

Editorial

Introduction: Religion and Human Rights in Post-Communism

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In this Special Issue, “religion” is understood as a set of beliefs and values and a corresponding way of life that embodies and enacts these values, including an understanding of the world. From the Latin *religio*, or bond, religion may manifest itself as doctrine, rules and hierarchies. “Faith” refers to authentic conviction and concrete commitment—a bond (Fortman 2011). “Human rights” are understood as the rights articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). There is a connection between the two—the term “religion” is mentioned five times in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948). Article 2 sanctions that human rights belong to everyone, that freedom of religion is a human right and that everyone is entitled to

... all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (Ibid)

Article 16 declared the same rights as Article 2, adding the right to marry and establish a family without distinction or limitation based on, among other things, religion. Article 18 is more religiously focused, asserting that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are human rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (Ibid)

Article 18 makes a strong statement on freedom of thought and conscience, which relates to religious beliefs that an individual can either express alone or share with a religious community.

However, lived experience has shown that freedom to practice one’s religion can be limited if the limitation is prescribed by national laws and is necessary and proportionate. The limitations may be pursued as a legitimate aim in the interests of public safety; the protection of public order, health, or morals; or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (Máté-Tóth and Sándor 2019). Religious freedom, therefore, may be curtailed if the national government decides that common good is at stake. At the same time, the relationship between religion and human rights might be at times ambiguous and in some instances even conflicting. Religion may support respect for human rights, but it may also contest, challenge, or diminish them. When it comes to the violation of human rights, religion may become a problem-solving institution supporting the common good, but it may also be the social institution defining and thus constructing the social problems related to the implementation of human rights, including women’s access to abortion, artificial insemination, surrogacy, etc. (Ziebertz and Zaccaria 2021). Besides revealing the ambivalence and contradictions inherent to religion and human rights, this Special Issue offers another important layer of exploration—an innovative approach to the relationship between religion and human rights in the former communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe or more generally the post-totalitarian societies, in the field defined



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as transitional justice. Transitional justice includes three forms of justice: backward-looking (reparation for past violations and persecution of religion and freedom of conscience), forward-looking (which also involves adjusting legislation to address the three forms of justice), and reckoning with the legacy of these human rights violations by developing concrete responses.

The collapse of the communist regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union ushered in a complete overhaul of life in that part of the world. Self-declared atheistic regimes made way for incipient democracies that have struggled not only to accommodate diversity in all its forms, including freedom of religion, but also to recognize and respect the communist-era human rights violations and provide a range of reparations for them. The link between organized religion and human rights has been examined in depth in some countries, time periods, and areas of life more than in others, leading to an incomplete or partial understanding of post-communist transitional justice developments, which also pertain to crimes and abuses suffered by religious communities and individual clergy and faithful (Arbour 2007).

The four contributions to this Special Issue shed new light on important but neglected aspects of the interplay between religion and human rights in post-communist countries. The volume includes country case studies as diverse as Albania, the Baltic republics/countries, Georgia, and Hungary, covering both religious majorities and religious minorities. The research methodology that underlines these contributions is empirical and praxis-oriented; the countries are explored in depth from a multi-disciplinary perspective which encompasses domains like history, political science, sociological, and gender and women's studies, and therefore this Special Issue provides a holistic approach to transitional justice that provides valuable lessons for other post-dictatorial settings.

Anna Dolidze's article focuses on the repatriation processes offered for the benefit of the Muslim Meskhetians, an ethnically and religiously diverse minority deported from Soviet Georgia some time before 1991 but eventually allowed to return to the republic after the collapse of the Soviet regime. This rich piece describes the post-Soviet repatriation process by showcasing the links between the efforts of the Georgian authorities to mend past wrongdoings while also advancing the country's request for membership in the Council of Europe. By providing concrete examples, the article demonstrates that the Georgian government had a superficial approach to transitional justice more generally, and repatriation more specifically. Without detailed criteria to clarify what exactly amounted to just repatriation, the process has had an uncertain degree of success. The article highlights an understudied case that sheds new light on the ways in which religion, minority human rights, and transitional justice reinforce each other.

Morta Vidūnaitė's article focuses on the variety of ways in which pious Muslim women exercise their agency to navigate religion, gender, and human rights in post-Soviet Baltic societies. The article argues that these women primarily find agency not in human rights but in their own religion (Islam). It is religion that provides instruction and agency, helping these women to secure human rights. As Vidūnaitė shows, women are empowered by Islam as the religion of their deliberate choice, which gives them meaning and guidance in life. They also find agency in their roles as wives and mothers, as well as in the sisterhood of the Muslim community. The article's results are based on the analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and field work conducted between 2021 and 2022. Baltic women's narratives on human rights (and in the case of this research, specifically regarding gender and sexuality) and the role of Islam in their lives contribute to the redefinition of religious and secular concepts within a post-communist context that involves transitional justice initiatives. In addition, these narratives are relevant for the wider scholarly debate on Muslim women living in non-Muslim democratic societies and the influence of religion on human rights.

The contribution authored by András Máté-Tóth and Gábor Dániel Nagy focuses on the relationship between human rights and religion, and argues that it cannot be seen as a relationship between two entirely distinct sets of values. The authors remind us that human

rights are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. However, throughout history, religious institutions have interpreted human rights in a variety of different ways and have supported or hindered their implementation because of different reasons and for different goals. The article analyzes the relationship between human rights and religion in the social and cultural matrix of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. While examining the relationship between religion and human rights, the article argues that the primary relationships are between human rights and the collective identity of the nation-state and between religion and the identity of the nation-state. These relationships are discussed in some detail with concrete examples.

Finally, Enika Abazi's article focuses on Albania, which under the communist regime became the first constitutional atheist state in the world. Article 37 of the 1976 Constitution states that "the state does not recognize any religion". Albanians were forced to deny their religion, change their belief system, and adopt the new socialist way of life, which denied and prohibited religion. Post-communist Albania represents a quintessential case study of importing religion into a formerly atheistic country that lacked qualified clergy, religious institutions and strong religious beliefs. In the permissive post-communist Albania, people, especially young people, have attributed different meanings to religion and religiosity. Surveys of faith communities along traditional lines would fail to provide useful insights into the significant transformations that have impacted the religious field in Albania after the fall of the communist regime and the current challenges faced by new and "traditional" denominations in that country. It is clear, however, that the post-communist religious context is dominated by two opposing currents. The article does not investigate religious "communitarianism" along traditional lines but rather examines salient religious identification and societal relationships and their implications. This analysis rests on survey data and free-flowing and open-ended interviews conducted mainly with students of the Political Science Department of the University of Tirana and of the European University of Tirana, as well as research in different social networks.

In conclusion, this Special Issue, focusing on religion and human rights in post-communism, provides new data and new models of the relationship between religion and human rights, which serves both the political scientist and the religion scholar, the politician and the citizen of these specific countries under investigation to understand the intricacies of the way in which religion has taken center stage in defining and redefining rights in a region that rediscovered religion after decades of anti-religious communism.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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