

RELIGION'S REVIVAL IN THE FORMER COMMUNIST EMPIRE

“Religion in Russia Simply Became Dormant Under Communism”

An Interview with Andrew Greeley

Public Perspective: The International Social Survey Program (ISSP), in which you and The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) are actively involved has recently released some extraordinarily interesting data on religious beliefs and practice in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former USSR—where a militant atheism had reigned. Would you tell our readers a bit about this study?

Andrew Greeley: The ISSP is a consortium of nearly 20 survey centers around the world. NORC is one of its conveners. We've been doing international studies since 1985. In 1991 we chose to look at religion and that was, happily, the year our Russian colleagues joined us. We have data on a number of the former socialist countries—East Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, as well as Russia.

The picture is different in each country. In eastern Germany there is precious little sign of religious revival. In Slovenia—no sign. Poland, on the other hand, has always been a religious country; the Catholic Church was too powerful for the party to suppress it. The biggest changes are occurring in Hungary and Russia.

In Hungary, the frequency of attendance between 1985 and 1991 tripled: from 6% going regularly to almost 20%; and from 25% saying they go at least once a year to 75%. Church attendance in Hungary now is actually higher than in Great Britain. Professor Michael Tomko, a Hungarian colleague, has suggested that at least some of this is probably due to the fact that the Hungarians are now free to say what they do—where they would have

been reluctant to admit church attendance earlier. But he thinks there's probably some real change going on. Hungary is a country where there has been a substantial religious revival. Politicians there find it necessary to claim some kind of religious identification when they are seeking office: “Well, I was baptized,” or “My wife and I were married in church,” “We got our children baptized,” or “My Uncle was a bishop.” Such claims of religious identity have become requirements for political life in the new Hungary.

Russia is the most interesting country of all because it has seen such an enormous increase in religious observance. We know that in fact 6,000 churches have opened in Russia since the fall of Communism. In our survey, one-third of Russians who used to be atheist now say they believe in God. Moreover, those who have moved to religious belief are disproportionately young; the greatest change is among people under 25. In 1990 only 9% of the Russians said they once identified with the Orthodox Church or were then Orthodox. Just a year later, in our 1991 survey, 30% identified with the Orthodox Church. For young people in particular, this religious conversion is a result of some intense religious experience. They say they intend to raise their children religiously. Some of my colleagues have suggested that this is a flash in the pan and won't last, but our data suggest it is a good deal more. There may indeed be a sincere religious transformation.

PP: What accounts for the big differences in post-Communist religious experience between Russia and Hungary on the one hand—where there is a big re-

vival—and eastern Germany and Slovenia, where there hasn't been much movement.

AG: My hunch is that the Russian tradition, the Orthodox tradition, is enormously rich. It has art, music, architecture, monasteries, stories with saints and mysticism—and all of these things a thousand years old and more. It is not the kind of cultural heritage that you can stamp out easily—even in 75 years. Religion in Russia simply became dormant under Communism. God wasn't dead in Russia, She was just hiding in the Moscow Subway or Underground, I should say. That's the secret of it. Orthodoxy had all the things that the Reformation didn't like about religious heritage. Eastern Germany was overwhelmingly Evangelical (or Lutheran) and lacked the strength of tradition to keep religion alive through the super dark years. In Hungary you had a strong tradition—perhaps not nearly as vigorous as in Poland but still alive and able because of its imagery and experiences to survive.

PP: You don't think Russia's religious revival has much to do with evangelism?

AG: That's right. While there have been some evangelistic ministries in Russia, they are very limited. We have a sample of almost 3,000 Russian respondents, and those whose religious conversion stems from an experience at a revival meeting don't show up in the sample. The evangelists get some publicity in the US, but in Russia their impact is minimal.

PP: In releasing your 1991 religion data, you referred to a “U effect” where the oldest population and the very youngest are the most religious.

AG: The U curve phenomenon is interesting because religious behavior generally increases with maturation or aging. It doesn't start at 55, it starts at 25, and people gradually become more religiously active as they grow older. So that when one encounters more religion among the younger generation, that's reason to suspect real social change going on.

We find a religious U curve in four of these former socialist countries—Russia, eastern Germany, Hungary, and Slovenia. In all of these countries there is an increase in both faith in life after death and in a personal God among people under 35. We also find it in four non-socialist countries—western Germany, Austria, Norway, and Israel. This doesn't seem to involve a return to church—but rather a heightened religious consciousness among younger people. In Russia it is particularly strong. More than 2 out of every 5 Russians under 25 said in 1991 that they believed in God—a tremendous change in a very short period of time.

PP: You make an interesting comment—that among the young people there is evidence of strongly held beliefs, but not of increased levels of church attendance.

AG: First of all, I don't think the Russian heritage involves people going to church all the time—once a week as they do in some of the western heritages—but indeed they do have much more confidence in the church than in any other place in the world. Three-quarters of the Russians say they have a high level of confidence in the church—just an astonishing phenomenon. Despite the fact that the officials of the Orthodox Church were frequently in cahoots with the KGB, the Russian people have confidence in the ecclesiastical institution. This is as true of the young people as anyone else.

Young people in Russia have not started to go back to church in any great numbers. We don't have any benchmarks from the past to know what the numbers were once, but it's now about 10-15% going regularly and another 10-15% going sometimes. Church attendance in every country, we know, increases as people get older; it will be interesting to

see if the same thing happens in Russia.

PP: We are talking, aren't we, about two different things when we talk about the fabric of spiritual beliefs on the one hand, and what people think about the role of the church and the hierarchy and authority of the church, on the other?

AG: Indeed. Poland continues to be an intensely Catholic country but confidence in Church leadership there has been going down dramatically in recent years. In Russia, as I've said, the Orthodox Church has returned to popularity. The influence of the Orthodox leadership right now is high because people have a high degree of respect for it. But if they tried to do the same thing that the Polish Church leadership has tried, they would have the same problems. The Polish Church leadership tried to destroy everything that developed in the Communist era and return to the social and political conditions of the 1930s.

PP: You conducted the ISSP religion surveys in nearly 20 countries—not just in the former Communist states. Would you summarize the broader picture?

AG: The first thing I'd say is that religion isn't dead or dying around the world. The overwhelming majority of people in all the countries believe in God and have some kind of religious affiliation. There are different levels of devotion. In all of our countries the only place we see a sharp decline is Holland. The most religious countries in our sample are Poland, Ireland and the United States. The least religious I suppose would be Britain, eastern Germany and Slovenia. Interestingly enough, in Britain and Slovenia belief in magic is much higher than it is in other countries. So it could be that when religion subsides belief in magic increases.

Poland had the advantage, so to speak, that its religious heritage is identified with the cause of nationalism; this is true too, in Ireland. Polish Catholicism and Irish Catholicism have been bulwarks of their countries' national spirit. The United States is special. As a result of the great religious movements at the beginning of the 19th century, religion became part of being American and is firmly imbedded in our culture. The American

tradition—where religion is a matter of undisputed choice and identity—is very different from that of Poland or Ireland, but it also involves a link of religion to nationalism. I don't want to sound like a reductionist because I am not, I think these factors all affect religion but don't explain it.

On the other hand, many countries, particularly in western Europe, never were very religious: Britain and France, for example, and to some extent Germany. In the so called good old days in the Middle Ages, magic was mixed in with religion and the populace never seems to have been very devout. What you have to explain then, is why some countries are now substantially more religious than they were in the past—Ireland, for example. Until the great famine in the middle of the last century, the Irish people, though Catholic, were not particularly devout, but in the years since then they became very devout. I don't know enough about the history of Poland, but I think what happened is similar to what occurred in Ireland. Nationalism became identified with religion, or religion with nationalism, providing powerful reinforcement for religion. In Russia, probably one of the ways of resisting Communist suppression through the years was a secret identification with Orthodoxy. The Pope is supposed to have said to Gorbachev, "But surely, my son, you were baptized," and Gorbachev is said to have responded, "But Holy Father, everyone was baptized." To get at the factors that make for greater religious devotion in a country requires a lot of historical digging.

Coming back to the US—Americans were not all that religious at the time of the Revolutionary War or even up until 1800. Then there was an incredible phenomenon called the second Great Awakening, in which what appears to have happened was that the populism of the revolutionary ethos invaded religious life and everybody became convinced they were capable of "doing their own religion" and there was a proliferation of religious movements. There was a flourishing of religious argument and religious music and religious revival meetings. At that time America became locked into

being a very devout country, and when the later immigrant groups came, the Catholics in particular, noting how religious the country was and how religion was a way of defining yourself, they for the most part either remained devout or indeed became more devout because being religious was a way of being American.

PP: You don't think the story of modern religious experience has been at all well told?

AG: The social science in America, and indeed the national elites which dominate our media and our book publishing industry, really don't think religion is serious. On the whole not very religious themselves, they can't take religion seriously. They've sort of accepted the popular version of the Secularization model, that religion is going away. I have seen no

research that persuades me that this is true, and in fact much research that suggests the opposite. The media engage in other distortions. I have been doing some work lately on comparing Catholics and Southern Baptists—the two largest denominations in the country, together including more than a third of all Americans. And it turns out that the image of the Southern Baptists which the national media present is utterly false; only a tiny minority of them are potential or actual members of a new “Religious Right”. There are modest differences in norms and values between Catholics and Southern Baptists, which you can account for by the different images of God—the Catholics having a much more affectionate image of God and the Southern Baptists a more punitive one.

Overall, American religion has been

stable as far back as we have surveys, back into the middle 1930s. We need to abandon the Secularization model, abandon the idea that religion is nothing more than superstition bound to wither in the face of science and development. We need to take religion seriously and try to understand its positive and negative influences in our society. I have been doing research on religious imagery for the last dozen years because I am convinced that the core of religion is experience and image and story. Religion is a powerful determinant of many forms of social behavior. It deserves serious study, not reductionist attempts to explain it away.

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THE ISSP CROSS-NATIONAL RELIGION SURVEY

**FIGURE 1
DIFFERENT NATIONAL VIEWS ON CHURCH AND STATE**

Question: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?...Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office?

