

Chapter 4

Did Communism Kill Religion in Eastern Europe?

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how religion was affected by communism and how religious the Czech Republic and Hungary are today. It looks at how communist policy impacted various aspects of religion, including religious education and religious practices such as baptism and weddings. The chapter then analyzes current levels of religiosity in the Czech Republic and Hungary and discusses them in relation to religiosity in Western Europe. It is concluded that while religiosity in the Czech Republic is especially low, this may be due more to secularization than its communist legacy. Hungary's levels of religiosity are more in line with the rest of Eastern Europe and, given the government's recent inclusion of Christian values in public education, could potentially increase.

INTRODUCTION

Religion was heavily attacked by Communists in Eastern Europe during their reign from 1947 to 1989. They saw it as a threat to Marxist ideology and sought to eliminate it. Religious leaders were jailed, and people practicing religion often were disadvantaged socially and in terms of educational opportunities (Tomka, 2011). While religion ultimately survived, this chapter addresses the impact communism had on religion in the Czech Republic and Hungary today. It examines religion during communism, what happened immediately

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following the regime change to democracy in 1989, and how religious the two countries are today. The chapter concludes by discussing whether religious decline should be attributed to the communist legacy or is part of a larger trend towards secularization.

The first section of the chapter looks at how religion is part of political socialization. A person's religious beliefs often influence the way they think about politics and government and affect the policy positions they hold. Therefore, the section also addresses how compatible (or incompatible) religion is with communism. Additionally, religiosity is examined along with the theory of secularization. In order to know the full impact communism had on religion in Eastern Europe, it is necessary also to consider alternative explanations for religious decline.

The next section of the chapter briefly discusses the religious history of the Czech Republic and Hungary. It also looks at the approach taken by communists to minimize the role of religion in society, including how religious leaders were treated. What happened in regard to religion in the immediate aftermath of the regime change is also examined.

Finally, the current rates of religiosity in the Czech Republic and Hungary are viewed, along with how they compare to those in Western Europe. It is ultimately determined that while communism definitely had an impact on religion in Eastern Europe, it did not permanently stunt religious growth.

COMMUNISM, RELIGIOSITY, AND THE THEORY OF SECULARIZATION

Religion can serve as another source of political socialization. Studies have shown that followers of the same religion are fairly homogenous in terms of political preferences, ideology, and policy positions (Barker & Carman, 2000; Green, 2007; Mayer, 2004; Pearson-Merkowitz & Gimpel, 2009; Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2007). Additionally, research has found that people who regularly practice a religion have more civic skills and are more likely to participate politically (Pearson-Merkowitz & Gimpel, 2009; Verba et al., 1995; Wald et al., 1988).

Given the linkage between religion and politics, it becomes evident why the Communist Party would view religion as an enemy. Communists saw religion as “nonsense, non-scientific, a conservation of the past and an obstacle

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