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# **FOCUSING ON WOUNDED COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: TOWARDS A REGIONAL INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS PROCESSES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

**By András Máté-Tóth**

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## **Overture**

“In Christian Europe there was honour in work, people had dignity, men and women were equal, the family was the basis of the nation, the nation was the basis of Europe, and states guaranteed security. In today’s open-society Europe there are no borders; European people can be readily replaced with immigrants; the family has been transformed into an optional, fluid form of cohabitation; the nation, national identity and national pride are seen as negative and obsolete notions; and the state no longer guarantees security in Europe“ (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, July 28, 2018).

“Our common mission is to repel the enemy, to protect our homeland, our future, and the future of the new generations from the tyranny that the attacker seeks to bring with his bayonets. The truth is on our side. Therefore, the enemy, with the help of God and with the support of the whole civilized world, will be defeated” (Metropolitan Epiphanius of Ukraine 2022).

"There is no contradiction between the Church and patriotism. [...] At the same time, however, we can see in our country the emergence of attitudes opposed to patriotism. Their common ground is egotism. [...] [It] is an un-Christian attitude. It is also national egotism, nationalism that cultivates the feeling of its own superiority, closing itself to other national communities and to the community of all people" (Polish Bishops’ Conference “The Christian form of patriotism” 2017).

Defending the value system of Christian Europe, defending the nation with the help of God, and defending the nation against nationalism. Three recent statements from three different

countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Such ideas and avowals lay the provocative groundwork to take a closer look to the points of connection between religion and security.<sup>1</sup>

I have two theses to put forward, aiming to make them understandable and discussable. The first is that the region Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE) can be appropriately interpreted in the theoretical framework of *wounded collective identity*. The primary marker of the region is the crucial hermeneutical power of the historical traumas and the strong presence of these traumas in the memory. The second point is that the presence and various roles of religions in the region can be adequately understood by investigating the theory of securitization. These two arguments may have a shocking effect. Scholars of religion, mainly trained in one or another of the social sciences, may be irritated by the arguments of wounded collective identity and securitization. They have experience with theories of modernization and secularization. I'm not against these latter approaches, and my goal is not to discredit their legitimacy. I am only convinced and motivated to argue for a better understanding, which takes the regional experiences more seriously.

As a scholar of religion, I will, first, posit security and securitization as the essential dimension of religion. Then, I will concentrate on the transformations and the shared identity of CEE. The region has been intrinsically threatened and wounded through global and regional processes. After describing the main marker of the region—a wounded collective identity—I will come to my second point. In a wounded world, in societies plagued by many insecurities, we can best understand religion in relation to security and insecurity.

## **Religion IS Securitization**

We scholars of *Religionswissenschaft* and religious history, in the main, recognize that religion in abstract is not an objective reality. Instead, religion is an interpretative category for the understanding of culture, history, and society. Keeping this open-ended sense of religion in mind, my first argument is that religion in its very different forms has a fundamental character as a defender and securitizer. I try to demonstrate this argument by referring only to the understanding of prayer as a central element of almost all religions.

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote at the conference of the European Association for the Study on Religions (EASR) in 2022 Cork, Ireland.

## *Prayer*

In the introduction to his major work on prayer, Friedrich Heiler writes page after page explaining that prayer and religion are inseparable. He cites a number of philosophers, theologians and religious historians in support of his claim. Quoting Schleiermacher, he expresses his own conviction, and the basis for his description of prayer in religious studies, that being a believer and praying are ultimately one and the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, by taking prayer as a constitutive element of religion, we can understand religion essentially as a defender and a securitizer. Moreover, religion demonstrates its elementary defender character in the various concepts of salvation. People are in trouble, and religion provides their salvation. Last but not least, religious communities generally interpret themselves as communities of salvation.

"The original occasion for prayer is always an apparent concrete emergency in which the elementary life interests of an individual or a group are seriously threatened."<sup>3</sup>

"When the human material world is accounted for in an act of creation resulting in a cleavage or separation from the divine or spiritual world, prayer is one means by which this gap of createdness is overcome, if but momentarily."<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, prayer is always a prayer of petition, in which one speaks to the Deity in the situation of one's own endangerment and that of one's loved ones. This is how Luther understands prayer, in which a person turns to God as a refuge in all his/her troubles. The basic premise of Friedrich Heiler's great monograph on prayer is that 'trouble teaches us to pray.' Prayer can be categorized in a phenomenological approach to religion, but ultimately the prayers of the history of religion refute strict distinctions. The Islamic *salat* prayer is an example of this, as is the prayer of the ancient Egyptian laborer Nofer-Abu, in which the point is that the human stands before the deity in his/her total vulnerability and at the same time in his/her total hope.<sup>5</sup>

The main point here is that religion as an interpretative category always plays a role of delineation and negation of the "other," which is declared not only as prophane, but as a threat

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Heiler, *Das Gebet: Eine religionsgeschichtl. u. religionspsycholog. Untersuchung*. 4. Aufl. (München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1921), pp. 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Heiler, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Sam D. Gill, "Prayer." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 7367–72. (Detroit, London: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). p. 7367.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Heinz Ratschow, "Gebet: I. Religionsgeschichtlich." In *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Vol. 12, edited by Gerhard Krause, Gerhard Müller, and Horst R. Balz, 31–34. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976-2007).

like 'idolatry,' 'magic,' 'superstition,' 'sects,' 'heresies,' 'cults,' etc.<sup>6</sup> Religion is for the faithful, as well as for the outside observer, securitization.

## Global Threats

After seeing defense and security as the main constitutive element of religion, I want to turn to my second point: security has become the highest need and value globally and primarily regionally in CEE. What has happened in Ukraine in the past few months has shown how vulnerable societies and states are in the 21st century. Insecurity and vulnerability are terms and dimensions more and more at stake in public affairs and in scholarly reflection. On this path, I will first give some global and then regional evidence concerning the broad relevance and highest importance of the question of security.

To be threatened is a common experience and feeling in the global world, as has become evident in the last two decades. Denise Jodelet, Jorge Vala, and Ewa Drozda-Senkowska edited a book published in 2020 by Springer whose title underlines my exact point: *Societies Under Threat*.<sup>7</sup> The collected chapters focus on the topic of "threat or threats, which to date have not attracted much attention in either public policy debate or scientific life." (p. v.) The publication addresses migratory movements, climate change, and terrorism. The concept of threat seems to increasingly predominate, thus substantially altering the representations and sensitivities of our contemporaries. As the editors closed the manuscript and sent it to the publisher, the Covid-19 pandemic had just begun to be a worldwide threat. The authors refer to the Spanish Flu as the biggest pandemic in world history, with the important remark of how little was it was commemorated in the humanities and social sciences compared with works on the First World War. Millions of families mourned their relatives because of the flu, and the memory lived on in the private sphere. In sum, the book *Societies Under Threat* signals a fundamental challenge for the humanities and social sciences, among them religious studies, to elaborate a special approach focusing on the basic global fact of traumas, threats, and fear.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Stausberg and Mark Q. Gardiner. "Definition." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg. 1st edition, 9–32. Oxford handbooks in religion and theology. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Jodelet, Jorge Vala, and Ewa Drozda-Senkowska. *Societies Under Threat* 3. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

## Regional Wounds

In recent years and months, many examples in CEE have verified the decisive political factor of traumas. I have referred above to the monstrosities of the war in Ukraine; it is sufficient to remember the massacre and mass graves in Bucha, Ukraine. In May this year, prime minister Orbán of Hungary expressed in a radio interview that at one time, Hungary had a sea, but it was taken away. Promptly came the answer from Zagreb and the Hungarian ambassador was summoned to the minister of foreign affairs. In April, Lithuania's president urged Sweden and Finland to join NATO because Lithuania feared being the next Ukraine. Gitanas Nausea says that admitting the Nordic nations would improve the security situation in the Baltic region. The list of sensibilities, fears, and security issues is endless and demonstrates the collective existential instability of the societies that were re-established after the fall of communism.

It is not possible to speak about Central and Eastern Europe today without mentioning the war in Ukraine. However, this war is not the first after WWII. We have to remember the Yugoslav Wars between 1991-2001: the Ten-Day war in Slovenia (1991), the Croatian war (1991-1995), the Bosnian war (1992-1995), the Kosovo war (1998-1999), the two armed insurgencies in the Preševo Valley (1999-2001), and the Republic of Macedonia (2001). These armed conflicts were about redrawing borders, defending state sovereignty, and securing ethnic-national identity. The same is being experienced in Ukraine not only for months but for years. Crimea was occupied by the Russian army after the Maidan revolution in 2014 and declared by President Putin as part of Russia. The war and occupation of the Donbas and recently of other cities and regions of Ukraine is declared by President Putin partly as a national duty to defend the oppressed Russian population and partly as a defense of Russia against American and Western European interests and influences.

Insecure borders, border sensibilities, and diplomatic and armed conflicts along the national and state borders belong to the list of main characteristics of the region of CEE. The question of state borders is always tied closest to the question of national identities. The history of CEE since the national awakening in the 18th century has been, in principle, the history of insisting on national and national-state identities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E. g. Réka Szilárdi, Szilvia Kakuszi, and András Máté-Tóth. "Borderline társadalomzavar? Kísérlet a kelet-közép-európai társadalmak metaforikus értelmezésére." *VALÓSÁG* 45, no. 3 (2022): 45–56.

## *Betweenness*

If we take a closer look at the history of the entire region, beyond focusing on a particular country only, it is evident that most of the border conflicts in the region come from the geopolitical and geocultural in-between status of the region. For centuries, borders and national and state affiliations were defined by the hegemonic empires from the West and East. The endless need and cries for sovereignty and autonomy under the various occupations have emphasized the common sense of the region, with a formative influence on the region's sensibilities, and leading to the temptations of nationalism, xenophobia, and nationalist hysteria. The region of CEE is a border region and displays symptoms of a collective borderline disorder.

The war in Ukraine is no different. President Putin and Patriarch Kirill argued for the war and declared the reason for the war in the frame of conflict between the West (America and the EU) and the East (Russian world). Just like in the Holodomor, causing the starvation of millions in 1932-33 triggered by the Hitler-Stalin pact, and in the manner Ukraine was declared after WWII to be part of the Soviet Union, Putin wants to block the free diplomatic Western orientation of an independent Ukraine.

All these historical and recent traumas mentioned above are not extreme exceptions. They symbolize and demonstrate the massive importance of the collective wounds in the societies of CEE. Politics and people also understand their fate through the lens of wounded collective identity, and they are captivated by real and imagined types of pain. For a proper understanding of the region and the presence and the functions of religion in CEE, it is necessary to put the factor of wounded collective identity in the center of the interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Not only the recent war in Ukraine, not only the unstable borders in the last century, but the entire geocultural and geopolitical setting of the region is marked primarily by in-betweenness. The region is a border region with all the consequences of this status. Strong hegemonies have fought against each other on this borderland which is CEE. It is not a coincidence that the prominent Yale historian Timothy Snyder called this region *Bloodlands: Between Hitler and Stalin* (2012). Or that another historian, the Polish Oskar Halecki, called it in his monograph the *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East-Central Europe* (2000).<sup>10</sup> The consciousness of in-betweenness and mutual occupations are not only

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<sup>9</sup> András Máté-Tóth, *Freiheit Und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa*. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Oskar Halecki, *Grenzraum Des Abendlandes: Eine Geschichte Ostmitteleuropas*. (Salzburg: Müller, 1957).

characteristic of Central Europe. It is the main historical factor for the Baltic and the Balkan regions. Researchers such as Manuela Boatcă, Zoltán Ginelly, and others are analyzing the region using the postcolonial approach. CEE can be understood as a colony of the hegemonic empires of Germans and Habsburgs, Russians and Soviets, and Ottomans. The definitive in-between status of the region goes back to the time of the Roman Empire. Wounded by this weighty historical heritage, societies and their representatives react in a particular manner to every national and international affair. To understand the differences between Western European cultures and CEE, the primary explanation is the trauma tradition.

### ***WCI Definition***

Based on historical data, surveys, and analysis of contemporary novels written by authors from CEE, I summarize the insights and impressions under the technical term wounded collective identity, explained with a minimalist definition: wounded collective identity is a metaphoric construction of the collective self-consciousness--based on the particular experiences in CEE--with significant elements such as the trauma-centered memory, the feeling of being threatened, and an obsessive demand for permanent self-determination. Wounded collective identity is not a descriptive category. It is an approach for a proper understanding of the region's particular dynamics. Wounded collective identity is like a primordial code with which the societal and religious processes can be decoded.

### ***WCI Heritage***

The region's history is full of traumas such as the mutual occupations by the hegemonies of East and West, the often brutally persecuted minority status of significant populations, the repression of human rights and language rights, the population exchanges after the redrawing of national borders, and the outrageous shame of genocides during and in the Holodomor, the Holocaust, Srebrenica, and most recently Ukraine. All these traumas have a decisive impact on the self-understanding of the region as historical baggage. They yield to the temptation to feel victimized, to have xenophobic tendencies, to have an irritated sensibility regarding national identity and sovereignty.

This paper does not detail further the approach to wounded collective identity; a more detailed approach can be found in my book *Freiheit und Populismus* (2019), written in German, and some journal articles and YouTube videos of mine in English.<sup>11</sup> The argumentation of my

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<sup>11</sup> András Máté-Tóth, "Wounded Words in a Wounded World: Opportunities for Mission in Central and Eastern Europe Today." *Mission Studies* 37, no. 3 (2020): 354–73. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341736>. Máté-



paper leads toward a further theoretical step. How can we interpret religious transformations in the region of CEE if we take wounded collective identity as the primary marker of the region? My answer in advance is as follows: religion can be appropriately understood through the lens of security and securitization in the region of wounded collective identity.

I explain my arguments in two steps. First, I contrast the approach of wounded collective identity with the approach of modernization. Second, I contrast the approach of secularization with securitization.

### **Woundedness Instead of Modernity**

The primary paradigm for analyzing Europe's societal transformation in the last two centuries is modernization. Well-known authors from sociology invented the term and designed the multifaceted theory of modernization, including Peter L. Berger, Anthony Giddens, and later Shmuel Eisenstadt with his profound modification of the original theory under the technical term "multiple modernizations." The main indicators delivered by theory are, in my understanding, signified by a developmental approach represented by the word "higher level": people educated at a higher level, a higher level of women in the education and workplaces, higher-level industrial production, and higher-level inhabitants in cities and capitals. Almost all descriptions and interpretations focused on the highest developed European societies and states like Great Britain, Germany, France, and, outside of Europe, the USA, and Japan.

In the last two decades, many authors have signaled the starting point of modernism and the universal validity of the main arguments of modernity. Among them, Manuela Boatcă explained in many scientific journal articles and her recent book co-authored with Anca Parvulescu how it is necessary to concentrate on the worldview and interpretation of the CEE as an in-between zone of empires. In this effort, they investigated the theoretical framework of post-colonialism and inter-imperiality.<sup>12</sup>

I propose taking a step forward in the analysis of the main historical experiences of the region CEE and their powerful presence in our time. And what is more, instead of borrowing

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Tóth, and Réka Szilárdi. "Szekuritizáció és vallás Kelet-Közép-Európában. Elméleti felvetés." *REGIO* 30, no. 1 (2022): 26–43. <https://m2.mtmt.hu/api/publication/32682315>. [Lecture](#) at CEU: Wounded Collective Identity (2018), [Lecture](#) at Szeged: Wounded collective identity: an autopoietic approach (2020).

<sup>12</sup> Anca Parvulescu, , and Manuela Boatcă. "The Inter-Imperial Dowry Plot." *Interventions* 23, no. 4 (2021): 570–95. Boatcă and Parvulescu. "Creolizing Transylvania: Notes on Coloniality and Inter-Imperiality." *History of the Present* 10, no. 1 (2020): 9–27. Gauthier, François. "(What Is Left of) Secularization? Debate on Jörg Stolz's Article on Secularization Theories in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Ideas, Evidence, and Problems." *Social Compass* 67, no. 2 (2020): 309–14.

theories from outside the region, we must develop an original idea based precisely on the identity markers of the region. This is the approach I call a wounded collective identity.

### **Securitization Instead of Secularization**

The theory of secularization is the main approach to analyzing religious transformations. For over half a century, this hermeneutic dominated the field of sociology and the field of religion, as well. As in the case of modernization, the theory of secularization is driven by the question of “more or less.” A smaller or larger proportion of people believe in God, spend time going to church, declare themselves Baptists or Jews, regard religious institutions as competent to in answering questions of social life and justice etc. The basic assumption of secularization is that the more modern a society, the less religious; thus, they conclude that the analysis of the religious fields is quite simple and valid in every area of culture. Critics of this theory come mainly from outside of the North Atlantic sphere, such as the famous and well-respected critique from Talal Asad. His critics take the fundamental difference between Western Europe and the Islamic civilization seriously. In analyzing “Islamism” it is necessary to also include the regional circumstances, which call for rethinking the deep structures of the theory of secularism.

The important question is what circumstances oblige Islamism to emerge publicly as a political discourse, and whether, and if so in what way, it challenges the deep structures of secularism, including its connection with nationalists discourse. (Asad 2003, 199)

Another type of critic focuses on statistically immeasurable dimensions of religion, first in the public. José Casanova can be taken as a leading proponent of this approach. In his analytical framework Casanova focused on the different dimensions of de-privatization of religion, because “there was a need to rethink systematically the relationship of religion and modernity, and the possible roles religions may play in the public sphere of modern societies.” (Casanova 1994, 211) Although there are many profound critics who are widely accepted in fields of study that touch on religion, the approach of secularization still holds a leading position.

Focusing on the region of CEE, which is characterized in my understanding as a collectively wounded region, the approach of secularization has limited relevance. Although for 30 years we have had thousands of national and international papers using this theory in the region, the main marker of the region remains less researched and analyzed. If we have a careful look at the inner dynamics of societies in CEE, we are not much confronted with the question

of whether more or less religious activity can be observed. We are confronted with questions of national sovereignty, coping with traumas and insecurity, dealing with questions of economic, political, and welfare positions in Europe and in the whole world. The decisive factors of societal transformations and collective sensibilities are most connected to the question of ontological, existential, and societal security problems. This is true not only because of the recent war in the Ukraine, but since the collapse of the former world order when there was less freedom but more stability and security.

Allow me to go back to the three quotations at the very beginning of this paper. All of them provide explicit insights into the definitive connection between the region's wounds and security provided by religion.

As the Hungarian prime minister stated: today's open-society Europe no longer guarantees security in Europe, but the Christian Europe we are fighting for does. As the Metropolitan Epiphanius of Ukraine explained: our common mission is to protect our homeland with the help of God. And in the third statement, the Polish Bishops' Conference pleaded for a Christian patriotism against the un-Christian nationalism. Fighting against non-Christian enemies, for security, for the nation—this represents the fundamental realm and coherence between the main wounds of the region, the deep needs for autonomy and security, and the role of religion in relation to these.

These correlations and arguments motivated me to examine the questions about religion in relation to the question of security as closely as possible. In the very beginning of my paper, I already highlighted security as one of the constitutive elements of religion, citing the example of prayer. Keeping this close connection between religion and security in mind, it is not hard to predict that the main marker of the societies of CEE will show deep correlations with the primary marker of religion. The main point is that the appropriate approach to the region of CEE is the wounded collective identity instead of the framework of modernization. And, in addition, the proper analysis of religious processes in the region focuses on religion in correlation to security.

Following this logic, religion in the region shows its true character as a source and force of security. In the sociological research on religion, Peter L. Berger spoke about the sacred canopy as a secure home for people in modern societies, Anthony Giddens coined the term *ontological security* as the knowledge about the reality as it must be, and Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart talked about existential security in which religion is less needed if people have secure material circumstances. All these ideas lack the reflection on the historical and contemporary traumas of societies, particularly in CEE. They understand religion mainly as

centered on the church and Christianity, and the memory of historical wounds has marginal importance, if any. Jörg Stolz may have been right when he highlighted in his presidential address at the International Society for the Sociology of Religion in 2019 that: it is “not so much individual existential security that influences the religiosity of individuals; rather, it is perceived existential insecurity in society as a whole.”<sup>13</sup> Societies as a whole deliver, in various ways, decisive traumatic experiences to posterity, which motivate the need for ontological and any other kind of security religion can provide. The designation of danger and the promise to avert it is a discursive process called securitization.

As I stressed in the beginning of this paper, religion can be understood as securitization. Securitization is—to quote Lægaard— “the process of transforming a subject into a matter of ‘security’ by presenting it as involving an extraordinary problem (threat, necessity, etc.) requiring certain political actions. [...] Securitization is a discursive process of framing: it is concerned with what political actors do and with the discursive effects of this”<sup>14</sup>. In CEE, we observe how this constitutive character of religion, which means securitization, is combined with securitization processes. Religion is securitization and is present in the region as securitization.

In closing let me indicate three specific research areas in CEE. In them, religion can be appropriately analyzed and interpreted by investigating the theoretical frameworks of wounded collective identity and securitization.

### ***Research Area 1: Religion as Tradition***

Religion in the public sphere in CEE is primarily a factor of preservation of national traditions rooted mainly in Christian and denominational high culture and festive traditions. Although there are enormous differences between each region's society regarding religion, we have a robust similarity. All the traditional customs and the emphasis of religious traditions in the public sphere have a clear stabilizing factor. Stability vs. insecurity, saving and keeping vs. changing and leaving.

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<sup>13</sup> Jörg Stolz, “Secularization Theories in the Twenty-First Century: Ideas, Evidence, and Problems. Presidential Address.” *Social Compass* 67, no. 2 (2020): 282–308 (p. 285).

<sup>14</sup> Sune Lægaard, “Religious Toleration and Securitisation of Religion.” In *Spaces of Tolerance: Changing Geographies and Philosophies of Religion & NBSP in Today’s Europe*, edited by Luiza Bialasiewicz and Valentina Gentile. 1st ed., 103–20. Routledge research in place, space, and politics. (New York: Routledge, 2019). pp. 104-5.

## ***Research Area 2: Christianity and the Stability of State***

Mentioning Christianity in the public and political sphere has the main function of emphasizing state sovereignty. There is a difference between Christianity in the religious sense versus the political sense, and the latter overlaps with the public sphere. Politicians and church representatives establish a close connection with Christianity, the nation, and the state. By emphasizing the political Trinity of Christianity, nation, and state, they counterbalance the threatened continuity and stability of their societies.

## ***Research Area 3: Christianity and the Family***

In addition to the defense of national state sovereignty using Christian rhetoric, saving the traditional form of the family belongs very closely to the same rhetoric. Christianity emblemizes a particular type of modern family life, emphasizing that family means a man and a woman plus a child or children. Professional politicians and opinion-formers, Church representatives, and right-wing oriented voters advocate a "normal family" and Christianity in the same breath. The main argument is that a family is the nucleus of society, and if the family is saved, humanity is saved. Keeping the family and society is part of Christianity and is the main goal and duty of Christian Churches.

## **Outlook**

I have argued that the theories of wounded collective identity and securitization are more appropriate than the commonly used theories of modernity and secularization for understanding the social and religious processes in the CEE region. I believe that I have successfully proven my thesis for the CEE region. In conclusion, I also dare to suggest that the significance of social traumas and threats is globalizing, thus increasing the hermeneutical capacity of my approach to the study of religion outside the CEE region. If contemporary religious trends on any continent are to be adequately analyzed, trauma management and the security dimensions of religion must increasingly come to the fore.

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