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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview conducted by Valeriya Chernova, Jana Lehmann, and Kathleen Hellermann
Edited by Andrea Rota
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Milda Ališauskienė is professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania. Her research interests include the sociology of religion, religion in post-communist societies, religious fundamentalism, and new religions. She coedited (with Ingo Schroeder) Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Societies: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania[1]. Since 2015 she has served on the executive board of the International Association for the History of Religions. At the 2018 EASR conference, Professor Ališauskienė held the keynote »The Diversification of Religious Identities in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Baltic States«.

1 *Professor Ališauskienė, thank you for joining us. You belong to a younger generation of scholars working on religion in post-Soviet countries with a focus on new religious movements. Where does your interest in new religious movements come from?*

2 During my bachelor's studies at Vilnius Pedagogical University, I was captivated by courses on new religious movements and the sociology of religion. The theoretical paradigm in the latter was the secularization thesis, and I focused on the secularization process from a historical point of view in my bachelor's thesis. I was particularly

interested in understanding the process of secularization during the French Revolution and how different historians evaluated this process. During my master's studies, as I continued working on the topic of secularization and its critique, some theories came to the forefront that talked about secularization not only as the disenchantment of the world but also as something connected to the diversification of society. Thus, I focused on new religious movements as an interesting case study of such diversification.

3 *How would you say the emergence of new religious movements changed cultural and religious life in post-Soviet countries?*

4 This is a complex issue. Statistically, the change was not very significant. But the emergence of new religious movements changed people's perception of the freedom of religion. During the Soviet period, many people living in central and eastern European countries conceived of religious pluralism in terms of distinct national or historical churches; they expected to live in a homogenous religious society with a single national church. The appearance of new religious movements questioned the image of a religiously homogenous society and challenged the traditional understanding of the freedom of religion. Today, freedom of religion is available to individuals in the majority of these societies, but there are still many discussions about collective rights to the freedom of religion. In this respect, new religious movements are still seen as a threat to the imagined religious homogeneity of the population.

5 *You come from Lithuania. How are new religious movements organized in your country?*

6 To answer this question, I have to make a preliminary distinction between groups that developed in the nineteenth century, such as Seventh-day Adventists, and new religious movements established after the Second World War, which were mainly active in the US and Western Europe. As Eileen Barker has noted, the latter were waiting for the collapse of the Berlin Wall to enter Eastern Europe. Furthermore, most of them had learned a lesson from their negative experiences in Western Europe and did not make the same »mistakes« when they first approached people in post-Soviet countries. They were less proactive. Nevertheless, people were still really concerned about their presence. In Lithuania, we can further distinguish between new religious movements from the West, with their particular Western style of communication, and groups originating in Lithuania itself, which are very different. They are relatively few but quite fascinating. For instance, the growing Romuva movement sees itself as restoring the ancient Baltic faith community. Interestingly, they have a rather democratic organizational structure. At the same time, however, they exhibit nationalist and homophobic attitudes.

7 *Does a New Age milieu also exist in Lithuania? And if so, how and when did it originate?*

8 Usually historians say that the New Age movement started in the seventies in California and spread from there to the rest of the world. Sociologically speaking, the New Age movement is a product of globalization and the exchange of different ideas from around the world. New Age ideas did not reach the Soviet Union from the West; they arrived »from the other side« so to speak. The Soviet Union was quite friendly with India, China, and Mongolia where the same Eastern religious traditions incorporated into New Age spirituality were popular. Thus, these ideas and traditions journeyed to the Soviet Union from there. The materials that spread among the people and the texts they read—for example, about different yoga practices—are good indicators of this process. And in the case of some new religious movements, we can also see how they

first went to Russia and from there to Lithuania. For instance, the Krishna Consciousness movement arrived in Lithuania in the late 1980s from Russia.

9 *What kind of relationship does the New Age movement in Lithuania have with the dominant Catholic religion?*

10 It is important to note that the Roman Catholic community in Lithuania is not a homogenous religious community. Furthermore, while about 80 percent of Lithuanians describe themselves as Catholics, only about one quarter of the Catholic population practices on a regular basis. Your question speaks to the problem of identity and identification, a topic addressed by Grace Davie in her keynote here in Bern [see the interview with Davie in this special issue]. When we consider Catholics in Lithuania, we need to ask: What is the content of their faith in practice? If we look closer, we can see different formulations of Roman Catholic teachings and also different ways in which people adjust and adapt these doctrines to fit their spiritual needs. For example, some Catholic women want to give birth at home: they want to have a special bond with their newborn, as they express it, and for them this is very much a spiritual issue. They also have particular practices—for instance, they ritually bury what is left from the birth. But they identify as traditional Catholics in surveys and do not see any conflict between their practices and beliefs and the Catholic tradition. Identification is also a matter of power. People want to identify with the traditional, more powerful religion, but the reality of their everyday religious life is more complex, and there is a place in it for New Age beliefs and practices, too.

11 *What you just mentioned ties in with the conference theme of multiple religious identities. Would you say that a person can have multiple religious identities?*

12 Yes, I think so. Identity is a very complex issue. We must bear in mind that there are different reasons why people identify themselves in a certain way. We also need to remember that identity does not only mean *religious* identity. We all have different identities, and religion is just one part of it: we have gender, sexual, ethnic identities, and so on. And all these identities are combined into one identity, a »who I am«. Sometimes they do so in very strange and enlightening ways.

My research on LGBT people provides a case in point. I thought that LGBT people could not be Roman Catholics because of the Roman Catholic doctrine on homosexuality. The view that I held on this matter was a stereotype, and I found out it was wrong in the sense that one third of my respondents in the LGBT community still defined themselves as believing and practicing Roman Catholics. They did not see any conflict. And when I asked them, »What do you do when you go to church and hear a sermon about LGBT people explaining that they contravene church doctrine?« they would answer, »Well, I just don't care about what they say anymore.«

When I talked with LGBT people, I found that they are more knowledgeable about religion than the average Lithuanian. They usually have quite a good Western-style education and can see that the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania is different than Roman Catholic Church in Italy, Spain, or Ireland and that the Roman Catholic Church is diverse in itself.

13 *Going back to the issue of power, how much power does the church hold when it comes to issues concerning a vulnerable social group such as the LGBT community?*

14 In the Lithuanian case, I think that the Roman Catholic Church is a powerful institution in public life. Perhaps you would not notice it directly because the Lithuanian Bishops'

Conference has not addressed these issues in public. However, despite the separation of church and state, you can see that certain politicians act on behalf of the church. Furthermore, there are particular church-based organizations in civil society—although they do not always disclose the source of their funding—that have an anti-LGBT, anti-abortion, anti-pro-choice agenda. This evidences a significant shift in the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1996, in its attempt to find a new place in society, the Roman Catholic Church declared its intention to abstain from any political activity. But it remains an important and powerful social institution. Overall, the public discourse on religion in Lithuania is still dominated by theological arguments rather than by juridical or sociological ones.
Of course, there are also groups challenging the church. For instance, liberal Catholics are more open toward the LGBT community and speak out publicly about it. And Lithuanian society is quite secularized at the individual level. Although the majority of people identify with Roman Catholicism, most of them do not pay much attention to the social activities of the church or would not apply its teaching to their everyday lives. The reason why they identify as Catholics or support the church is that they might want to use some of its services. It is a certain form of vicarious religion, as Grace Davie would put it. The Roman Catholic Church, however, seems sometimes unable to grasp that society is changing and that an increasing part of the Lithuanian population is growing indifferent toward religious topics. Instead, it clings to its position as the one and only church.

15 *This is very interesting. Could you elaborate on the relationship between the Catholic Church and Lithuanian national identity?*

16 In Lithuania, the turning points in the relationship between national identity and Roman Catholicism were the influence of nineteenth-century Romantic ideas about the nation state and the Russian Revolution, which greatly impacted life in the country. Under the rule of the Russian tsar, the Catholic Church served as a shelter for Lithuanians against the uprising, and members of the church played a role in the process that lead to the independence of Lithuania in 1918. The Declaration of Independence was signed by representatives of the Catholic clergy, who remained important actors on a political level during the first Republic of Lithuania [1918–1940], and the connection between church and state continued to be very close. This meant, for instance, that Catholic priests received a salary, held public offices, and worked in governmental institutions. After the Soviet occupation [1944], things changed, and the church lost its position in public life. This position was eventually restored in the 1990s. While conducting research on freethinking and atheist movements, I found that during the first republic there were very active social movements of freethinkers that challenged existing church–state relations. The introduction of civil marriage was, for example, an issue. Then, during the Second World War and the Soviet occupation, the Catholic Church went underground. Its social and political power was forcibly eliminated, and the Soviet authorities imposed a forced secularization process. During this period, people employed different strategies to manage their religious lives. On the one hand, some wanted to keep following their religion and avoid any collaboration with the Soviets. For instance, they refrained from joining the Communist Party or seeking a career under Soviet rule. Some people were also trying to combine Catholicism and communism. On the other hand, my research on religion and socialization in Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuania has revealed widespread anticlerical attitudes in the pre–World War II generation. For instance, one of my informants who

was eighty years old mentioned that his mother was very religious while his father was agnostic. His mother was always prepared to go to church on Sunday, but his father did not like the priest, and her attendance depended on his mood since he would choose whether or not to take her to church by horse. What I would like to emphasize is that the picture becomes more complex when we consider the different levels of social life: the relationships of church and state at the macro level, the organizational meso level, and the micro level of an individual life. For me it is always important to ask how people live their religion, that is, on the micro level.

The sociohistorical context is also very important. When we speak about religion in central and eastern European countries, we should not limit ourselves to talking about Soviet atheism; we also need to keep Soviet modernization in mind. These societies were going through social processes that were in many cases similar to those experienced by Western societies. For instance, during the first Republic of Lithuania, the majority of the population was illiterate. During the Soviet period, mass education was introduced, and it had an impact on religious life. Another example: during the Soviet period, gender equality was introduced. We may debate its *content*, but politics were implemented that certainly affected religious life: as women worked and could not spend as much time with their children, they socialized them religiously in a similar way to what happened in Western societies that underwent a secularization process.

17 *What did religious socialization during the Soviet period look like in Lithuania? Did this period affect the current development of alternative religiosity in the country?*

18 During the Soviet era, religious socialization in Lithuania took place at home and through underground church activities. In this respect, there were some similarities with other communist countries where babushkas [old women attending church] took care of religious socialization. In Lithuania, nuns primarily assumed this task underground, but priests and monks also did—usually in church buildings that were locked to prevent outsiders from entering—and religious education was definitely provided within families. I think that one consequence of the complicated religious socialization during the Soviet period was an open fluctuation of religious identities in the post-Soviet period. People became more open to different ideas. For instance, the 1990 European Values Study showed that 40 percent of the population believed in reincarnation; this number has decreased since then. Today the church is putting great effort into religious socialization programs to explain to younger people what it means to be Roman Catholic. This was not the case during the Soviet period when the majority of the population was raised. These people are thus religious in their own special way. They would say they are Roman Catholics, but they also have some other religious beliefs and practices.

Indeed, I would say that this religious socialization during the Soviet period is key to understanding why people have so many different attitudes toward religion and also why religion is considered to be a private matter in contemporary Lithuania. The privatization of religion was inherited from the Soviet period when religion was forcefully removed from the public realm and continued to be practiced in private. As various studies have shown, contemporary Lithuanians think that religion is a private matter, question the role of the church in public life, and voice anticlerical attitudes. The Roman Catholic community is diverse in Lithuania, and the fact that the majority of the population identify as Catholics is only one side of the coin.

19 *How would you characterize your role and your goals as a researcher?*

20 As a researcher, I aim to do my work as correctly as possible, respecting the methodological rules. Furthermore, I have an obligation to disseminate the results of my research to the public. However, in Lithuania, I frequently find myself in an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, I receive research funding and work on topics that I feel are important. On the other hand, I can see that in Lithuania the population is not ready to discuss these issues. Whenever there is a public debate, you are forced into one camp. Either you are part of the Roman Catholic Church—and in that case you should not »wash the church's dirty laundry in public«—or you are against the Catholic Church, and then this means that you are probably an atheist who hates religion. Sociologists of religion are not so popular in this respect as they challenge the area that is considered to be the stabilizing aspect of public life. While I constantly write columns in the media and answer journalists' questions, I can see that the general feeling is that I am against the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that I provide arguments of different kinds—historical, anthropological, and so on—is usually irrelevant. In many cases, people who participate in the public debates do not see the arguments, they only see a red light: you are attacking the Roman Catholic Church.

21 *How do you think this situation is going to evolve?*

22 It is always difficult to make predictions, but I am afraid it won't get better, particularly because of the development of authoritarian regimes in the region—in Russia, Poland, and Hungary. I am afraid that some politicians in Lithuania are also following this line and see some benefit in this kind of strong authoritarian state. We will definitely see the effects of such developments on minority religions. For instance, I am closely following the case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. The organization has been banned, and many Jehovah's Witnesses are leaving the country. In Lithuania the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is currently asking the government for state recognition, and this will certainly influence public debates about the national and religious identities of the country.

23 *Thank you very much for this interesting discussion. It was a pleasure to talk to you! We wish you good luck and all the best with your research!*

24 It was my pleasure. Thank you very much as well!

NOTES

1. Ališauskienė, Milda and Ingo Schroeder. 2011. *Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Societies: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania.* Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate.

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