

**A response to**  
**Slavica Jakelic's *When Religion is Not a Choice***

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I have enjoyed reading this chapter and can sympathize with the author's desire to question what she feels to be the dominant paradigms in social science. I entirely agree that ways of thinking that depend primarily on choice are not much help in understanding the religious situation in many parts of Europe. And broadly speaking, the further south and east in Europe that you go, the worse it gets. The great majority of European scholars know this – hence their spirited resistance to rational choice theory.

Many of the same scholars, however, are rather too convinced that their own preferred paradigm – secularization – is an adequate alternative, though this too founders in the south and east of Europe. In offering an alternative to both perspectives, and giving it a name – collectivist religion – Jakelic is doing us a favor. I am also sympathetic to the view that collectivist religion is not simply an epiphenomenon: as Jakelic quite rightly says it has 'agency' and is as capable of building identities, whether national or otherwise, as it is of reflecting them.

Thinking carefully about Jakelic's argument, however, I want to pursue it further and declare that collectivist religion is – and remains – the norm all over Europe, recognizing that it varies considerably in intensity. The reasons are historical. In 325, Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea. The Nicene Creed included the phrase: the 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church'. And by the end of the fourth century this church – Orthodox Christianity – had become not only the state (collectivist) religion but a defining institution of the Byzantine Empire. This sharing of power has colored European religion ever since.

The following centuries saw schisms, divisions, reformations, counter-reformations, revolutions and restorations a-plenty but the bond with territory remained. No longer an imperial question, it became in most parts of Europe a national one. Nations moreover housed dioceses, and dioceses housed parishes – territory, in other words, mattered at every level of society.

Why, then, has this model endured more robustly in some places than others? By far the best guide in these matters is David Martin, whose *General Theory of Secularization*<sup>1</sup> interrogates the very different pathways of secularization in different parts of the world. Martin pays considerable attention to the European case. In so doing, he identifies key factors and key historical moments that determine why, for example, the Protestant countries of Northern Europe are different from the Latin South and why (more specifically) the religious situation in Poland is so different from its neighbor, the Czech Republic. Similar contrasts can be

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, D., *A General Theory of Secularization*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

found in the Balkans, recognizing that Martin's exposition was written in the late 1970s – well before the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Martin is interested in patterns – specifically in discovering the factors, or combinations of factors, that are likely to 'produce' strong forms of collectivist religion. These things are not random; they occur in those places where the presence of a particular form of religion has close affinities with the identity of a nation. Each reinforces the other, for historico-political reasons, which does not mean that religion is simply a reflection of nationhood. It, too, can determine outcomes.

Jakelic's approach also strikes chords with my own work. Of particular importance in this respect are the weaker rather than stronger forms of collectivist religion. The idea of 'vicarious religion'<sup>2</sup> is significant in this respect, by which I mean the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number. The latter, moreover, not only understand, but very largely approve of what the minority is doing. Or to put this in economic terms, the state church – or its successor – acts as a public utility. It is there at the point of need for those who identify with it, and in Europe that means significant sections of the population who live in a designated territory.

Such a situation exists all over Europe. Indeed, the purest forms of vicarious religion can be found in the Lutheran churches of Northern Europe and Germany. Here, state (or former state) churches are funded by a church tax, which is paid by every member of the population unless they 'contract out'. For how long this situation will continue is hard to say, but for the time-being, the data tell us that *relatively* few people choose not to pay – even in countries which are known for their secularity.

One final point is worth noting. I have presented the notion of vicarious religion to audiences all over Europe. With very few exceptions, Europeans are able to grasp this idea even if they have to search for a word to express it in their own language. In the United States, conversely, even an English-speaking audience finds vicarious religion difficult to comprehend – quite simply, it doesn't resonate with American self-understanding. The reasons are clear enough and take us back to our starting point. In the United States, there is no state church – there never has been. Instead, scores of denominations constitute a market in religion and a market requires choice. The dominant mode of theorizing (rational choice theory) reflects this situation.

The crucial point to remember is that paradigms are rather like French wine: they do not travel well – in either direction.

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<sup>2</sup> Davie, G., *Religion in Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.