From Nones to Yeses: Pastoral Care among the Nones in Central Europe

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Defining and characterizing the social group of the nones need not only be based on empirical data and personal impressions. Empirical data is obtained by formulating questions and collecting answers to the questions asked. The answers depend on the questions. If we identify the group of the nones primarily with negative qualities or deficiencies, our questions will also be framed in terms of something negative. As a result, we will approach the group of nones primarily from a position of lack. If we define the nones from the outset as characterized by a non-churched religiosity, a non-Christian religiosity, or a nonreligious grounding of morals, then we will inevitably draw a line between religion and nonreligion. Nones will thus comprise the nonreligion social group. If we take the personal impressions of pastors as a basis, then the nones will become representatives of a kind of other side, a kind of marginal situation. Pastors are ambassadors of God and the Christian church, seeking to bring people to God and the community of churches. Those who cannot be won over to the God of Christians and lured into the ritual communion of the churches are viewed as failures on behalf of the pastoral ministry. Nones are seen as primarily outsiders and in opposition to the Christian church. On one side there is the church committed to the God of Christians; on the other side there are the nones who are insecure and un-churched and opposed to the God of Christians. This is the case in the personal experience of pastors, at least, who have encountered many failures. Either empirically or experientially, there is a strong temptation to identify the group of the nones with atheists and anti-churches and, as a result, to define any pastoral strategy and behavior toward the nones along these lines.

In this essay, I attempt to draw a more nuanced picture of the category of the nones and, in so doing, take a more communicative pastoral approach.

The Nones Are the Majority of Society

The results of sociological research on religion show that, in terms of religiosity, the majority of respondents choose a religious category whereby they define themselves as religious in their own way. This is also the case in the societies of Central Europe.[1] Questionnaires that do not use the category of the religious in their own way use categories of belief in God and atheism. These results show that the majority do not clearly believe in God but are not clearly atheists either. While the data show an atheist majority in the Czech

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[1] I will not consider the results from outside this region in this paper.

Republic, it is fair to say that the majority of atheist respondents are more likely to be apatheists. In other words, they are not characterized by direct opposition to God, but by alienation from a certain image of God and the intellectual and moral requirements associated with it.

It follows from all this that the *Zeitgeist* is primarily the spirituality of the nones. We can see that clear and stable religious and other value preferences constitute the extremes of society, while weak and unstable preferences constitute the overwhelming majority. Unquestioning belief in God and unwavering atheism have become two extremes in Central Europe. The societies of this region are characterized more by uncertainties, with an intermediate state as the general majority state between these two extremes.

Hence, pastoral care must first and foremost seek an answer to the question of how it relates to the majority of society. It is inadequate to speak of atheists in terms of nones and to adopt the basic stance of anti-God and anti-church dialogue. It is particularly important to be critical of the idioms and permanent expressions that stigmatize and give negative connotations to those who belong to the nones. Such terms include immoral, communist, or atheist. It is as if the broad social stratum of nones were a legacy of materialist, anti-religious, and anti-clerical political forces. In contrast, those who have a close relationship with the Christian church, and believe in the God of Christians, are the faithful who persevere to the end. If we focus on these two extremes in pastoral understanding, we are, in fact, building a bridge between them. On the bridge, the traffic is one-way, from the pastoral mission to the atheists. Experience shows that traffic in the opposite direction is extremely rare, that is, atheists approach Christianity's offerings only rarely, if at all. The greater difficulty, however, is that in this bridge-building, we are, in fact, bypassing the majority of society and forgetting to communicate with the very majority with whom we should be communicating in the first place.

For many people who have grown up in traditional large church communities, belonging to a conservative church and believing in God are inseparable. If church systems and faith in God are about equivalent to each other, then believers are presented with a serious choice. Either they leave their church and thus God, or they remain in their church and thus leave themselves. This is the tension that provokes the nones' position.[2] Dialogical pastoral care must seek to be able to separate faith in God from church systems. It should see the communities of the churches as communities in search of God, and, in that search, it should be able to identify with the community of the nones who, in some cases, have moved away from God because they have had to move away from their church. In those societies where, for many decades, the dominant propaganda has made every effort to discredit the churches, while, at the same time, making it impossible for the churches to express their own views in public due to strict censorship, the discrediting of

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[2] James B. Gould, "A Pastoral Theology of Disenfranchised Doubt and Deconversion from Restrictive Religious Groups," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31, no. 1 (2021): 35-53, https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2020.1824172.

the churches has been accompanied by the discrediting of God. This is one explanation for the phenomenon of the nones in Central European societies – notwithstanding that the religious maps of the four countries differ considerably, which will be discussed more in the next section. The churches in this region not only carry the legacy of the communist rule but have, themselves, contributed to the loss of social prestige in the thirty years since the regime change.

If we take the above insights seriously, we might ultimately go so far as to label the term nones itself as inappropriate for pastoral thinking and strategy. After all, nones means to say "no" to something, to be on the outside of something. What the majority of the nones distance themselves from is the divine and ecclesial perspective that is held in high esteem by a minority of churchly believers. Of course, church thinking and language can start from the assumption in its own sociography that the majority is different from the church minority. But if the aim is to characterize the majority in this way because it follows the lines along which the main characteristics of a relevant pastoral approach can be developed, then the term nones is not appropriate since, for them, what is of greatest importance is precisely that which is of little or no importance to ecclesial religiosity. If we are really interested in the nones as a majority, if we are really interested in their own self-definition, then we need to focus on what those who say yes to monotheism are saying no to. Put another way, a dialogical pastoral stance seeks to find the yeses of the nones.

In this respect, it is instructive to observe the addressees of the papal encyclicals of the twentieth century. Prior to Pope Paul VI, the addressees of the encyclicals were the clergy and the faithful in communion with the Catholic Church. Paul VI was perhaps the first to add the phrase "and to all men of good will" to the traditional addressees of his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* from August 1964.[3] With this addition, he indicated that his message was addressed to all people, not only to the clergy and the faithful, but also to the widest circle of recipients, all men of good will. This designation of addressee is also a resolution, which is decisive for the pastoral paradigm. The Church sees the human being primarily as a person of good will, which has deep theological roots, going back to Jesus, St Paul, and St Augustine. The dialogical ecclesiology does not concentrate on the sense in which the majority of society can be considered nones but focuses, rather, on the sense in which its yeses can be considered. The Church sees the human being as first and foremost a person of good will, who seeks the good and strives to do it.

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[3] Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html: "To His Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries who are at Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See, to the Clergy and faithful of the entire world, and to all men of good will."

The Nones Are the Majority of Church Members

Another important finding of sociological polls on religion is that the vast majority of the baptized are not religious according to the Church's teaching and do not participate in the liturgical life of the Church, i.e., do not attend Sunday Mass regularly. This phenomenon is explained by a number of internationally accepted theories. For example, Grace Davie describes this as "belonging without believing."[4] Christians in Central Europe are cultural Christians rather than Christ-followers, as current canon law calls the baptized who are theologically considered members of the Church. In the four Central European countries, there is a different but significant overlap between the baptized and the unchurched, as well as the nones. As Max Weber noted, the Church is an institution of which one becomes a member by being born into it. Membership in a church does not, therefore, in itself reveal anything about one's personal religiosity and behavior. It also follows from this context that pastoral care must adopt a dialogical stance not only towards the non-baptized nones outside the Church but also towards the nones who are in the majority among the members of the Church.

In this context, the distinction made by Robert Wuthnow,[5] José Casanova, and Charles Taylor[6] between seekers and dwellers are apt for this region. Those who are religious, and/or nones who are, in their own way, far from ecclesiastical religiosity and behavior, can all be considered seekers. This is not in order to somehow incorporate them into the ecclesial sphere of interest, or to diminish the weight of church apostasy and pastoral failures when referring to them. Instead, this is because it is the best way to take really seriously those with whom we want to discuss topics like evangelism, the communion of the Church, and the love of God. The English word companionship is a fitting way of expressing this objective. The Church can think of the nones as a community of well-meaning people who are seekers, searching for meaning and happiness in life, and with whom churches want to form a companionship for this search.

Pastors and the Nones

There are probably also psychological reasons why professional clergy do not devote themselves to the category of the nones.[7] These reasons are

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[4] Grace Davie, "Believing Without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?," *Social Compass* 37, no. 4 (1990): 455-469, https://doi.org/10.1177/003 776890037004004.

[5] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

[6] Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and George F. McLean, eds., *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012).

[7] I am grateful to Jan Jandourek for the valuable additions in this section.

economic in various senses of the word. Nones are not part of the Christian community; they do not contribute to it either with money or with activities. If pastors were to devote their energy to them, they would be missing marks for the rest of their spiritual flock. Nones cannot be reported as successes in a church's baptism and confirmation statistics. Church marriage figures are always suspect because it is not clear whether the occasion was used to convey at least some spiritual content to the betrothed or whether it was merely a ritual assist to enhance the aesthetic impression of the ceremony. At most, nones improve the statistics of church funerals, which is not considered a pastoral achievement. Their proximity to church communities would also disrupt the normal and established way of doing things.

Nones as individuals have needs that pastors can theoretically fill but, often, the pastors do not have the necessary qualifications to do so. They are trained for spiritual direction and not spiritual accompaniment, which can also mean that the accompanied will eventually separate and go elsewhere. The traditional pastor's role description is to watch over orthodoxy, which is exactly what the nones are not interested in at all. Pastors are supposed to speak authoritatively (or so they think) on matters of morality in general and also on individual morality, which the nones consider a private matter.

An understanding of the nones and a willingness to attend to them would require a different type of clergy who are not so tightly tied to the regular church operations. It would be necessary to open up clergy membership to include people who also have a civic vocation. On one side, the pastoral care among the nones requires church leaders who are able to interfere with their life and work. On the other side, if there are pastors who match the qualities and needs raised by the nones, they are often considered eccentric figures in their own community.

The Nones Are a Consequence of the Loss of Faith in Traditional Institutions

In order to understand the characteristics and sensibilities of the nones, it is necessary to clarify certain social traditions and legacies. A key option for an approach based on historical retrospection is how far back in history we go. Taking into account the specificities of the region, and in particular the prominence of national, nation-state aspects, it is necessary to start the series of historical explanations at the mid-nineteenth century. For all four countries, the lost or not-yet-won nation-state aspirations were the main political and cultural axis, which also had a significant impact on the dimensions of religiosity and ecclesiasticism.

Poland, the largest modern state in the region, lost its independence in 1793 and became a colony of three great powers: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Only after the First World War (1918) did Poland regain its independence. Hungary became part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the 1848 War of Independence because full state autonomy failed, and this dual state was

created in 1867: one part was the Austrian Empire and the other the Kingdom of Hungary. The monarchy ended with the First World War when two-thirds of Hungary's territory was inherited by the successor states, including Czechoslovakia. The Czech Republic was a hereditary province of the Habsburgs (from 1620) until the break-up of the German-Roman Empire (1806) and became part of the Habsburg Empire. It gained partial independence as part of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Slovakia's national awakening movements date back to the nineteenth century, and it enjoyed partial statehood with the Czech Republic under the statehood of Czechoslovakia. Then, in 1939, Czechoslovakia was briefly dissolved, and Slovakia gained its first partial independence, which was ended by the Paris Peace Treaty at the end of World War II, restoring Czechoslovakia to the 1939 status quo. Both states, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic gained finally their independence in 1993.

However great the differences in history, geography, and cultural traditions between the four countries in general, the tradition of the struggle for nation-state autonomy deeply shapes their social and cultural sensitivities and reflexes. After the Second World War, the countries fell behind the Iron Curtain as part of the Soviet zone. Although they had independent state parastatals, they were not able to operate under the total dictatorship of the Communist Party, which was controlled by Moscow. True nation-state autonomy became a reality after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In terms of religiosity and the nones, the centuries-long struggle for national independence and the memory of that struggle is a significant factor. In Polish history the Catholic Church was the most capable of defending and representing national interests, whereas in the Czech Republic, the Catholic Church was the wheelwright of national interests. In Hungary, during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Catholicism was pro-monarchy, but Protestantism was pro-independence. In Slovakia, the high Catholic clergy (Tiso) supported Hitler's policy of achieving national independence.

Those who see the churches as representatives and defenders of national interests are basing their views on cultural Christianity and national Christianity. Those, on the other hand, who see the churches as an obstacle to or opponent of the national cause are likely to represent the cultural-nones or the national-nones. For the former group, the social behavior of the churches after the regime change is less of a burden on their loyalty to the churches than it is for the latter group. These historically-rooted attitudes were reinforced by the communist rule, which was strongly anti-religious and anti-clerical. They have also been reinforced by the extreme nationalism of the last decade, which has pushed the cultural-religious base in the direction of radical nationalism and the cultural-nonreligious base in the opposite direction. This explains how Poles have become more Catholic, Czechs more atheist, and how Slovakia and Hungary have become more religiously divided. Radicalization thus increases the secularization process and increases the camp of the cultural-nones.

It cannot, of course, be argued that the proportions and characteristics of religiosity and the nones in these countries can be attributed solely to the historical legacy mentioned above. However, it can be reasonably argued that these factors play a significant role in the development of a context-sensitive pastoral stance.

A Dialogical Approach

The Greek word for dialogue means a conversational exchange between two persons or groups. This means that both sides have their say. Churches have been striving to develop a basic stance – throughout their histories with fluctuating intensity – which is not exclusively as teaching churches, but also as learning, listening churches. Understanding and deepening the above-mentioned factors is only one of the conditions for a dialogue that promises results. The other is to review church communication logics and routines in terms of whether they help or hinder dialogue with the nones and witnessing among them. The Christian church in every age has responded to the social context, developing its knowledge of God, its teaching, and its witness in response to the challenges faced. Among others, Rémi Brague,[8] writing in the 1990s, stressed the eccentric nature of Europe and of Christianity in Europe. The primary characteristic of European, Western Christianity is that it has developed its own religious identity in meaningful dialogue with cultures outside itself. Christian culture is an eccentric culture. In the global context of culture today, it is becoming less and less clear what can be called European and what can be called non-European. But Christian eccentricity is, today, even more of a primary requirement for the shaping of the churches' attitudes and communication emphases. An introspective church hides the Gospel; an introspective church bears witness to it.

Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz's 2007 study[9] has listed the challenges for theology and Catholic Church thinking in dialogue with atheists and non-believers:

1) The following problems require in-depth reflection and broader discussion: anthropomorphic image of God; 'demythologization' of religion through the criticism of superstitions; initiation of the dialogue about Jesus Christ in the context of the philosophy of post-modernism and relativism;

2) Academic communities, particularly those with ecclesiastical faculties have the right conditions for interdisciplinary debates. These possibilities should be used to conduct dialogue with atheists and nonbelievers;

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[8] Rémi Brague, "Orient und Okzident: Modelle 'Römischer' Christenheit," in *Das Europa Der Religionen*, ed. Otto Kallscheuer (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1996), 45-66.

[9] Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz, "'Dialog' I 'Dialogiczność' Jako Narzędzia Teologii," *Teologia w Polsce* 1, no. 1 (2007): 137-148.

3) The development of communication with the public requires the Church to be ready to properly absorb and interpret the content of mass culture and to form structures responsible for media content.

In connection with this list, and somewhat extending it, we can say that a shift of emphasis in theological thinking and church communication in Central Europe is needed. In the immediate aftermath of the regime change, churches understandably sought secure guarantees for their own existence and functioning. Regardless of how much this search for security corresponded to the basic stance of Jesus as God's wandering people, or of St. Francis in solidarity with the vulnerable, the era of freedom after forty years of oppression also encouraged the churches to be part of the new possibilities. This process of re-stabilization undoubtedly had benefits. Churches (re)-provided buildings, funding, and legal frameworks. But, inevitably, there were also downsides. Churches became political actors and lost the intimacy and trust in society that they had enjoyed in the first years immediately after the regime change. Today, we can say that the conditions under which churches operate are stable in central European societies. Indeed, they have become the spoiled institutions of right-wing governments. In this safe environment, the Jewish prophetic criticism of church buildings and the comfort of pastors becomes relevant again: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who feed themselves!" (Ez. 34, 2).

The shift in emphasis in the understanding of revelation means that the Catholic Church must understand the deposit of faith as a process of understanding and not as property to be guarded. In theology, the phenomenon and dynamics of dogma history and dogma development are well known. However much uncertainty there may be in the present cultural and ecclesial context, the Church cannot remain locked in the exclusive spaces of its knowledge of God and salvation; rather, it must join the wanderers of contemporary society with this knowledge. As underlined in the vision of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is God's wandering people, wandering with humanity in all its historical stages and in all its cultural identities. The emphasis is based on a theological anthropology that sees the human being first and foremost not as a sinner, but as a person of goodwill who can benefit from the graces of freedom that come from salvation. As for the community of the Church, what is needed is a theological sociology that conceives of society as a community of solidarity, common good, and mercy. These are, among other things, the ecclesial and theological emphases that are present in the pastoral work among the nones and which have also found a place, to some extent, in the documents of the dicastery, especially in the encyclicals and other addresses of Pope Francis. In a letter, Pope Francis writes: "The time has now finally come, ushered in by the Second Vatican

Council, for a dialogue that is open and free of preconceptions, and which reopens the doors to a responsible and fruitful encounter."[10]

The Themes of Dialogue Are the Themes of Convivence

Dialogue with nonbelievers and atheists, on the part of the Church, focused primarily on religious truths and was based on a kind of defense of the faith. However, the newer dogmatic and pastoral approach conceives of dialogue as a thread of different positions and initiatives on the main questions of humanity. One sign of this change of approach was the incorporation of the secretariat of the nonbelievers, which had previously operated in the Vatican, into the Pontifical Commission for Culture. This decision is an indication that the Church is not primarily concerned with nonbelievers, but with the challenges that are emerging in today's culture. It is a question of the life and survival of human civilization and the whole globe. This is the greatest challenge facing humanity, and the Church wishes to join with all people of goodwill in understanding and addressing it. This change of perspective was partly brought about by the Church at the Second Vatican Council. It is also needed by those in society who define themselves as nones. This change of perspective implies a rethinking of certain inherited logics and reflexes, which also entails a certain uncertainty. The abandonment of the old, well-established worldview building blocks and the acquisition of dialogical thinking requires a great intellectual and spiritual effort. However, the goal of coexistence and mutual solidarity between people of different persuasions is of such weight that it is worth the work of intense self-reflection.

This is all the more so because one of the main characteristics of today's *Zeitgeist* is its vulnerability. It is not only those living in poverty and misery or the underprivileged who are vulnerable; the value systems on which humanity's global coexistence is based are also vulnerable. Human rights, state sovereignty, morals, health, and educational systems are all vulnerable to destruction in a post-truth context. In an unprecedented way, humanity is exposed to the growing temptation to renounce universal values and norms and to place itself at the mercy of particular interests, which means an exponential increase in injustice and arbitrariness.

While social debates and political clashes in Central Europe are taking place around national interests, oligarchies, and the burdensome legacy of the past, the Christian church, and especially the local representatives of the Universal Catholic Church, have a special responsibility to remind people of the wider challenges. In the three decades following the change of regime, we have rarely witnessed the active involvement of the churches in social debates on issues of creation, global justice, and security. Official statements by local

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[10] *Letter in La Rebublica*, September 4, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html.

churches still hardly go beyond nationalist agendas. There are many efforts in the areas of pastoral care among the poor and those in crisis. What is experienced and done in these areas of pastoral care should move from the categorical to the central level. Churches should be able to be present not only among the sick and the imprisoned in a purgative and consoling way, and for those who belong to the nones, but also to the whole of society.

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