

Space as an instrument to interpret the role of religion and churches in Central and Eastern European societies

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The denotations and metaphors of space that allow us to interpret and understand the role of religion and churches in Central and Eastern European societies, especially in Slovakia and Croatia, after the fall of the communist regimes are examined in this article. The terms “periphery” and “center” are seen as useful for analyzing the shift that occurred with respect to the place and role of religion and churches in these societies during and after communism, with a focus on its advantages and disadvantages. The analysis also relates to certain concepts in space theory, especially those used by Foucault. The transition from churches in the periphery to churches of the periphery is identified as the basic challenge and connected to the theological reflections of Pope Francis and his concept of the “outcoming Church”.

Introduction and theoretical background

Over the past few decades, the category of space has been discovered as a central, analytical-interpretative concept and instrument in the social sciences and humanities. This phenomenon is known as the *spatial turn* (Bachmann-Medick 2006; Döring and Thielmann 2008). Space is understood not only as a physical category, but as a relational, societal, cultural and symbolic category that includes discursive, virtual and imaginary spaces as well. The actions and metaphors of taking up space, conquering space, settling in space and using space that we take and use in everyday life are connected with the idea of power or the deprivation of power, and therefore, they have a relational meaning with regard to individuals and social groups. Philosophers have explained and demonstrated that spaces are produced through social practices (Lefebvre 1974), and that spaces are also producers of social relations, of power and control (Foucault 1984).

In Foucault’s analyses of space as a set of relations, he pays special attention to two types of spaces that are linked with all the others, “but in such a way as

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to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 1984, 3). He identified these spaces both as the unreal spaces, the utopias, that “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down”, and as the real places, existing in every culture and civilization, something like counter-sites, which he invoked “by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias” (Foucault 1984, 3–4). The heterotopias take quite varied forms in different cultures and societies. As different spaces, other places, they are “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (Foucault 1984, 4). This concept can be helpful in understand-





ing the role of religion and churches in Central and Eastern European societies.

Religion as a social practice takes place in social relations, realities and processes. The space of a lived religion is not a separate space or a separate sphere. The “spatial turn” raises the question of whether space could be a productive factor for religion. Not only does lived religion form a spatial reality, but space even shapes religion and opens new horizons of lived religion and religious practice (Erne and Schüz 2010).

In this contribution, the denotations and metaphors of space will serve as an instrument for interpreting and understanding the “place” and role of religion and the Church in the post-transitional societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Examples from Slovakia and Croatia will be presented. The analysis uses some theoretical concepts of space, especially drawing on the work of Michel Foucault. The transition from churches placed in the periphery to churches of the periphery will be analyzed as the basic challenge that churches in Central and Eastern Europe are still facing.

Religions and churches in post-communist countries: expulsion to the margins and return to the center

During the period of communist regimes in the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (which lasted from 1944/1949 to 1989/1991, depending on the country), religious communities in these countries were forcefully ousted from public spaces. Churches were stripped of large portions of their property and defamed with respect to their worldview. Their life and activities took place in very restricted and private spaces, under constant supervision by the state and political authorities.

Although this was a situation marked by exile, marginalization, ghettoization, descent into the underground and deprivation of power, in such an atmosphere of constant supervision, fear, distrust and uncertainty religious communities were at the same time a sort of *different space*. Using Michel Foucault’s terminology, these “heterotopias” or “other places” are places in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1984, 3). Religious groups, in the eyes of the regime, were what Foucault calls “heterotopias of deviation”, or places “in which individuals whose

behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”, but viewed from the perspective of believers these were “crisis heterotopias” in which individuals or groups were “in a state of crisis” (Foucault 1984, 4–5).

Essentially, this was a space of symbolic freedom and internal power, albeit one created as a result of their exterior powerlessness. Faith became a personal or family commitment for which it was necessary to pay a price (e. g. dishonor and loss of a good reputation as well as having lower ranked positions in the labor market and in the socio-political community). These circumstances of exclusion, repression and control elicited feelings of solidarity among believers with their religious community and its leadership. This created, on the one hand, an atmosphere of connectedness between communities and leaders, but, on the other, it inhibited greater internal institutional transformation within such communities. In relation to the Catholic Church, which is the largest religious community in both Slovakia and Croatia, it is related to insufficient implementation of the Second Vatican Council’s new ecclesiology, theology and spirituality.

With the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, religious communities and Christian churches moved from the social margins to the center. From the underground, or from invisible spaces, they emerged into public space, into the very center of social events.

The example of Slovakia

Slovakia is a country with a strong religious tradition: according to the last census, 76 % of the population declares itself religious. A large majority belong to the Roman Catholic Church (62 % of the population). In addition, 17 other churches and religious communities are recognized in Slovakia as well. Religion, especially Catholicism, has clearly held a central place in Slovakia over the centuries.

Between 1948 and 1989, the Church and, more generally, religion were brutally attacked by communists: religion was violently suppressed and pushed *from the center to the periphery*. Between 1949 and 1950, all diocesan seminars were canceled and all convents and monasteries were closed. The Greek Catholic Church was abolished, and Czechoslovakia (from which Slovakia became independent in 1993) broke off all diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The result of this persecution was as follows: more than 71,000 citizens were sentenced to prison in Slo-



vakia during the 40 years of communism. The Communist regime killed more than a thousand people and evicted more than 15,000 people from their homes. The forced labor camps in Slovakia had more than 13,000 inmates (Mikloško 2009).

During communist rule, a paradoxical phenomenon was evident: this persecution was counterproductive; in fact, it enriched at least some part of the Church. Almost all the leaders of Catholic culture were imprisoned or in exile during the Stalinist era. As a result of these ordeals, some of them experienced a strange metamorphosis in prisons and labor camps. In comparison to their previous lives in an isolated Catholic milieu, they were now behind communist bars in forced coexistence with people with different worldviews—Christians or those of other faiths, even socialists and non-conformist communists who had fallen into disfavor. Nevertheless, they quickly realized that many things—not only resistance to communism—united them. For many persons, meeting with priests and religious persons in these extreme conditions brought about significant transformations: many non-believers discovered a positive relationship with religious persons, or at least developed a deep respect for their testimonies, for religion and for the Church. Paradoxically, *Slovak Catholicism in this periphery came out of its ghetto*, at least in terms of the ideas and attitudes of its best representatives. Churches, forcibly stripped of their institutional supports when there was a general lack of trust, became close to young people, especially in the form of spontaneous communities. From this example, in contrast to the formal institutional forms of the Church, it is clear that the life of the Catholic Church “spilled over” into small communities where it became productive.

The fact that the Communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia tried to create a “national church”, one separated from the Vatican, provoked the phenomenon of the so-called “secret church” or “underground church”, which began in Slovakia after 1969. Primarily, religious and cultural intellectuals, male and female religious orders, as well as almost all those in the lay movement belonged to the “secret church”. They started to publish *samizdat*¹ and organize pilgrimages for young people.

1 *Samizdat* (etymologically derived from Russian: self-published) was a form of dissident activity across the Eastern bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground publications by hand and passed the documents from reader to reader.

They also initiated the first petition against the regime. A hunger strike among seminarians was also staged at the Theological Faculty in Bratislava. The Communist regime, with its professed scientific atheism, wanted to suppress religion and push the Church into an insignificant periphery, which paradoxically created *an intense center* of deep religiosity that became a major force in the fight against the Communist regime (Mikloško 2009).

Nevertheless, the “loss of religiosity” can be observed in post-communist Slovakia. One general opinion is that the Church did not meet most people’s expectations after the democratic changes. Therefore, its unprecedented moral authority, culminating shortly after November 1989, gradually faded; the expected “big boom” of religiosity did not take place. The Catholic Church is no longer one of the more popular and widely esteemed institutions of Slovak society. Today, we can say that the Church in Slovakia *is in the periphery*: a result of 40 years of communism and the failure of the Church to fulfill society’s expectations (Halík 2000). The Church was too decimated by decades of oppression; it could not promptly take a prominent place among the transformational forces of society. The Church had been *expelled from many spheres of public life* for decades. It now lacks experience in unrestricted public activity in the spheres of education, health, media, social communication, political life, and so forth. The Church was accustomed to a particular clerical style. It was not immediately able to open a space for the laity and teach the clergy and laity a new, more mature and affiliate pastoral style after communism.

Tomáš Halík thinks that Catholicism today, in the era of globalization, could have an important role under certain circumstances. It could even take the lead in the dialogue with world religions and secular humanism, because both have their points of contact in the Church’s experience during communism. The key question is whether current Slovak Catholicism would be able to embrace this dimension of the Church’s mission in the new millennium (Halík 2000).

The example of Croatia

In Croatia, the majority of the population has traditionally been affiliated with the Catholic Church. According to the 1953 census, 73.9 % of the population still declared itself Roman Catholic several years after the beginning of the communist era. Immediately after the establishment of a democratic



society, this number reached 76.6 % according to the 1991 census (Nikodem 2004, 264).

Like other religious communities in the former Yugoslavia, which Croatia was a part of until its independence in 1991, the Catholic Church in Croatia was the target of ideological denunciations by the Communist Party. After Zagreb's Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac disagreed with the separation of the Church from the Vatican, he was accused, sentenced and detained in 1946. As a result of the Holy See's decision to appoint him as a cardinal, Yugoslavia discontinued diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1952. As many as 500–600 priests were killed; many others were imprisoned or had to flee the country. The Communist government carried out a general nationalization, whereby many properties and institutions were confiscated from the Church, such as hospitals, schools and dormitories. Religious education was no longer a part of the school curriculum and the Faculty of Theology was no longer a part of the University of Zagreb. In addition, all Catholic lay organizations were banned and publication of religious material was minimized and subjected to permanent government control. The Communist Party carried out a systematic push to make everyone in society atheist (Boeckh 2006; Jakulj 2015, 482–483).

The Catholic Church supported the change in social system after the first multi-party elections in 1990. It advocated the rights of people to self-determination and endorsed the proclamation regarding the sovereignty, autonomy and independence of the country after the referendum on its independence in 1991. Real civic opposition did not exist in Croatia during the era of communist totalitarianism, unlike in some other socialist countries, such as Poland or Czechoslovakia. Hence, after the political turn of events the Catholic Church was particularly recognized as the force that could contribute to the development of a democratic society. In the early 1990s, the Church attained an important role in the formation of a new society, in cooperation with the state. Undeniably, it played a positive role in the democratization processes of society in those first years (Filipović 2014, 643–645).

The constitution of the new state guaranteed all citizens freedom of conscience and religious affiliation, free public expression of their faith and worldview, legal equality as members of any religious community and the possibility for inclusion in society through the establishment of their own public institutions; this was done simultaneously with the separation of religious communities from the state

(Sabor Republike Hrvatske 1990, Art. 14, 40, 41). Agreements were signed between the Republic of Croatia and The Vatican on cooperation in numerous fields of social and public life: upbringing and education, pastoral care in hospitals and other social institutions, the army and police (Ugovor između Svete Stolice i Republike Hrvatske 1997). The new legal framework provided the Church with legal protection and the necessary funds for executing its mission to the benefit of individuals and society. The Church considers believes it now has legitimate right to instill Christian values in a population, which, according to the latest statistics, is still predominantly Catholic (86.28 %) (Državni zavod za statistiku 2011).

In the first years of democracy, there was also a certain degree of triumphalism, disorientation and confusion in relation to the new role of the Church in society and its relationship to state authorities. Like in other transitional countries with majority churches, the Catholic Church in Croatia was also exposed to attempts of being used as an instrument to the advantage of political parties and structures. A more decisive critical shift away from political authority can be observed from 1997 onward, when the Church had already started legally based cooperation with institutions of the state. In the meantime, the development of civil society, which had yet to be built after the fall of communist regime began to emerge.

Compared to previous times, *the new positioning of religious communities* in society gave them a different kind of power. This power was based on the right of public activity that was denied to them in the previous period. It also included material rights and income in the form of returned property that was once seized as well as inclusion in social institutions with corresponding financial remuneration (Filipović 2014, 647–649).

As an urgent response to war devastations and property demolition suffered by the population during the war between 1991 and 1995, the inclusion of the Catholic Church as well as other religious communities in civil society began in Croatia in the early 1990s. The Church provided shelter to refugees and to those that were exiled. It has also promoted peace and justice. After the war, the Church had a different and more comprehensive approach to charitable work compared to socialist times. The institution of Caritas helped families, by establishing counselling services and promoting voluntary work. Its aim was to make Caritas recognizable in society,



cooperate with other institutions and initiatives as well as integrate Caritas into the overall pastoral care of the parish Church (Filipović 2014, 651–657).

Attainment of external power evoked in one part of the clergy and laypeople a pre-Second Vatican Council image of the Church and a mentality of integralism and nostalgia. This was enforced in the face of increasing globalization and pluralization of world views. Ideological opposition between Catholic associations and atheist groups, which also have been growing in strength and fighting against the “de-secularization” of society, are frequently mediated and emphasized in the media. It is not easy to find a balanced position: for the secular and secularist groups to accept the democratic premise that religious communities also have the right to public activity and articulation of their own views in public, and for religious communities to be open to communication and different views, to seek roads to dialogue and to respect different opinions (Filipović 2012).

The deprivation of official spaces and iconic-symbolic spaces during the communist regimes was for the Churches an attack on the established church identity. However, this was transformed into an underground identity, a “heterotopic” identity that gives Churches new roles in society. It certainly would be a mistake not to take advantage of this potential in new democratic circumstances and to reclaim, in modern times, the Church’s old central place of power, based on the historical significance of the Church in a particular nation.

From center to periphery: toward a new presence of Christian communities in society

The churches in Central and Eastern Europe had the opportunity to become visible in society following the crisis (“crisis heterotopias”) and to contribute to the establishment of a free society. They had to integrate their experience of suffering by building a new model of the Church’s presence in society in the modern world. Using both Christian and Foucauldian images, we can say that it was a church as a boat or ship on turbulent seas, but through its faith it served as the “greatest reserve of the imagination”, the “heterotopia par excellence” (Foucault 1984, 9). It was a church where authentic life and personal testimony of faith were important, where fraternity and solidarity were experienced, a church geared to-

wards serving instead of being served. With its experience of being a marginalized church, the Church must now go back to the margins to take the side of those who are marginalized, stigmatized, excluded, to stand up for the “losers” in a world that is permeated by egoism and injustice. This is the path of the Church, which must follow its Lord and teacher Jesus and which should protect and nurture the growth of every seed of good, regardless of where it might be found.

Incentives of Pope Francis for an outcoming Church

The required decentralization of the Church receives its theological foundations from the teachings of Pope Francis. His program of the “outcoming Church” (Francis 2013, no. 20–24), which is central to his pontificate, captures this new ecclesiological orientation. Significantly, Pope Francis expresses this objective via the strong and concrete image of the “periphery”. In opposition to “self-reference”, in which a Church is at the center of all reports and seeks its own place and status, the Pope emphasizes a Church that is oriented towards the peripheries (Francis 2013, no. 20; 30; 46; 63; 97; 191). In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis explains his position as follows:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (*Mk* 6:37). (Francis 2013, no. 49)

Rather than a geo-political or geo-economic concept, which implies a power-centered vision of the world, the idea of a “periphery” seems to refer, in Pope Francis’s view, to another side of the world and its history, one which is neglected and marginalized (Ferrara 2015). According to Ferrara, Pope



Francis's discourse on the periphery has to do with the concepts of exclusion (Volf 1996) and expulsion (Sassen 2013). Since the periphery, for Pope Francis, is an important place, it could be interpreted in a Foucauldian sense as the "other place". In this context, Andrea Riccardi's interpretation of Pope Francis's peripheries is also interesting: "Today in the peripheries we are faced with the challenge of integration of refugees and immigrants, but institutions do not make the integration, it is the communities that integrate, but these communities are no longer existing. We need to revive a great civil and even religious passion for the peripheries, to inhabit them again. There is no future in our cities if the peripheries do not rejoin to a destiny and a common vocation" (Riccardi 2016). Therefore, Riccardi says, the Church must discover lay actors or a community in the peripheries for its new presence, one that would be open and accessible to all. A rootedness in the peripheries, close to the people, requires rethinking the relationship with territory (Riccardi 2016).

Peripheries as "different places" open up other possibilities for churches instead of the traditional, central places of power. The periphery offers a possibility to "enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people" (Francis 2013, no. 270). A "pastoral conversion" is therefore needed: to go out to the peripheries to meet people and to meet Christ, who is already present and active amidst his favorites. Only through following Christ can the Church "get out of itself" and break free from the temptation of self-reference (Valente 2016). Peripheries give the Church the possibility of encounters and of dealing creatively with differences and contrasts.

Challenges for churches in Central and Eastern European countries today

There is a tension between the center and the periphery. How can churches in Eastern Europe become churches that are not in the periphery, but churches of the periphery?

Churches in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries must learn to rethink space. Considerable transformations in recent decades reflect a growth of "non-places". According to Marc Augé, postmodernity brings forth non-places: places of solitude, without a point of reference or

history, transit areas such as shopping centers, highways, railway stations or airports (Augé 1992, 69–72). The role of the Church is to enter these new spaces. Religion is also lived in secular spaces. Indeed, religion is encountered today in different fields of religious, secular and post-secular religious relations (Knott 2005).

Tomáš Halík uses the image of the basilica of St. Peter's in Rome to call attention to the importance of the idea. The basilica includes the area of the square with a colonnade: so in fact even those people who flow through the colonnade are somehow in the temple, though they actually are not aware of it. If the Church had built an impenetrable wall instead of the colonnade and tried to close the interior of the basilica, this would not be an image of Catholicity—for such an image also includes open arms, open space and the "hall of faith"—a necessary point to consider (Halík 2000). By creating interspaces, we find new places of interactivities and meeting points, or, in the words of Sophie Wolfrum, "Möglichkeitsräume", spaces of opportunities (Wolfrum 2007, 8–13).

In these reflections on creating interspaces, or spaces of opportunities, we can rely on one important feature of Thomism: recognition of the importance of "nature". Thomism opposes a certain type of theology that advocates only two spheres, divine and demonic; instead, he also saw some "neutral" *natural* spheres (Aquinas 1975, III-2). On a similar basis, the Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* from December 7, 1965, formulated the principle of the legitimate autonomy of "secular realities" (GS 36). Thus, it contributed to the courage of the Church to renounce the temptation of triumphalism and clerical dominance and was open to dialogue with the outside world.

Churches of today have to become schools of Christian wisdom: but not in the meaning of classic catechism teaching and instruction; it is more about making space for people with questions, doubts and uncertainties as well as creating space for those who are intricately seeking their own spiritual path. In this context, Halík's distinction between *dwellers*, or parishioners, and *seekers* is helpful: "*Seekers among believers* are those for whom faith is not a *treasure* of final truths, but rather a spiritual *way* while *seekers among nonbelievers* are 'spiritual but not religious', and seekers occupying a middle ground between believers and nonbelievers are '*simul fidelis et infidelis*'. Seekers are not fully identified with organized religion, with the teaching and regular practice of insti-



tutional churches. In this sense, these seekers may be thought of as ‘the new Zaccheuses’” (Halík 2015).

The necessity of accompanying seekers, to travel part of the journey together in dialogue, is evident. The principal goal of this accompaniment is not to push seekers back into the already existing structures of the Church, but, through mutual dialogue, to enrich and to enlarge existing structures by integrating their experiences to enrich faith. The greater understanding that ensues will also enable the Church to open wide its treasures of spirituality to those who are seeking, and in ways that are most relevant to the seekers’ journeys (Halík 2015).

Conclusion

The aim of this contribution was to examine the place and role of religion and churches in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries using the denotations and metaphors of space. By showing the situations in Slovakia and Croatia as case studies of what similarly happened in other countries before and after the transition, a few conclusions came to light. The churches in those two countries were pushed to the margins of society, defamed and persecuted during the communist regimes. However, in these circumstances they had the opportunity to build a new image of the Church: a church of internal power, of living faith, of small communities, and of closeness between hierarchy and laity. They were open to dialoguing with others, although they also developed a stance of defensiveness against the attacks of atheism.

After the fall of the communist regimes, they acquired freedom of action and regained external power, associated with the restitution of material goods and their positions in society. In several countries, they came from the margins to the center and have experienced the ambivalence of power at the center precisely because they had lost their previous internal power and credibility.

The words of Pope Francis emphasize that the Church must leave its self-referentiality and go to the peripheries, not only in the geographical sense, but existentially, to encounter people and to acquire a new point of view. This is a good guideline for churches in Central and Eastern Europe. They must utilize their experiences as suffering churches and become churches that are no longer in the periphery, but churches of the periphery. In the periphery, which is the main metaphor of our time, churches

have to introduce evangelical values: dignity of the human being, social inclusion, justice, respect for rivals, openness to universality, while overcoming nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and so forth. In the peripheries, they can reach the seekers and find the people living in poverty not only in the material sense, but also in terms of their spiritual experience and religious certainty. With this turning point, by creating interspaces for seekers and providing companionship along the way, Christian communities as *different places* can join Christ’s paschal mystery and transform *the non-places* of the periphery into places of new life and new meaning.

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