Sacred Geography of the Post-Socialist Balkans: Transformations of Religious Landscape and Pilgrimage
An Introduction

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This introductory text aims at presenting the dynamics in the development of religious life in the post-socialist Balkans and the trends in its research from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences. The topic has geographical as well as political and temporal limitations. The transformations in the political, economic, social and cultural development of the former socialist countries have been taking place hand in hand with significant changes in religious life as well. The officially imposed atheistic ideology and the restriction on religious practice during socialism have been followed by a manifestation of religious feelings, particularly in the 1990s. The different faiths traditional for the region have come alive in the public sphere. After 1989, the religious sphere became more pluralized in the countries of the Eastern bloc, and new religious movements such as neo-Protestantism, Eastern teachings, New Age ideas, etc. began to spread.

The intensification of religious practice in post-socialist countries raises the question of defining the processes observed. The research corpus on the issue can be grouped into four major theses: on the revitalization of religion; on the important differences in the religiousness of different countries; on religion as an important identity framework for social processes; and on the role of religion in the new pluralistic social environment (Jerolomov, Zrinščak 2006: 280). Researchers of religion in Eastern Europe define the observed processes
as ‘religious resurrection’ (Tomka 2011), ‘revitalization’ of current religious practice (Blagojević 2009: 69) or ‘a return’ of religiosity (Karamihova 2007a); unfortunately, most anthropologists and sociologists failed to observe ‘the particular shape and form of this religious growth and the structural changes of the religious representations triggered by the post-socialist period’ (Gog 2006: 51). The increased importance of religion can be attributed to its function of reconstructing the political and geopolitical identity in the post-socialist era (Borowik 2006: 272). Researchers point out that the general crisis of the communist model of modernization has led to a moral crisis, which in turn has resulted in turning to religion (Iveković 2002: 523); according to a thesis of the Croatian sociologist of religion Vrcan the ‘crisis of religion’ has turned into a ‘religion of crisis’ (Vrcan 1986). This turning to religion in Eastern Europe is motivated by the quest for cultural identity, social regeneration and fulfilment of spiritual needs (Tomka 2002: 537). However, referring to Sorin Gog we can also note that ‘the church loses her privileged position of hosting the religious experience and the process of de-institutionalization of religious experience leads to structural changes on the locus of the church in society’ (Gog 2006: 42). Instead of being an indicator of pure faith, in the 1990s religious belonging in the Balkans changes into an act of confirmation of cultural and ethnic affiliation more and more frequently, especially in critical situations such as the wars in former Yugoslavia (see for example: Ognjenović, Jozelić 2014).

The post-socialist ‘religious resurrection’ is looked upon as an aspect of the global rise of religiousness (Benovska-Sůbkova 2012: 49) as well as a process of construction of new identities. In this respect this volume is part of a more general debate on secularization in Europe and around the world. After the triumph of the secularization theory in the social sciences during the second half of the 20th century, the end of the century ushered in doubts regarding its cogency with respect to the observed phenomena and raised the question as to whether secularization is a modern myth (Pollack 2003). Researchers state correctly that modernization does not necessarily lead to secularization, and in this respect secularized Europe is more of an exception¹ rather than the norm (Berger, Davie, Fokas 2008). Modernization causes secularization as well as counter-secularization movements, while even in Europe we could speak of a change in the institutional role of religion rather than of secularization (Berger 2004: 11, 22). While the supporters of secularization use the processes in the Christian churches in Europe as their empirical base, the critics of secularization theories base their justification on examples of religious practices

¹ Davie allowed a concession: believing without belonging, but only in the case of Europe, which stands as an exception there – her influential book of a few years before is entitled along the same line: Europe: The Exceptional Case (Davie 2002).