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# Winds of Change: Religious Nationalism in a Transformation Context

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## Introduction

The indictment of two Croatian army generals, Rahim Ademi and Ante Gotovina, by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague on 8 June 2001 soon prompted an attack on the legitimacy of the Tribunal by the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. On Monday 23 July the Croatian bishops issued through their *Justitia et Pax* Committee a statement hinting at an international conspiracy against Croatia and portraying the Tribunal as an onslaught on national independence. 'We cannot rid ourselves of the impression that there is collusion among influential persons from foreign countries and likeminded persons in Croatia who ... obstruct the free path toward full sovereignty'. Furthermore they stressed the alleged political motivation of the Tribunal, implicitly denying the possible guilt of the accused war criminals. They stressed the necessity of nationwide reconciliation, which should entail a single vision of the nation among all strata of society. 'On the domestic front, it is necessary to have a consensus about essential matters,' said the statement. 'The positions of the various factions within the Croatian state should contain all the essential elements of our statehood.'[1] In a broader context the statement drew attention to another perplexing reality: the Catholic Church's attitude towards the ethnic war in Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s. The Croatian Bishops' Conference unanimously decided to celebrate mass in all churches on Victory and Homeland Day on 5 August, a date which marks the anniversary of Operation Storm, the entry by the Croatian army into Knin region in 1995.

The Bosnian conflict was one of the most violent manifestations of post-communist nation-building and a painful illustration of what can happen when nationalist and religious sentiments are fused. Religion then became perhaps the most important marker and filter of national identity. The question as to whether this war was a religious one has been debated from the outset and remains a tricky problem of definition. Nevertheless it is clear that the various denominations, especially the Roman Catholic and the Serbian Orthodox Churches, did indeed contribute to the conflict and lacked sufficient means, or maybe even the simple determination, to dampen it down. Public statements by denominational representatives and attempts to influence the respective believers or, behind the scenes, the political leaders of the belligerent parties, apparently remained without results. Two features stood out. First, it was apparent that in adopting an anticommunist stance and focusing on their

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ethnic nation before 1990 these churches had contributed to growing national awareness. Second, it was apparent that church leaders who were responsible for appeals for peace during the conflict lacked the courage to single out their own country and countrymen: their condemnations of the war were generally directed at all parties and therefore remained ambiguous. Undoubtedly, these churches carry no direct blame for the outbreak of the war in Bosnia; but the war, its prelude and its aftermath demonstrated plainly that nationalism, nation, national history and religion can become closely connected and that the churches' leaders as well as ordinary believers find it hard to disentangle them.

## Preliminary Remarks

Religious nationalism in a Central and Eastern European transformation context, my subject here, has more or less clearly defined geopolitical borders.[2] According to their level of political and economic transformation, we may distinguish three different country groups. The extent to which interethnic and nationalistic questions play a role seems to depend on whether transformations have been successful or not, but there are some exceptions.

Hungary, Poland and the Baltic States as transformation countries are doing relatively well, but nationalist sentiment, for different reasons, is rather strong in each of them. Albania is another anomaly: it is a stagnant multiethnic and multireligious state in a crisis area, but because of its multireligious and multiethnic makeup, its weak prewar statehood and its tattered communist past nationalism does not play an important role.

I define 'religious nationalism' very broadly, including any religious manifestation of national self-determination or ideological superiority within a restricted geographical or ethnic area. Thus, religious nationalism is related to the process of singling out specific, privileged cultural artefacts, habits, morals or ideology and opposing them to the past, other regions, religions, nations or peoples. In this process, however, what is singled out may be highly similar to what is rejected, because superiority and inferiority are more closely linked to geographic, ethnic or historic provenance and less to content. I shall not distinguish between nationalism and

**Table 1**

Central and Eastern European countries according to the degree of societal transformation and of interethnic and nationalistic problems

| *Interethnic and nationalistic problems* | *Successful transformation* | *Advancing transformation* | *Hampered transformation* | *Stagnation* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | Poland<br>Hungary | Estonia<br>Latvia<br>Lithuania | Russian Federation<br>Slovakia | Former Yugoslavia (except Slovenia)<br>Bulgaria<br>Romania<br>Belarus'<br>Moldova<br>Ukraine |
| No | Czech Republic<br>Slovenia | | | Albania |

patriotism. In the context of my subject-matter, this distinction seems rather artificial and impractical. What could be labelled 'patriotism' in a mature democratic society could well be nationalism in Russia, Ukraine or Romania, defective democracies with badly functioning democratic institutions or semi-authoritarian rule.[3]

Before turning to my topic I would like to discuss some concepts which are generally accepted throughout Central and Eastern Europe but which are nevertheless false or shallow, often illustrating an antiwestern prejudice. First I shall consider the nature of postcommunist society. Can it be explained with reference to the so-called 'moral vacuum'? Then I shall look at the phenomenon of democracy without democratic structures, as opposed to liberal democracy. Does it contribute to the transformation process? Finally, I shall explore the link between religion and nationalism in the transformation context, pondering on, among other things, the nature of their relationship.

## The Emptiness Inside

'Vacuum' theorists generally argue that under communist rule morality was eroded and that after the fall of the Iron Curtain all sorts of western evils were sucked into the resulting void. While recognising the depravity of communist rule, I do not believe that this theory provides an accurate description of what has happened since the end of communism. The theory depicts the postcommunist citizen as a simplistic, unreflecting and almost childlike individual. It also makes false assumptions about the relationship between material living conditions and individual moral standards, for the collapse of the socialist welfare state left most people with less rather than more choice in life. We should ask whether rocketing violence and crime rates in Eastern Europe are not the result of general impoverishment and social fragmentation rather than of individual immorality. What is more, the 'vacuum' theorists seem to lay much too much stress on the common historical roots of liberalism and communism, while disregarding the huge practical and theoretical differences between them. Finally, 'vacuum' theorists seem to imply that there is a feasible alternative to both political systems, most probably an indigenous one.

I would like to propose an alternative perspective based on daily life experience. The ways in which people deal with the various tasks and moral dilemmas in life may differ because of cultural and material diversity. However, people everywhere have to face up to similar tasks: grow up, find a partner, rear children, earn a decent living, develop a life philosophy, and come to grips with failure, illness and death. In doing so, they will adhere to similar values and have to face comparable moral dilemmas throughout their lives. The Ten Commandments, one might say, are not the exclusive property of the Judeo–Christian tradition but part of innate human morality. The results of the European Values Study[4] clearly confirm the relevance of this 'tasks-in-life' approach; though sometimes considerable variations in attitudes and beliefs may occur, significant similarities between East and West exist. The idea that there is now a moral vacuum in Eastern Europe and that it is in the process of being filled with something of western origin, which is alien, is tempting but deceptive and untrue. It is almost a fantasy of innocence. This scheme, with a passive, innocent and uprooted victim on the one hand and an evil, intrusive and overwhelming perpetrator on the other, is a mental pattern common to many a nationalist.

A comparison between Eastern and Western European man will show, moreover, that the former, precisely because of his adverse living conditions, is very much

concerned with his material and corporal well being, while the latter is far from being materialistic or hedonistic. Leading a relatively secure and comfortable life, Western European man adheres to postmaterialistic values, and given the accumulated wealth in western countries his lifestyle is in fact rather ascetic.

## A One-item Menu

One idea which seems to be prevalent in postcommunist Eastern Europe is that of building a democratic society without democratic structures. The theoretical basis for such an undertaking is the Platonic division between an ignorant, disorderly crowd (hands and body) and a few omniscient leaders or moral heroes, perhaps theologians and philosophers (head), who have taken upon themselves the task of guiding the masses to a perfectly egalitarian and democratic society. History has provided us with striking examples of the inherent dangers: Plato's philosopher–dictator, the Comité du Salut Publique of the French Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Sir Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* therefore remains an eloquent account of deceptive political prophecy from Antiquity to Marx. The belief that one possesses superior and definitive knowledge about historical processes is a pernicious fallacy which has been proved wrong time after time, most recently in 1989.[5]

It is dangerous to leave the welfare of the many in the hands of moral saints, most of whom prove to be fallible and corruptible. Democracy, after all, must rest on the participation and support of the many as well as of the few, who thus add to its legitimacy, strength and success. Furthermore, while other political systems lack self-adjustment mechanisms, democracy is provided with them from the very outset. Democracy has moreover proved itself to be a reliable guarantee for peaceful co-existence of states: between 1816 and 1991 no democracy waged war upon another. In this respect it is rather sad that the churches rarely give wholehearted support to a constitutional patriotism which aims at the dissemination of democratic ideals and values. The words of the Roman Catholic Mgr Ronald Knox apparently seem to have kept some validity, and not only for the Roman Catholic Church. 'For, when we demand liberty in the modern State, we are appealing to its own principles, not to ours', he wrote in 1927.[6]

Given the increasing globalisation of the political–economic sphere and, especially, the enlargement of the European Union, the establishment of democracy seems to be not only inevitable but in fact essential. After all, the creation of an alternative political–economic free haven with cultural values exclusively of its own – if that were indeed possible – would reduce the postcommunist societies to the same isolation from the world scene which turned out to be fatal for them in the 1970s and 1980s. What has to be achieved, then, is a reasonable compromise, a restructuring of society through a fully-fledged western-style democracy and a viable civil society. These are the necessary prerequisites for a fair, open and just society, in which a plurality of individual life projects and specific, particular, local traditions can find their rightful place.[7]

Underneath the vacuum theory and the concept of democracy without democratic structures seems to linger the chimerical idea that the benefits of the socialist welfare state could have been preserved by replacing communist ideology with something else. This was to be done by administering a healthy dose of nationalism, religion and tough morals, while circumventing the open, pluralistic, democratic society, which has been variously characterised by critics of modern culture as atheist,

relativist, consumerist, hedonistic, individualistic, egoistic, sexualised, secularist, utilitarian, materialist, liberal, totalitarian and a culture of death. Here nationalists and believers found common ground and nowadays share their postcommunist deceptions. An uncontested moral leader, Pope John Paul, seems to hold some intermediate position, stressing well-prepared individual morality. When regretting the swift societal changes after 1989 he has contrasted the communist experience of the Polish people with Old Testament Israel travelling through the desert: 'How wise and clairvoyant was Moses, after leaving Egypt, not to take the Israelites straight to the Promised Land', he wrote to a Polish friend in 1994.[8] He evidently thought it would have been better if the Poles had had more preparation before the reins were slackened.

The attempt to define issues of morality and everyday life by reference to a single specific theory, Christian, nationalist or both, may well be the first stage on the road to a perilous utopia: a brave new man-made world. After all, the enterprise contradicts essential characteristics of democracy: pluralism, openness and individual morality, which presuppose liberty, the absence of constraint and some common ground. The present state of affairs in Central and Eastern Europe hardly seems to suggest that an alternative sociopolitical order, some kind of indigenous third way, as yet nonexistent, might be developed in the near future. No matter how hard one may try, in the end neither fervent prayer nor sublime morals will automatically put bread on the table, nor will traditional knitting patterns serve as a guideline for societal transformation.

## Under the Surface

With respect to the relationship between religion and nationalism, generally two rather superficial 'explanations' are advanced, one maximalist, the other minimalist.

The maximalists assume that there are definite causal connections between the two. They may picture religion as inherently striving for a societal monopoly, for a theocracy. The Roman Catholic Church for example, they say, claims that a secular state usurps absolute power over man and his destiny, because it turns away from the church's objective truths.[9] Nationalism and nationalist ideology, maximalists then conclude, are used by churches as a means to an end. Their adherence to democracy, societal pluralism and human rights is verbal only; in reality they are aiming at establishing their own value system, as is evident in their stress on traditional and national values and the idea of a Christian Europe.[10]

The maximalists are however mistaken in assuming that the convictions of theologians and church leaders (which may, what is more, vary considerably) are reflected in the views of believers: large numbers of believers in fact adhere to the ideals of plural society, liberal democracy and human rights.

The minimalists, on the other hand, deny any substantial link between the two. They argue that malevolent nationalists manipulate believers and religious leaders. Even if religious concepts, imagery and symbols are being misused, for instance to rally support or to provide psychological relief or ideological motivation, this connection is still presented as purely accidental.

The minimalists' explanation is inadequate as well, because strictly speaking it provides us with a description only, rather than with an analysis of the phenomenon. Moreover, it moves quickly past some important underlying questions which still need answering. How can religious believers and especially members of the clergy, who dealt with manipulative communist leaders for over forty years, be so easily

courted? What do they expect to gain? Is their pliancy just an adaptive strategy to hold on to the mass of believers? Does the apparent affinity between religion and nationalism originate from pure pragmatism, from some constraint, from occasional weakness, from a specific mental makeup or from some obscure mixture of motives?

I want to argue that the relationship between religion and nationalism is actually quite close. Some striking resemblances exist between the two, not only in structure and function, but also in content.

## The Enduring Problem

The relationship between church and state, between faith and nationalism, can be one of struggle, competition, cooperation, fusion, usurpation or indifference. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, depending on the specific timeframe, country and confession, all these modalities have been tried and there are at present no convincing indications to believe that a definitive and ideal *modus vivendi* will emerge in the twenty-first century. Like H. Richard Niebuhr (in his *Christ and Culture*) I would like to describe this sometimes frictional, sometimes smooth relationship as part of the 'enduring problem' of connecting religion with culture.[11]

Within each of the three main subdivisions of Christianity – Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism – the relationship between church and state is reflected upon differently, but the differences are gradual and not absolute. Each of these confessions, especially when it is a majority or former majority church, is vulnerable to nationalism, exaggerating or absolutising the nexus between circumstances which, given the interdependence of church and state, objectively favour the combination of faith and nationalism. One circumstance is the fact that churches are commonly organised as national entities, which are to a large extent self-accountable. The reasons for this may be historical, practical or ideological, or most commonly a mixture of these: rulers wanted a homogeneous, national church within their territory, and hence the identification of a particular church with a specific culture and a specific language-group, combined with a claim on national history and heritage. Another circumstance is the fact that out of concern for the wellbeing of the nation, church and state may cooperate in influencing the individual or society as a whole, for example through legislation. Sometimes this connection is formalised. In the Orthodox ideal, for instance, the church and the state are to be distinguished by their functions, but at the same time they need to be in harmony (symphony). Another circumstance is the fact that historical interaction between church and nation has often brought about a sense of special birthright in majority confessions: the argument is that the Gospel, interpreted through a particular denominational tradition, in turn purifies the national culture, which becomes more and more Christian. This is clearly the tacit assumption behind Pope John Paul's vision of a Christian Europe, which is now commonly propagated throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The true source, guardian and guide of culture, even if it is secularised culture, is in this case, the Roman Catholic Church. Since the late communist period, indeed, the Polish Roman Catholics have been presented as a European role-model.

It may well be that the urge to solve the enduring problem of connecting religion with culture may engender religious nationalism. Concrete cultural expressions are idealised when they are identified with religious convictions. However, history teaches us how tastes, opinions and even religious convictions may alter over time. Furthermore, 'definitive solutions' fail to recognise the fundamental dialectics of the

relationship between religion and culture, that is, the dynamic mix of secular and religious elements. For example, churches may have a theological interpretation of human rights, but in fact 'human rights' were invented and propagated in a secular context, and it took the churches some 150 years to come to terms with them. The churches have traditionally been unable to conceive of the concept of freedom of religion, which they have perceived as contrary to their own claims to truth. The churches, then, should remain attentive to the new creative impulses with which culture provides them.

## An Identity Match

Right from the outset up to this very day Christianity has had an ambiguous relationship with the natural world as well as with culture at large. Nature and culture have been suspect, because they might provoke in man improper sentiments, pervert his will and delude him into believing falsehoods. Some 1600 years ago St Augustine pointed out that evil is anything which distracts man from God. It is at this point that the paths presented by Christians and nationalists may coincide. Nationalists focus on language, habits and culture, on the survival or vitality of the nation in contrast with other nations. They discuss the role of the individual in all this. Nationalist ideology sanctions certain practices, habits and artefacts as genuinely national and this sampling produces a checklist to determine an individual's allegiance to the nation, as a creed to which one should adhere. In a similar fashion, religion worries about the path which believers should choose in order to come safely through the 'vale of tears' to the eternal afterlife. Faith, however, needs earthly forms in order to become communicable and attractive. Through a process of more or less attentive scrutiny it takes on a worldly shape: a nonchristian, indigenous colouring of folk culture, native language and local customs.

Nationalism and religion (and communism as well) share a number of characteristics. They foster social homogenisation – peace, order and unity – claiming to follow the example of venerated predecessors: saints or national heroes or a mixture of the two. This social order is represented by and accessible through ritual and mysticism. They are also concerned with the role of the individual in this social order. Since all believers or members of a nation are deemed to be equal, religions and nationalist organisations alike advocate an egalitarian society, but at the same time their view of the world is paternalistic and hierarchical. Churches and nationalist movements, after all, mediate thinned-down knowledge to the common people, while ascribing to themselves the role of interpreter, teacher and guardian of

**Table 2**
An identity match between nationalism and religion

| *Aspect* | *Social homogenisation* | *Individual* | *Knowledge* | *Structure* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Characteristics | Order | Paternalism | History of salvation | Immutability |
| | Unity | Hierarchic | Remembrance | Traditionalism |
| | Ritual | Egalitarianism | Messianism | Resistance |
| | Mysticism | Mediator | Morality | Interpretation |
| | | | | Holism |

an ultimate truth for all. This knowledge includes a history of salvation in a religious or a nationalist variant and has a clear messianic and prophetic dimension. The founding of a state or God's incarnation in Christ are both given a historical as well as a salvific significance in the explanation of worldly prosperity, suffering and evil, enmity, oppression and liberation. Many nations believe that they were once prosperous, then suffered crucifixion and finally experienced resurrection. This is not merely biblical imagery, but purports to be knowledge about transcendental intercession. Revelatory knowledge about individual morality is yet another shared element. A virtuous life in this world, guided by objective truths, should secure the individual's immortality as a national hero, a saved soul or both.

Faith and nation also resemble each other in structure. Both assume that an inner force defines the essence of faith or nation, which then encounters resistance from enemies in the outside world. This inner force needs an authoritative, tradition-orientated interpretation, derived from the revelation, the Church Fathers or indigenous culture.

Both nationalism and religion thus provide social and psychological guidelines and ideological motivation. Will, emotion and intellect are bound together in one 'holistic' worldview and the contingency of history is, partly or totally, eliminated.

## Winds of Change

I now want to take a closer look at two important functions which religious nationalism performs in Central and Eastern Europe today.

The first of these is as a marker of identity which simultaneously confers a sense of belonging. The demise of communism was preceded by the decreasing ideological persuasiveness of socialism and, when the inevitable end came, the latter had ceased to provide much of a collective identity. Now, by redefining the past as thoroughly Christian – in specific confessional colourings of course – and by debunking recent history as utterly negative, churches have aimed, deliberately or not, at monopolising collective postcommunist identity. In a climate of disappointment at the changes which were occurring after the fall of communism and of realisation that anti-communism did not lead to superior insight into how to rebuild society, people started selectively borrowing more or less successful examples from the past, from a time when people, nation and religion supposedly formed a solid and harmonious unity. Attention focused particularly on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period which stands in sharp contrast with the period of secularisation caused by forced modernisation under communist rule, when the churches were kept at a distance from education, medical care, labour unions, workers' organisations, politics and so forth. Now the churches seemed to be saying: look at what we did in the past. We are the soul and core institution of the nation and provide the glue of society. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church in Central Europe the introduction of Christianity around 1000 AD plays an important legitimising role. Roman Catholic Europeanism is linked with the founding of primordial states like Poland and Hungary. Through the fervour of indefatigable missionaries and righteous Christian rulers, so we are told, these nations simultaneously and collectively accepted Roman Christianity as faith and were absorbed into the (Christianised) European arena. Kings accepting a new religion and receiving their crown from the Roman pontiff – a ritual which was reenacted in Budapest in 2000 – are deemed to have recognised the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church over the secular sphere. Awkward details in this historical tableau, like the iron-fist rule of the first Hungarian king, Stephen,

are, however, brushed away.[12] Thus a smooth yet highly ideologised historical concept of national church–state continuity comes to life.

There is a fundamental difference, however, between the role played by the churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the role they play today. In the former period the churches were acting in harmony with modernity, while nowadays their inspiration is, by and large, antimodern. This is where the second function of religious nationalism comes into play: as a distributor of ideology and interpretative filter. Mediating between possibilities now unfolding and accumulated knowledge from the past the churches point out to their members and the general public what is true and what is false. Let us take some random examples. True is the indigenous Christian culture in its specific denominational garment. True are the classical, 'Christianised' values which pertain to the rural societies of yesterday: they should permeate modern society, which the churches condemn as being atomised and individualised. True is the politician who cares for these traditional values and who opposes himself to the big equaliser, western liberal democracy. False are the foreign missionaries from the West, say the churches, as if they exercise some kind of feudal religious right over their serfs. A comparison between Poland and Ukraine is quite revealing. These two countries are at opposite ends of the political spectrum in post-communist Europe. Poland is a developing democracy which is doing relatively well, but at the same time the Roman Catholic Church is an important antagonist to the implementation of societal pluralism through democratic rule. In Ukraine, meanwhile, many religious denominations explicitly support the undemocratic state leadership, which is frustrating political and economic transformation. Perhaps they feel that they have no other choice than to support this corrupt regime, but it is unclear to me whether they take their nationalist stand out of calculation or conviction.

## A Sad Farewell

If 1989 revealed a vacuum, it was above all a political, ideological and social one. Many haunting questions needed answering, but a new outlook on life under conditions of freedom and pluralism was absent. What had been the point of all the suffering of the 1940s and 1950s? How did the communist experience until 1989 fit into the timeline of the nation and the individual? How could moral order be restored? What was the legitimacy of old and new political and religious leaders? With respect to the Christian churches, the absence of thorough theological reflection on the era is rather astonishing. The churches have had great difficulty in relating to their new environment and, even in the churches, nostalgia for the communist era has sprung up. The churches' precommunist traditions were reinforced in communist times, and the churches themselves have had little influence on the transformation process and are barely affected by it. Furthermore, democracy western-style and its alleged and real side-effects are perceived as a threat to whatever virtues – Christian, nationalist or both – have been kept alive.

The downfall of communism created great expectations, but in the first half of the 1990s the religious revival of the previous decade, which had often been very closely connected with national independence movements, ground to a halt. Moreover, the churches had to come to grips with the fact that the prewar society had gone forever.

Certainly, in the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, under the influence of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the churches had played a decisive role in raising both national awareness and general knowledge. Through the

denominationally coloured teaching of religion, history, geography, reading and writing the churches prepared their members for life in a modernising society. Roman Catholic priests were instrumental in the survival and emancipation of indigenous languages from Belgium to Lithuania.

In a modern, globalising society, however, the churches can no longer play this intermediate role. They simply lack the knowledge, infrastructures and intellectual drive to do so. Even experts are unable fully to assess future developments or risks. For example, the crash of the Tokyo stock exchange in 1997 which shook the Central and Eastern European economies to their foundations took the financial analysts by surprise and left them at a loss. Furthermore, modern 'risk society'[13] is built on the widespread dissemination of expert knowledge, which individuals use to make their day-to-day decisions and life-choices. The medical profession, for example, deals with an infinitely more complicated agenda than it did, say, 30 years ago; and at the same time ordinary people nowadays know much more about medicine and bioethics than their parents ever did. When communicating with medical specialists they will use this knowledge, and doctors, for their part, expect patients to do so and anticipate this. The churches, even if they propagate relevant religious and moral precepts, have no direct role in the decision-making process itself. This is up to the autonomous individual – who is, by the way, neither erratic nor irrational, but accountable.

The churches have retained and will retain their marginal role in society. Nevertheless, it is a role which differs considerably from the role they were assigned in the communist ghetto. The communists wanted to eliminate all competing institutions. Under conditions of pluralism and democracy, by contrast, the churches are to be amongst the many competitors in civil society, where abstract values are shaped into concrete ideals and political and social action. This is not a threat, but an opportunity, which still has to be seized. Meanwhile they face a strong temptation to take up nationalist themes. In many respects the transformation countries lack intermediate structures between state and individual. Here the churches have often stepped in with the aim of regaining their real or imagined historic role as mother and teacher of the people. Historical accomplishments serve as material for the churches in arguments with the secular authorities. Surely, they argue, the communist era as well as current societal transformation with all its consequences seem to provide justification enough for a return to the traditional and collective identities of the past. Here there is a clear congeniality between the churches and nationalists, who strive for a well-organised and morally and socially rigid world which allegedly existed at some time in the past.

## Conclusion

Manifestations of religious nationalism as seen in Poland, Romania, Ukraine and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe should be vigorously criticised. Even if the political situation and antiquated self-perception are limiting a church in its dialogue with society and in its attitudes to democracy, there is no justification for the unwarranted recycling of fragmentarily researched and highly ideologised history, the blessing of indigenous cultural artefacts, the cultivation of national enmity and an unchristian sense of superiority. In addition, these activities are usually dishonest, since, generally speaking, the best things that one's own culture or religion has produced are being compared with the worst of another's. In this way a dubious post-communist identity is constructed. Moreover, this approach does not amount to even a minimalist approach to societal transformation, founded as it is on an unjust and

inaccurate assessment of both past and present. Religious nationalism lures people with the vision of a well-organised world that once was, but it fails to offer a well-defined vision of the future and the possibilities that lie potential there. In this respect it is a perfidious ideology. In providing a holistic worldview religious nationalism shows scant respect for the real living conditions of people, offends against their autonomy, and exploits the universal human desire for belonging and continuity and a common emotional opposition to change.

I should of course make it clear that I am in no way denying the value of indigenous culture or arguing that it is inferior to western culture. What I am criticising is the impulse to link religious fervour with a distorted vision of man and society.

To summarise, there seem to be four principal reasons why churches may espouse religious nationalism. First, believers and hierarchs alike may discern a missionary calling, even the hand of God, in the nation. Second, even though they may not be nationalists out of principle, church leaders may use nationalistic themes in order to gain support not only amongst believers but from the powers that be as well. Third, the absence of any serious and systematic reflection on the past might lead them to substitute for rational discourse a religio-cultural ideology in which a spirituality of leadership, excellence or suffering is developed against a background of familiar and comforting imagery, music, arts and crafts. The answer to the problem of theodicy is thus found in confidence-boosting or consolatory nationalist–religious imagery and ideology. Fourth, a fear of western culture and its accomplishments may seduce people into thinking that an alternative to both the closed, repressive communist society and the open and pluralist society exists or should be developed. This option necessarily overrates the potential of indigenous cultural and religious traditions: no feasible alternative to democracy has yet been developed, and, indeed, the Christian tradition in all its denominational variety has in fact little experience of, or affinity with, democracy.

Taking an optimistic view I am inclined to see religious nationalism as an indicator of the intensity of the problems of transformation and therefore as a passing phenomenon. With the improvement of the economic and political situation extremist features will surely disappear. At the same time, however, we should be well aware of the fact that democratisation and economic growth do not address the root causes of religious nationalism, which is an aspect of the continuing problem of relating religion to culture and culture to religion. Faith as such, however, gives us only a limited number of guiding principles on the basis of which to review this relationship. Religious nationalism sends out a serious warning: Christians suffer from a common hubris: the conviction that they can overcome the contingency of earthly life by offering total solutions. An Eastern European worst-case scenario is a strong religious belief that, out of love for an unwilling neighbour and with the help of the state, the flock can be forced into a moral and religious straitjacket. Then conviction is traded for constraint.

## Notes and References

[1] Internet: http://www.hic.hr/English/news/hbk.htm.

[2] For a good overview of the Central and Eastern European region, see Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1998). For insight into the Orthodox world, see Victoria Clark, *Why Angels Fall: a Journey through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (Picador–Macmillan, London, 2001).

[3] Ina Merdjanova, 'In search of identity: nationalism and religion in Eastern Europe', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2000, pp. 233–62 gives a comprehensive overview of theories of nationalism.

[4] Internet: http://cwis.kub.nl/~fsw_2/evs/index.htm. 'The European Values Study is a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values, initiated by the European Value Systems Study Group (EVSSG) in the late 1970s ... .'

[5] Soros' Open Society Fund borrowed its name from Popper's masterpiece and puts considerable effort into disseminating Popper's works and ideas in Central and Eastern Europe.

[6] Quoted from R.A. Knox, *The Belief of Catholics* (Sheed & Ward, London, 1939), p. 242. See also Jay Newman, *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1982), p. 76.

[7] For a discussion of civil society and nationalism, see Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1996).

[8] Quoted from the Dutch edition of Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* (Doubleday, New York, 1996), ch. 8.

[9] See *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, no. 2244, internet: http://www.Vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm.

[10] In November 2001 European Union parliamentarians organised a meeting in order to counter church lobbies approaching the European institutions, stating the 'urgency of organising active resistance to the encroaching influence of religion in the EU' (see internet: http://www.secularism.org.uk/euseminart.htm).

[11] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper, New York, 1951).

[12] See for example Gábor Klaniczay, 'Rex Iustus: the saintly institutor of Christian kingship', *The Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 158, 2000, pp. 14–31.

[13] For an introduction to the 'risk society' see Mark Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990).