

A Catholic Thing, or Something More?:
A Response to Slavica Jakelic's *Collectivistic Religions*
by
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Several years ago, when I was in my early graduate school years, I went to see Garry Wills give a talk at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school. Wills was in the middle of his "let's show the contingency of everything Catholicism holds eternal" tour, and he received quite a welcome from the Fathers and Sisters and students at Santa Clara. They even seemed to enjoy his fervent critiques of the Catholic Church. But for me, I thought these critiques were so stinging that the solution was easy: why not become an Episcopalian? When during the Q&A I asked him why he hadn't converted, he said he'd been asked that a lot recently, but then his answer became a bit rambling, as though he were still working through his thoughts.

It turns out I wasn't the only one asking him this question, and his answers got better over time. Indeed, his next book was titled "Why I Am A Catholic" (2003) and discussed his love of the creed, his fascination with the central mysteries of the Catholic Church, and the transcendent sense of peace that Catholicism brought him. But that analytical explanation only emerged in the latter half of the book. The first part of the book was all about his boyhood, his biography, and his personal spiritual journey. In addition to his love of the Apostle's Creed, then, there seemed to be something nameless about Catholicism's appeal to Wills, something primordial. As Wills made clear in his 1972 essay "Memories of a Catholic Boyhood," one "does not choose to belong to these religious traditions; one is born into them," and one cannot escape them without giving up too much of one's identity.

The quotation in the previous sentence is actually not from Wills, though, but instead the last sentence of the first paragraph of Slavica Jakelic's new book, *Collectivistic Religions*. Jakelic's book is about the kind of faith that Wills was struggling to articulate, and she gives a much-needed name to faiths that are communal and collectivistic, transcendent, yes, but also rooted in, and rooting one in, this world, and not as a matter of choice but as a matter of identity, a sense of being and belonging. These are what she calls "collectivistic religions." The power of "choice" in our current "religious marketplace" is weak in this realm of belief, and thus (to keep my example going) Wills didn't *choose* to become an Episcopalian because he couldn't *and simultaneously remain true to himself*. Catholicism was too much a part of who he was (and is).

Notions of birthright religion are well out-of-date among sociologists these days (less so for historians). And following the faith of our fathers is thought simply to be a small part of our religious journey, usually the beginning part and perhaps the ending part too. The notion that religion is biologically primordial is widely deemed an atavistic, "remnant[] of some premodern time" as Jakelic nicely puts it.

But Jakelic rightly argues that this claim is simply Weber's secularization thesis all over again, and this is an astute point. If birthright religion is antiquated, then the marketplace is the sole path to modernity, and the marketplace is the place of hardly

any collectively meaningful faith at all. Yet, in a neat turn, Jakelic doesn't dismiss the secularization thesis completely, instead borrowing from Eisenstadt to argue that, "We have learned, sometimes the hard way, that modernization does not have identical paths everywhere." Secularization is one path. So is fundamentalism. Another, which everyone seems puzzled by, is this primordial connection to one's faith—not solely as a religious identity, not solely as affiliated with some notion of nationhood, but as a collective that can (but doesn't always) encompass a nation. Instead, in this realm, religion provides a sense of peoplehood, a gift that is not chosen at all, but inherited.

By providing us with a name for this kind of faith, Jakelic complicates nicely the notion that the "religious marketplace" is the end product of modernity. And she tours Europe in an effort to examine the various populations of that continent who belong to some "collectivistic religion." In later pages, we'll glimpse Ireland, Poland, Greece, and the former Yugoslav states now known as Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Members of the "collectivistic religions" in these areas make up roughly one-fifth of the supposedly secularized Europe and thus provide a dramatic denunciation of the idea that European secularization is a one-way street. Religion for many folks in these countries has been "a constitutive, often *the* constitutive, element of people's collective memory and identity," while also being ascribed at birth and public in character. It is not subjected to the marketplace, and it needs to be accounted for.

The thesis is helpful in a lot of ways, if primarily to complicate the teleology of religious sociology and the historians who borrow from it. But it also raises certain important questions. To wit: aside from Greek Orthodox, all of her case studies are Catholic. This prompts the obvious question of whether or not there is something to Catholicism that helps form a collectivist identity for a body of people. Another way of asking the same question is this: is there something within Protestant theology (Protestantism being for now the other major faith in Europe) that prevents the collectivistic nature of that faith? An individual relationship with God, for instance?

Moving beyond the Reformation, it seems useful to wonder about the historical development of the collectivistic faiths she studies. In other words, a major factor in nineteenth-century Catholicism was the ultramontanism of the Catholic Revival, which was the Catholic hierarchy's counterpunch to the rise of political liberalism and its often bloody and sometimes anticlerical revolutions. Nothing here was more powerful in the Catholic imagination than the French Revolution, which became an unqualified symbol of all the errors of modernity. In response, the Catholic Church crafted an "us-versus-them" mentality, rejecting the power of rationality in favor of neo-Thomism, a reinstating of the Gregorian chant, the unification of the Mass, the punishing of clerics who stood outside the ultramontane revolt, and the general removal of the hem of their garment from much of the modern world. Considering this history, then, it's no surprise that the majority of the collectivistic faiths in Europe would be Catholic. The Church made sure it would formulate a large part of people's collective identity as a response to modern liberalism.

But this nineteenth-century history brings up a twentieth-century question: how wide is the circle of the "we" within a collectivistic religion? How big does the collective have to be to fit the moniker? How small can it be? I'm thinking here of American Jews,

the vast majority of whom have assimilated quite nicely into American life during the past fifty years, and yet they retain a sense of belonging rooted in their identity as Jews. The notion of the tribe, while not entirely defining who they are and how they function, nevertheless possesses a strong hold on their identity. Is American Jewry, then, a collectivistic faith?

And this brings us back to Wills. If Catholicism has a unique history that lends itself to a collectivistic religious identity, and if the moniker can be curbed to include American Jewry, then Wills was certainly defending his collectivistic religion. But if the circle for American Jewry is too small to fit the moniker, then Wills was perhaps talking about something different, something that Jakelic's book doesn't quite explore. It'd be a good exercise to wonder about a name for that kind of faith.

These questions aside, Jakelic's analytic tool gives us a new name for an old idea—birthright religion—and re-introduces the notion that seeing religion as a product in a marketplace is not always the most productive way to see it. Indeed, if that's the only way we see it, we miss a huge swath of the world's faithful, and one-fifth of "secular Europe." Better tools make better thinkers, and we're in debt to Jakelic for providing us with this one.