

## Chapter 3:

### Religion and Ritual

The socialist countries often saw themselves and were seen by observers as embarked upon the first sustained effort in the history of human societies to base a social order on rationalist and atheist principles. Yet critics have found that the attempt to build such a society transformed the rationalist critique itself, i.e. Marxism-Leninism, into a salvation religion. Marxist theories of ideology have influenced numerous anthropological accounts of religion in non-socialist societies. To what extent can the Marxist-Leninist societies themselves and their successors be subjected to a similar critique?

The relationship between socialist theology and practical policies towards religion in socialist Eastern Europe ranged from outright persecution in Albania to the *modus vivendi* established between church and state in Poland. The strength of the older established religions varied considerably. The numbers of believers were much lower in Czechoslovakia and East Germany than in Poland. There was also a significant weakening in most areas of Orthodox Christianity. However, religious revivals, particularly Protestant sectarian groupings, have been noted in many countries, including East Germany. The meaning of such revivals, and of continued strong religiosity in several Catholic areas, has been much discussed by political scientists, for religious affiliation in socialist societies was clearly a highly politicized matter. Recent Polish history, and the growth of the East German peace movement provide good examples. Anthropologists can also make a significant contribution to understanding continuity and change in traditional religions, and to the ultimate failure of Marxism-Leninism to displace them.

I begin with a consideration of the role of religion in the development of political identities, focusing on a highly distinctive East European phenomenon: the Catholic churches of the Byzantine rite, the members of which are usually known as Greek Catholics or Uniates. I then consider how the established religions survived under socialism, looking particularly at some highly successful adaptations in the rural sphere. Turning to a closer examination of ritual, I consider 'traditional' phenomena before moving on to see how some of these changed as new ritual forms emerged in the socialist period, often linked to nationalist ideologies. These links have been consolidated in the post-socialist years.

### Religion and politics between east and west: the Uniates

There are close connections in Eastern Europe between religion and ethnic identity. For example, Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Bosnian Moslems all speak basically the same Serbo-Croat language and share many other cultural traits. The identification of Poles with the Roman Catholic church has been fundamental in distinguishing them from Orthodox Slavs and other neighbours. This was particularly important, as in the case of Serbia, during the long period of foreign domination, when the church was the only organization in which the sense of nationhood could be preserved. These cases are widely known, and the role of religion in the development of modern nationalist movements, particularly in the early phases of such movements, is a commonplace. It is also easy enough to find opposite cases, in which lack of religious unity impeded a nationalist movement. For example, the Albanians were divided between Catholicism and Orthodoxy long before the arrival of the Ottomans, who eventually (several centuries later) persuaded the majority of Albanians to adopt Islam. The Albanians never possessed a national church and it was impossible for religion to be a focus of Albanian identity. Instead the Orthodox Albanians came increasingly under the influence of Greeks, as a direct consequence of the religious tolerance of the *millet* system. This meant that Albanians, in addition to their struggle against Ottoman domination, also had to wage a separate struggle for religious autonomy from the Greek Orthodox church.

It is conventionally held that Orthodox Christianity has been more closely bound to secular authority than the Latin tradition. In the epoch when stronger, 'absolutist' states were developing in the west, several Catholic rulers applied pressure to Orthodox populations within their territories to adopt Catholicism. The Greek Catholic churches of Eastern Europe, often referred to as Uniate, were the result of this pressure. The largest Uniate community is Ukrainian speaking: its religious practices are close to those of Russian Orthodoxy. Conversion to Catholicism amounted to recognizing the Pope as spiritual leader and head of the church on earth, plus a few other minor theological points which had no relevance to practical religion. As far as the ordinary believers were concerned, the old liturgy remained in use, the clergy could still marry, and there was no change in the ritual calendar. Uniate churches were formed in several regions from the late sixteenth century, not through spontaneous pressures from below, but because of pressure from Catholic rulers for religious uniformity (*cuius regio, eius religio*). These formal

'Unions' had to be confirmed at diocesan and local level, a process which sometimes took generations. Their effect was to separate the new congregations from co-ethnics further east, who remained Orthodox, but without incorporating them into the world of Latin Catholicism. They preserved this anomalous status, mixing the theology of the western church with the practical rites and liturgy of the eastern, until the beginning of the socialist period. They then went 'underground', but emerged with surprising vigour in several countries after 1989. At every stage of this tangled history the Uniates illustrate the close connections between religious and political identity.

The Ruthenian-Russian population of the Northern Carpathians was divided politically in the Middle Ages between the states of Poland and Hungary. Polish Kings pursued the Uniate strategy from 1596. Much later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the clergy of this church became a potent force in politics as the vanguard of Ukrainian nationalism. They were so successful that nationalist governments in Poland in the inter-war decades implemented special measures against this church. The Uniate church was dissolved by Stalin at the end of the Second World War, and most East European countries followed suit. Christians were directed towards the Orthodox church, which socialist states found easier to influence. Some converted to Orthodoxy and became convinced that this was the authentic Eastern Slav tradition, before the intrusions of the west in the counter-reformation period. Others, however, remained faithful to the Uniate church (see Chapter Eight).

Matters were almost as complex on the southern side of the border in the lands administered until 1918 by Hungary. Here a Uniate diocese was initially subordinate to a remote Hungarian diocese, though it was later granted independence. However, the Uniate clergy here was more inclined to assimilate into Hungarian society than to pursue a Ukrainian identity or any other ethnic separatism. In this case, in the context of strong pressures to assimilate, the Uniate structures helped to promote a western orientation and contributed to the fragmentation of a compact ethnic community, which might in other circumstances have forged stronger links with closely related people to the north and east. When the liberalization of political life in Czechoslovakia in 1968 gave these people the chance to choose between the Orthodox Church and the Uniate Church, many opted for the Uniates: Eastern Slovakia thus joined Hungary as one of the few areas where the Uniates could lead a fairly normal existence in socialist Eastern Europe (Magocsi 1983).

In Romania the Uniate clergy, with a strong base in Transylvania, was an important factor in the transmission of nationalist ideas in the nineteenth

## 54 The Skeleton at the Feast

century. In the twentieth century political pressures induced many Uniates to switch to Orthodoxy. Some villages were divided between competing religious factions. A church which acknowledged the supreme power of the Vatican, and yet was suspected of strong nationalist tendencies, spelled danger to socialist governments. Hence the Romanian government, too, persecuted Uniate believers and clergy. Late in the socialist period, at the height of the Ceauşescu régime's repressive campaigns against the Hungarians of Transylvania, Uniates were incited by the Romanian authorities to demand their rights in Roman Catholic churches, as part of the strategy to weaken the solidarity of the minority ethnic group.

After the collapse of socialism, Uniates have again flourished in regions where they were officially non-existent for over forty years. They are prominent in national life in the Western Ukraine, where many Orthodox priests have 're-converted' to the eastern variant of Catholicism and taken most, sometimes all, of their parishioners with them. Elsewhere, however, there remain fierce tensions between the two Catholic traditions. In southeastern Poland, Uniates are identified negatively with Ukrainian nationalism and terrorist atrocities. Members of the church complain bitterly about the treatment they receive from the dominant Roman Catholic church: indeed, the Pope's own commitment to parity of esteem for the eastern rite has been flagrantly transgressed by Polish nationalists, including Roman Catholic clergy (Hann forthcoming e).

### Religion and the peasantry: rural Poland

Despite variations in theology and in the precise linkages with politics at the national level, the practical functions of religion in the predominantly agricultural communities of Eastern Europe before the socialist period show similar recurring patterns. The details of the mixture produced by the blending of Catholicism with Asiatic shamanist traditions among Hungarians differed from the combinations that resulted from interaction with Slavic culture. But, through its close adjustment to the seasonal rhythms of rural life, the role of religion in giving meaning to the lives of ordinary people and in shaping the course of those lives through the major rituals of the life-cycle was much the same everywhere. Christianity dominated popular culture in Eastern Europe. It also dominated the legal 'superstructure' of society, e.g. the canon law specified which marriages were permissible and which prohibited. The church was often powerful politically, at national and at local levels, and it was a significant economic institution, particularly as a landowner. It generally

offered channels of social mobility for peasant sons. In some Orthodox areas, such as the Uniate territories discussed above, where priests could marry and there were few other openings for peasants, the clergy became an almost caste-like group. Under Latin Catholicism, celibacy prevented this. In Poland many Catholic priests were recruited from the peasantry, and the social or 'class' gap between the clergy and the faithful remained small.

The integrating role of religion in the folk culture of rural communities is well documented for Poland in the collaborative work of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918-20). They emphasize the close links between religious and economic activities, and the consolation that peasants could always find in religion, no matter how difficult their material life. On the other hand when, in the inter-war period, material conditions worsened in many parts of Poland, even the religious system showed signs of disintegration. In Polesie, which falls between Belarus and the Ukraine on today's maps, Józef Obrębski (1936) found that religion was not an effective panacea in a dire economic situation. Marxist sociologists of religion were later to argue explicitly that religion serves to reconcile peasants to harsh economic realities. They are said to be duped, blinded as to the real cause of their oppression by an ideology which subordinates them to temporal hierarchies and, by encouraging them to think of spiritual rewards in the next world, effectively legitimates their suffering in the present. The rising tide of national sentiment in Poland, in which the church was a key agent, was, according to Marxists, a further variant of this mystification.

At issue here are two fundamentally opposed ways of approaching religion: is it the glue that holds society together, the embodiment of the 'collective representations' of the society, or is it a smokescreen to protect dominant class interests? Evidence can be found in pre-socialist Eastern Europe to support both approaches. Both may be pursued in the socialist period too, but there are problems in identifying the 'smokescreen' function in societies officially committed to Marxist doctrines and composed of non-antagonistic classes. Before examining further the new official ideology, it is important not to lose sight of the vitality of the traditional religion. It had to operate in an entirely changed social and political context under socialism, and part of the support given was clearly a consequence of the lack of any other vehicle to oppose the socialist state. However, at least in some parts of some countries, churches had deeper sources of attraction and 'secularization' models look entirely inadequate. The position of the Roman Catholic church in rural Poland provides us with an outstanding example. Under socialism there was an abundant flow of able men



## 56 The Skeleton at the Feast

into the Polish priesthood (and of women into the convents), recruited as in the past from the same social groupings as the mass of their parishioners. The church was able to strengthen its organization, particularly in the countryside, which experienced lower rates of population loss than most areas of rural Europe. It had the financial and political resources to be able to build new churches with impunity, and to maintain an effective programme of religious education outside the state schools.

The village I studied in southeastern Poland was located in a valley resettled by Poles of diverse origins at the start of the socialist period. As in more traditional communities, the church became the most important meeting place in Wisłok, and the Sunday mass was the only occasion when the whole community, spread over several hamlets, gathered under one roof. The church was also the only truly popular cultural institution, though its activities in this field were severely limited by the state. Priests were well liked and respected, and they maintained the old custom of visiting each household in the village during the winter 'carolling period'. Ritual activities outside the church were constrained by the state, but still of considerable significance. Replicas of celebrated representations of the Holy Virgin, who is also acclaimed as Queen of Poland, circulated from house to house with great formality, drawing together large groupings of neighbours and kin for long evenings of prayers and hymns. More modern forms of ritual activity were also observed, such as the sprinkling of holy water on motor cars by the priest after mass on St. Christopher's Day (Hann 1985).

Regular attenders of mass in Poland (most of the rural population fall into this category) were left in no doubt of the depth of the Church's hostility towards the secular authorities. In the early 1980s the Polish state was publicly assailed not just as the perpetrator of a grave economic crisis, but as an inhuman organization intent on destroying Christian religious values, along with the basic liberties of all individuals. The church's appeal to intellectuals, strengthened by scandals such as the murder by secret police of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, is well known. It is less widely appreciated that the Roman Catholic church directed a specific message to the individual peasant, who in Poland was usually able to avoid collectivization, but still found himself vulnerable to the socialist state in many other ways. The priests I heard in Wisłok returned repeatedly to the theme of the sanctity of family life, and often related this to the sanctity of small parcels of private property. The independent peasant cultivator was said to be closer both to nature and to God than a worker on a state farm. During years of economic crisis, the state was accused of

squandering the harvest that God had ordained in Poland: state farm workers in the congregations which heard these sermons seemed to be in basic agreement with the church and the peasantry on these points. In this way, in addition to helping the rural population to cope with the perils of soils, of climate, and of human mortality, the Polish Catholic church sought to pass on a clear view about the uncertainties and disabilities of living under a socialist state. The church did not act simply as a conservative institution, concerned only to defend its established ground. It had updated its ideology, as it had earlier under the influence of populist politics. Critics might insist that the Catholic church in Poland, through its support for small-scale farming and its commitment to pro-natalist policies, has a heavy responsibility for continuing economic backwardness, and for the persistence of a peasant identity which might otherwise by now have faded.

There is, of course, much more to the Catholic church in Poland than a strong rural base. The Polish Pope devoted much energy to devising an equivalent message for the industrial working classes, but the task of pastoral integration is harder to accomplish in the cities. The clergy were conspicuous in cities such as Gdańsk during the *Solidarity* strikes and afterwards, and some town dwellers attended church as part of a profile of opposition to the socialist state; but the rural parishes were the true backbone of the Catholic faith in socialist Poland. It seems likely that much the same is true of other East European churches, and perhaps especially of the churches of Yugoslavia. It is surely no coincidence that the two states in which agricultural land stayed mainly in private hands were also the states where religious life remained most vigorous, continuing to find dramatic manifestations in rituals, pilgrimages and cult activities. Religion in these contexts continued to fulfil its old functions, but it also acquired new ones. Religious practices, formerly taken for granted as the secure moorings of community life, became more consciously valued. The remarkable Marian cults of Medjugorje showed that religion in a materialist state was still capable of generating cult excesses (Bax 1991, 1995).

### **Ritual in a traditional context: the Macedonian *slava***

The term 'ritual' is used in a confusing variety of ways by anthropologists, and some would prefer to abolish it altogether (Goody 1977). In its most general sense, it refers to all kinds of patterned and prescribed social behaviour, very often formalized and repetitive, including many of the habitual activities of everyday human life. The rituals to which anthropologists have devoted most

We can now suggest the central meaning of the *slava* which emerges from these Crna Goran data. It is an occasion which unites normally opposing interests in a single moral order that is expressed in *slava* ritual and belief. Not only does it break down group exclusiveness by permitting individuals to come together in their private capacity rather than as representatives, but it also forces normally exclusive groups to compete with each other for the attention of outsiders. (1976a: 28)

### Folklore authenticated by the state

In Skopska Crna Gorna the main ritual regulator was the calendar of the Orthodox Church, and the influence of the modern state was apparently not great. However many areas of ritual activity in socialist Eastern Europe became targets for intervention 'from above'. This sometimes took the form of crude prohibitions, e.g. public religious processions were proscribed in most socialist countries. Sometimes there were more complex attempts to graft on new meanings, while retaining what was acceptable in the old. In such circumstances the basic structures of rituals might not alter substantially, but the meanings and values communicated were significantly modified. For example, Carol Silverman noted that in socialist Bulgaria many saint's day celebrations became 'regional folk festivals, which include political speeches and competitive awards' (1983: 57). Silverman discussed the vitality of local folk group ensembles in Bulgarian villages, and the clear policy of the state to ensure that only genuine Bulgarian ensembles could ever perform before wider audiences (the folk music of groups such as Gypsies or Pomak Moslems was not promoted). The authorities went to considerable scholarly trouble to establish the 'authenticity' of the music that met with their approval, to the extent of discouraging 'innovations' that dated back hundreds of years. The aim was to freeze the music and associated instruments of a culture at a fixed moment in the past, when the 'national' status of the culture was allegedly clearest. The Bulgarian state also encouraged professional (i.e. state funded) groups to play westernized music, explicitly lacking local authenticity, in the interests of promoting cultural unity by standardization. In this way regional styles were undermined, and tastes homogenized across the country. These programmes were seen by Silverman as a continuation of the uses made of folklore by national 'awakeners' in the nineteenth century: music and dance had been a highly politicized field ever since, regularly manipulated by élites for their own legitimating purposes.



Frank Dubinskas pursued similar issues in his research in Yugoslavia. He found, in the folk music groups that he studied, strong tendencies towards standardization at the regional level. This contrasted with the pre-socialist burgeoning of folk music ensembles, when even inter-village differences were pronounced. The impact of the mass media facilitated this change, which, as in Bulgaria and every other socialist country, was subject to close control by official sponsoring bodies, i.e. the political authorities. Dubinskas was sceptical of claims to 'authenticity' in either the traditional or modern period, since the goal of producing music and dance to embody a presumed cultural distinctiveness inevitably distorts the attempt to reconstruct or build upon the performances of the past. But in another sense, even the new standardized music had its own authenticity: artists were creative within the new guidelines, and audiences and performers came to believe in the quality of their cultural product. Socialist governments found this area too important to ignore. Recreation and display through song and dance were vital components of popular culture. Being less closely attached to religious ritual, they could be more easily adapted to new contexts. These processes of secularization and politicization were not socialist innovations, but were continuations of tendencies which had begun in the last century.

Gail Kligman's monograph on Căluș rituals in southern Romania provides further illustrations of this theme and, like her later book following fieldwork in another region (1988), makes an important contribution to the general anthropological literature on ritual. The Călușari are small groups of men who at Whitsuntide dress and dance in styles superficially resembling English Morris Dancers. Whitsun was a time of uncertainty and danger in the ancient Romanian ritual calendar, and the Căluș rituals were a counterpoint to this; they were not significantly integrated into the Orthodox religion. A central feature of performances in the past was the healing of persons possessed by spirits, usually women, as a consequence of breaking some taboo during this period. More generally, the Călușari were thought to confer protection on those they danced over, especially young children, and to bring fertility to the land. Kligman describes in detail the recruitment and composition of the group and the contents of ritual performances. Each group had a leader, who retained and transmitted to his successors (who were not kin) full command of the prescribed secret knowledge. Almost equally important was the 'mute' member, who used only mime during performances. He was a joker or trickster character, both sacred and profane, who provided essential comic relief, and also participated in the complex sex reversals that are another feature of the

## 62 The Skeleton at the Feast

ritual. Among the main symbolic artifacts were a sword, a phallus, and a flag, born on a pole of about three metres, which was placed in the centre of the courtyards or magic circles where performances were given, and was thought to secrete 'all the power'. The temporal sequence was marked in great secrecy by the raising of this flag at the beginning, and its burial at the end. The liminal time in between was variously filled with house to house visits, visits to other villages, and occasional competitions with rival groups. Each performance of Căluș, in addition to specific acts of healing, if appropriate, was characterized by dance, music, drama, and magical actions syncretized to form an organic whole (1981: 13).

Kligman understands all of this behaviour to be a means of helping people to cope better with the uncertainties and dangers in their lives. She believes that real cures were effected in cases of 'nervous disorders of a hysterical nature', perhaps in rather the same way that psychoanalysts cure patients in other social conditions. However, more important than offering specific cures to the few (an aspect of Căluș that was almost extinct) is the symbolic manipulation, through which meaning was structured and constituted for all individuals in society. Căluș was a life-giving ritual for all, denying death and offering the hope of triumph over all existential problems.

How did this healing and fertility ritual survive in contemporary socialist society? Kligman argues that the 'rationality' epitomized in socialist Romania by the Five Year Plan is inherently insufficient to master the realities which really matter to people, and that consequently 'the belief in the underlying structure of Căluș persists' (1981: 150). It provided a sort of therapy for man's permanent existential crises. Although Romania experienced particular difficulties in economic and social development in the later years of socialism, a similar logic can be applied to all modernizing societies which attempt to base a social order on rational, secular principles. The modern social system, in which Căluș is clearly a curiosity, if not an anachronism, clashes with the cultural system, in which Căluș continues to address real and vital problems. Although Kligman calls for a switch of anthropological interest away from function and towards meaning, she herself shows that it remains *functional* in terms of its social psychology. She quotes tellingly the story of one sick man at Whitsun, whose craving for a certain cure led him to consult not just the Căluș, not just a socialist doctor, but both of these and a priest as well!

The Căluș rituals had other functional advantages for the socialist state in Romania. As with folklore groups, these rituals were deliberately brought out from their natural rural home and turned into art, for public consumption on the

stages or urban theatres. Again, the pattern was not initiated in the socialist period, for Călușari had performed in Western Europe before the Second World War. But the extent of support and sponsorship by the secular authorities was much greater under socialism: the rituals became more standardized, though not necessarily trivialized. Every year a festival was held in a model socialist city, where the spectators were observers rather than participants, and groups would lose points if their costumes deviated from officially prescribed norms based on the most colourful and spectacular variants. These occasions were not just about play or about aesthetics (although many dancers reached high technical standards without knowing much about the ritual itself). Some specific political messages were also conveyed. The government encouraged scholars to research the Latin origins of the rituals, as part of the general concern to establish the ancient identity of the Romanian people and hence their rights to all their present territory (see Chapter Four). Research was conducted in all areas of the country, even though the rituals used to be concentrated in the south, in order to strengthen the message that in watching and performing Căluș, all Romanians could take pride in a national ritual.

### The battle of the symbols

The power and complexity of symbolic structures are often thought to depend on their archaic character. The search for deep structural meaning seems incongruous in the case of the consciously invented rituals of modern socialist societies. Nevertheless, socialists needed to address perennial problems, and they had some degree of success in doing so. The Soviet Union, having set out with the goal of abolishing all superstitions in the name of Marxist-Leninist rationality, eventually promoted the development of a comprehensive system of rituals, even if the quality of the symbolic language was sometimes poor and derivative (Binns 1979-80; Lane 1981). Elsewhere there were similar attempts to provide socialist versions of the major life-cycle rituals, previously organized exclusively through the churches. The secular authorities had great difficulty in winning general acceptance for their versions of baptismal and funeral rites, perhaps because these mark the beginning and end of life itself, but secular wedding festivities were more widely taken up. However, in my experience, most East Europeans continued to regard the optional religious ceremony as more meaningful than the compulsory civil wedding. Other kinds of new rite, such as entry into youth associations or first place of work, may have had more success in terms of socialist consciousness-raising.

## 64 The Skeleton at the Feast

Less satisfactory from the authorities' point of view were some of the most visibly conspicuous ceremonies of socialist states, such as the Mayday and Great October Revolution Day marches. Although marked by public holidays, the sterility of the basic format and the interminable speeches left these rites, in Lane's analysis, as 'commemorative rites par excellence' (1981: 188). They lacked spontaneity and popular engagement, and served merely to reaffirm where power resided, in the state. A comparative analysis of Mayday parades in Prague and Vienna brought out similar points. This proletarian holiday was established by Social Democrats in Austria more than a century ago, and in their hands it retained elements of spontaneity, while in the workers' states themselves it had become stymied (Rotenberg 1983). On the other hand, some large-scale rituals did strike deeper chords. Lane found that commemoration of war dead seemed to respond to a need 'from below', as well as suiting the purposes of the Soviet government which had eventually triumphed in the 'Great Patriotic War'. But, for obvious historical reasons, it was not easy for other Eastern European states to emulate this particular ritual.

Many other apparently innovative rituals in the USSR seemed to depend crucially for what limited success they achieved on the power of pre-existing symbols. Yet there were dangers in relying on specifically Russian symbols in a federal state. When Orthodox Christian models were selected for standardization and applied to regions such as Central Asia, the clash with a pre-socialist ritual calendar was acute. Contradictions also occurred when pagan symbols were adapted for use in modern contexts. These were, in theory, just as remote from secular rationality as were Christian symbols; but the incongruities were perhaps less visible in such cases, and the use of such artifacts as the Christmas Tree and of symbols taken from nature, such as the 'eternal flame', became widespread in the USSR.

Eastern European governments faced the basic problem that the most evocative symbols were deeply embedded in religious culture (of which there might be several distinct variants within the state) and in the national identities which became so strong in the century or so preceding the transition to socialism. In theory the socialist state was founded on principles antithetical to these traditions. In practice it had to come to terms with them both. Only Albania attempted to abolish the old religions completely. All socialist states had to reconcile their socialism with their national traditions. The problems in adjusting to the socialist models pioneered by the Soviet Union were most acute in countries with a unified religious culture, strong nationalist trends and a history of anti-Russian sentiment. The prime example is Poland.

In Poland, all major domestic and life-cycle rituals have long been dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. A superficial glance at the public calendar before 1989 would show many similarities to the socialist ritual calendar elsewhere, perhaps marked by an unusually large number of national days of remembrance, including some, such as the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, which were popularly perceived as a reproach to the Soviet Union. A closer inspection of the reality of the Polish cycle shows that there were major differences from the USSR and other neighbours. Christmas and Easter were by far the most important rituals. November 7th was a public holiday in the Soviet bloc countries, commemorating the Revolution of 1917. It was officially celebrated in Poland too, but here the public holiday was taken on All Saints' Day, one week earlier. Mayday was observed in Poland, as elsewhere, as the workers' holiday, but during the *Solidarity* period in the early 1980s, there were better supported parades on May 3rd, marking the anniversary of Poland's declaration of a liberal Constitution in 1791. To many Poles, this national celebration mattered more than the proletarian holiday.

The ritual life of the Roman Catholic Church flourished in the socialist period. Conspicuous at the national level were pilgrimages to the shrine of Częstchowa where, as in the pre-socialist period, a Marian icon embodied the Catholic Church's special relationship with the Polish state. This identity was enormously strengthened by the election of Cardinal Woytyła as Pope in 1978. His numerous visits to his native country did much to stiffen loyalties to the church in a period when cynicism towards the secular authorities was reaching new heights. Poles delighted in reading between the lines of his sermons to uncover coded political messages. Even when no such messages could be detected, his very presence, officiating at huge open-air masses, in full Papal dress, with the colours of the Vatican strewn all around, communicated the synthesis of Polishness, Catholicism and anti-communism to which most Poles were strongly attracted.

What could the secular authorities achieve in such an unpromising situation? They could of course do their best to present their own ideals and their own versions of history through their monopolistic control over the media and formal educational institutions. But it was not easy to educate enough teachers to put across sanitized socialist versions of history, and to maintain the vigilance needed to prevent intellectuals from publicizing alternative histories and alternative symbols. Symbols such as the Katyń Forest, where Polish army officers were massacred by Russians in 1941, or the pre-war map of Poland,



## 66 The Skeleton at the Feast

showing large territories that had been incorporated into the USSR, were extremely prominent in the publicity of *Solidarity*.

Unable to attain the levels of control maintained in the USSR, the Polish authorities seemed instead to settle on a 'second-best' strategy of trying to subvert or capture some of the more evocative of pre-socialist symbols. They continued to use the old national anthem and the national colours (red and white, rather than the all-red of the Soviet Union). The hammer and sickle were partly replaced by specifically Polish symbols, among the most conspicuous of which was the emblem of an eagle. This had long been a symbol of Polish sovereignty and it could be traced back to the Piast dynasties which ruled the first Polish state more than a thousand years ago. There had been many subtle changes of form at different times, but the crown over the eagle's head was perceived as a symbol of national independence as well as of royal authority. Zdzisław Mach goes so far as to represent the old Polish kingdom as relatively free of conflict and hierarchy and to suggest that '...the notion of the monarchy symbolised by the crown is not incompatible with the notion of democracy' (1985: 8). This interpretation seemed to prevail among many Poles after the first socialist government decided to keep the eagle, but to encapsulate its own message of liberation by removing the crown. During the *Solidarity* period the eagle returned in oppositionist propaganda with an outside crown back on its head: anything less was seen as an implicit insult to national independence. Mach also found that an important element in the power of this symbol lay in its integration of religious symbols. It was common to represent the Mary figure on the breast of the eagle, in place of the royal coat of arms previously placed in that position. In both cases, according to Mach, the superiority of the eagle itself as the symbol of 'Polishness' was clearly indicated in the heraldic language, dominating over particular monarchs in the past as it dominates over religion today. Thus Mach concludes that national symbols are 'alive as a central element in the most crucial social processes in Poland, ordering the thinking of great masses of people and fundamentally influencing their actions' (1985: 14).

Some groups in Polish society not previously engaged in this struggle found themselves obliged to take sides: for example certain religious minorities were so alarmed by the nationalist behaviour of some Catholics that they sided with the government, not because they approved of its general socialist policies, but because they felt they would enjoy greater religious tolerance under a socialist government than under a government in which Catholics wielded power. I found such attitudes among Lemkos and Polish Protestants in southeastern

Poland (1985: Ch.6). But other minorities, such as the Lutherans studied by Grażyna Kubica (1986), found themselves inclining the other way. These people, who had not previously lit candles in their cemeteries on All Saints' Day, began to do so as Catholic rituals came to be recognized as the rituals of the whole Polish nation. It is clear from Kubica's analysis of this ritual that religious doctrines pertaining to the redemption of souls from purgatory have weakened among Catholics also. Despite this, the occasion had retained its 'sacred' character. It did not just unite families around the graves of their ancestors, it also united the great majority of Poles in a celebration which had nothing to do with the secular authorities. The latter countered by using this occasion for remembrance of war dead, including Soviet soldiers who died in Poland, thereby lending an 'official' character to a ritual that was not really theirs.

Kubica's work shows that standardization in ritual behaviour is not just a trend encouraged by governments, as in the context of folklore. When Lutherans take up Catholic practices in the higher cause of national unity, this is unity emerging 'from below'. Kubica gives other examples of competition, such as the church's organizing parades on Mayday in the name of Saint Joseph the Worker. The contest between government and opposition for ritual domination was particularly exciting in Poland, but similar conflicts simmered elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Socialist rulers generally co-opted the key national symbols; only in Poland was their right to do this seriously disputed.

Churches did not have a monopoly on oppositional rituals. As large, sometimes impersonal organizations which have often compromised with the authorities, the official church had on occasion to confront challenges to its authority. Currents of anticlericalism persisted, even in rural Poland. Evangelical and fundamentalist movements—Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses etc.—also became strong in several countries. More and more East Europeans seemed to be looking for personal relationships with God, unmediated by priests and hierarchical organizations. Relatively isolated social groups in socialist society, such as small tradesmen and artisans, were the people more likely to convert to the expanding Protestant movements. They were especially strong in Hungary. Unusual Evangelical prophecies circulated prominently in Poland, which was the one country in socialist Eastern Europe where astrology books were readily available. It would seem that, for all its political significance, the Catholic church did not fulfil all the Poles' needs in times of social crisis and intellectual cynicism. Even Indian meditation-based movements became a fad among East European intellectuals in several countries.

## 68 The Skeleton at the Feast

Thus not all symbolic competition in socialist Eastern Europe should be reduced to the antithesis between church and party. Folklore and rituals were continuously and subversively recreated 'from below', in the context of jokes and rumours not sanctioned by either church or state. The dancehouse movement in Hungary in the 1970s showed that youth groups were prepared to challenge official monopolies over the control of folklore. Many people were ritual pluralists in that, like the sick Romanian at Whitsun, they practised as few or as many rituals as seemed appropriate in the circumstances. Despite all the antagonisms in Poland, many party members still had their children baptized and even attended mass themselves (as did members of the Communist Party in Catholic Italy). The use of ritual depends largely on context: the Party Secretary in the urban factory might become a good Catholic when back in his village at weekends. Just as some rituals in Skopska Crna Gorna emphasized unity and community whilst others represented exclusion and opposition, so the repertoire of rituals in socialist countries served differing and conflicting purposes. Some were intended to communicate the political legitimacy of governments, while others dealt with personal, and ontological predicaments. The possibilities for combination were considerable, and the East European governments had to accept that coercion and inculcation were hardly the most effective methods in this field. The symbols of socialism were never as powerful as they seemed to be to some westerners, but critics who pointed to inconsistencies and contradictions in this field were perhaps missing the point: tolerance of, and even incitement to ambiguities in ritual are typical of all societies.

### Ritual and ideology in socialist societies

Was the attempt to desacralize under socialism seriously carried through, or did it merely give way to a new religious ideology, with Marxism-Leninism as its transcendental principle? The survival of the older religions suggests that atheistic rationality was not successful in practice. Traditional forms of religion continued to fulfil basic emotional and ritual functions, and in several countries the churches were able to play a larger social and political role on the national stage. Secularization was not as significant a trend as might have been expected, given the development of the economy and urbanization. The example of All Saints' Day rituals in Poland suggests that, even when they had lost some of their traditional religious meanings, rituals were not necessarily desacralized. The most powerful ritual symbols in most socialist countries of

Eastern Europe seemed to be those which linked traditional forms of religion to the nation.

Socialist states often sought to replace or modify traditional rituals with their own versions, and to proclaim a 'scientific' theory of progress, replete with invocations of Marx and Lenin. Such aspirations would seem to qualify from an anthropological standpoint for the realm of religious ideology. However, Lane (1981), finds it more appropriate to view the rituals and ideology of the USSR as a 'political religion', with a much smaller range than a religious system in the full anthropological sense. She argues that this political religion should not be confused with 'civil religion' in the west. In the centralized systems of the socialist countries, political rituals had a far more important task in the legitimation of governments than they generally have vested in them in liberal democracies, or even in those non-western societies where a heavy emphasis on tradition or charisma provides alternative sources of legitimation.

Certain kinds of ritual have similar political functions in almost every imaginable social system. For example, Janusz Mucha (1991) investigated electoral behaviour in 1980s Poland. He found it to be a sham, given the manipulation that took place in the media, and the lack of any real choice between candidates, even when there was more than one name on the ballot paper. Mucha saw socialist elections not as a 'survival' of a past bourgeois epoch, but in terms of their actual functioning in socialist society. Like other equally ritualized activities, such as 'social consultations', elections were a form of 'substitution' for some other model of political activity. A similar analysis could be made of political processes in other kinds of society. It could be applied to conventional religious behaviour in Poland in the pre-socialist past, and to new forms of religious activity after socialism. It could be applied also to western societies, where the overt reliance upon ritual to communicate authority is less noticeable, but the camouflaging of power structures through ritual just as vital. It is by no means self-evident that the electoral system as operated in socialist countries failed utterly in its legitimating function, simply because the mixture of free competition and prescribed ritual was very different from the usual western mixture.

The extent to which rituals do in fact legitimate is open to empirical investigation. There can be little doubt that the church of communism did attract and retain sincere and committed followers in almost all walks of life. However, the impression given by anthropological research is that this church was not, overall, very persuasive in most countries, perhaps precisely because

## 70 The Skeleton at the Feast

the political purposes were too transparent. Traditional religious systems are more subtle in disguising their intentions. Many of the new socialist rituals were counterproductive, especially among intellectuals. However, the dissident intellectuals' rejection of 'real socialism' was seldom strongly echoed among other social groups. Marxism-Leninism began as a critique of conservative religious ideology and, even when reified itself into a highly repressive ideology, it still taught the basically subversive doctrine that power should be exercised by the masses. There was a decline in deferential behaviour in Eastern Europe under socialism. No socialist government created the conditions in which the emancipatory potential of the doctrines could be properly realized, but the egalitarian content of socialist ideology made it ill equipped for the repressive role often assigned to it by unsympathetic intellectuals, both east and west. Thus, attempts to employ Marxism-Leninism as a salvation religion failed because, unlike other religious ideologies, it did not actually conceal from the mass of the people where power really lay. Everyone *knew* that it lay with the communist party, when according to the most fundamental strand of the ideology it *ought* to have been vested in the people.

The theology of Marxism-Leninism and the reflection of that theology in the major public rituals of the state in the socialist period had relatively little impact on the more deeply felt sacred spheres of self and community, which continued to be rooted elsewhere – in the family, in the nation and in the older religions. Most socialist states sought to exploit areas of traditional *sacrum* and did so with scant regard for their own 'theological' principles. In some, such as Hungary, the authorities were quite successful in colonizing traditional areas of *sacrum*. They achieved this in part through techniques used elsewhere, such as timing a major national holiday, Constitution Day, to coincide with the day of the nation's Patron Saint, which as a result of a similar compromise struck in an earlier era, also happened to be a major festival in the folk calendar, the 'New Bread' holiday. Hungarian citizens were allowed more freedom to practise the older religious rituals than elsewhere in the region. Under market socialism, everyday social practices departed further and further from the theoretical blueprints of socialist central planning. The pattern was a neat inversion of the Uniate solution of old. In the early modern period as outlined above, some populations in Eastern Europe acquired the theology of the west but held on tenaciously to the practices of the east (though in the end these too were partially subverted). In the late socialist period some of their descendants were able to adapt their *practices* towards those of the west, while continuing



to pay formal allegiance to the socialist theology imposed upon them from the east.

### After socialism

The collapse of socialism has brought some further radical changes in this field. Superficially the transformations are dramatic, but the realities have, as usual, proved to be more complex. In many parts of the region, religion has received a substantial fillip. Not only were the Greek Catholics able to come out of the closet in a number of countries, but large, established churches have been able to reorganize themselves, to reclaim property, and to reassume - as they see it - their rightful place in the life of the nation. In addition, many new religious currents have also gained supporters - possibly as a consequence of the social and economic dislocation associated with 'the transition'.

However, the picture is more complex than this. In Poland, for example, the greater prominence of the church in the life of the nation, as demonstrated in its impact on abortion legislation, is not matched by any increase in the numbers attending church services. On the contrary, in the altered political circumstances the visible expressions of Catholicism may be waning. (This does not inhibit millions from continuing to participate in a rich cultic life, and from contributing toward the costs of a huge new basilica at the Marian shrine of Licheń, a potential rival to Częstochowa.)

The socialist ritual calendars have been swept away, generally to allow the reinstatement of earlier national holidays. Thus Poland now celebrates 3 May instead of Mayday. Hungary has replaced its 1945 Liberation Day holiday with a national holiday on 15 March, the day sacred to the memory of the 1848 revolutionaries. It has replaced commemoration of Russia's Great October Revolution with a new holiday on 23 October to mark the Hungarians' own revolution in 1956. This day also marks the proclamation of the current Republic, but the precise content of the holiday is, as usual, contested by many different groups and factions. Nationalists on the political right claim the spirit of 1956 for their causes, but leftists and communists can also stake a claim. All that seems certain, here as elsewhere in the region, is that symbols and rituals associated with the nation remain by far the most powerful.

**Further reading**

The journal published by the Keston Institute, *Religion, State and Society* (formerly known as *Religion in Communist Lands*) offers good coverage of religious issues in Eastern Europe. Surveys of the socialist scene are supplied by Beeson (1974) and Walters (1988). Michel (1991) gives a useful picture of Catholicism in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, while Ramet (1988) provides insights into the Orthodox world. Ramet (1995) offers fresh material on some of the most recent religious changes in the region. Kligman (1988) is a fine study of 'traditional' ritual in northern Romania, while Kubik (1994) gives a vivid picture of the battle of symbols that was played out in late socialist Poland.



**Plate 1. First Communion in Rural Poland (1981)**