one can distinguish between types of more industrialized

and modernized countries with lower levels and partly weakening tendencies of religiosity, on the one hand, and rather agricultural countries with opposite tendencies, on the other. Nevertheless, the different religious dimensions do not show the same trends of religious change. Since 1990, “there was a considerable increase in the proportion of both those who believed in God and those who claimed to be religious in most countries” (p. 123), whereas religious practice has rather stagnated or slightly declined. For M. Tomka, these results mark the presence of a high religious demand in the majority of the chosen countries, with religiosity getting more and more independent from churches at the same time.

The quite positive general picture about the place of religion and religiosity in the former communist countries becomes even more accentuated in Chapter 4, where the role of religion in diverse domains of life is discussed. Just to mention a few results: people who claimed to be happy (p. 137), people with an optimistic world view (p. 143), people having children above-average (p. 155) and people that take social responsibility (p. 162–171) are overrepresented in the religious part of the societies of the region. Without questioning these results, the methodological approach of this chapter leaves some questions unanswered. It is obvious that M. Tomka made serious attempts to separate the impact of religiosity from the influence of other social factors. From a methodological perspective though, his work remains at a level of extended bivariate methods (crosstabs with two independent variables and figures derived from such crosstabs). Multivariate methods could have been useful in order to control several possible social factors simultaneously. In addition to that, the lack of a comparative perspective across countries and the use of merged data for the whole region in this chapter could be worth of further discussion.

Chapter 5 connects differences in religiosity to some basic features like generational dissimilarities, social stratification or denominational belonging, the latter based on the case studies of four countries (Latvia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). With this chapter M. Tomka also makes an attempt to divide Central and Eastern Europe into types based on the extent and the characteristic of religiosity. Combining several indicators on diverse dimensions of religiosity, he defines four regions: a non-religious Western region, a predominantly traditionally Christian region, an Eastern region of former Soviet states and a more heterogeneous fourth region including states of former Yugoslavia as well as Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia (p. 235–237). While the first three types clearly seem to make sense, the justification of the fourth region as one unit remains questionable.

Considering the extensive argumentations of the previous chapters, Chapter 6 (“Prospects of religious development”, p. 238–239) appears with its one and a half pages relatively compact. With this last part of the book, based on the systematic patterns of religious development in Central and Eastern European countries, M. Tomka cautiously formulates assumptions about the future of religiosity in the region. One important point is the role of modernization.

This process results very likely in a decline of traditions and traditional forms of religiosity, while an individual form of religiosity might gain in importance. At the same time M. Tomka leaves the question unanswered at first, whether secularization in terms of inevitable loss of significance is to be expected on the long run, or exactly opposite processes will occur. However, the final sentence gives a hint about his actual expectations: “The continuation of these trends would suggest further growth rather than decline, but their extent and duration will only be revealed in the future” (p. 239).

“Expanding Religion” is a very comprehensive overview about the religious change in post-communist Central and Eastern European countries, with a huge range of information and deep insights of a scholar, who dedicated himself to the investigation of this field. His book is one of the very few monographs to consider religious change in this specific region from a fairly broad perspective, combining profound theoretical considerations with high standard empirical analysis. It is a work worth reading without doubt, even if the reader himself would not necessarily share the rather optimistic view of M. Tomka concerning the course of development of the religion in the region. His insights provide indeed a lot of material for scientific discussion which, unfortunately, the author himself cannot be part of anymore.