

# Pluralism of Traditions in a Catholic Majority Society: Catholic Hegemony vis-à-vis Nationalism and Ethnic Experience

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**SUMMARY:** Anthropological studies of state-making have stressed the need to analyse the creation of a hegemonic notion of culture and nation, which must overcome heterogeneity in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity. The article seeks to highlight some aspects of historical processes through which the Catholic Church has struggled for the establishment of a consensual discourse of a homogeneous Catholic Lithuanian nation. Based on the Gramscian analysis of hegemony, the authors present two examples of contestations of Catholic hegemony in Lithuania – the complex understanding of the role Catholicism plays in the idea of the Lithuanian nation and its cultural heritage and the national antagonism between Polish and Lithuanian ethnic groups within the Catholic community.

**KEYWORDS:** CATHOLIC CHURCH, HEGEMONY, LITHUANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY, LITHUANIAN POLES.

## Theoretical Reflections

In this essay the two authors wish to stress the need for a *longue durée* perspective on processes of state-making, social and religious diversification, and political hegemony in the Lithuanian territory.<sup>1</sup> The present paper is intended as a preliminary sketch that highlights certain trajectories and themes we consider important in this respect and by no means as the final word

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on the given issue. Further historical-anthropological research in this field is clearly needed. In concrete terms, the paper aims to look at claims to hegemony in Lithuanian society through the lens of diversity. Throughout its history, the territory of the contemporary Lithuanian state has been home to a heterogeneous array of ethnic and religious groups. Only recently, in the wake of massive population shifts caused by World War II and the Soviet regime, has this diversity decreased. It has been further removed from the public eye by a dominating discourse of ethnic and religious homogeneity of a Catholic Lithuanian nation. In the following we set out to disaggregate this discourse by focusing on the inherent contestations of Catholic hegemony with special reference to the experiences of Poles in the Vilnius region.

With a population of 84% ethnic Lithuanians and 77% Catholics (Statistics Lithuania 2013) the contemporary Lithuanian state gives the impression of exceptional homogeneity. In terms of the religious field, Lithuania today exhibits the characteristics of a Catholic majority society, i.e., a society that has for centuries been dominated by the Catholic Church. Other examples include Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Croatia. Typical for such Catholic majority societies is the marginal position of all “other” religions, but also the fact that the statistical dominance of the Catholic Church masks a wide variety in the attitudes toward Catholicism and modes of belonging to the Catholic Church throughout the population, as well as substantial differences within the church itself (cf. Schröder 2012). The recent census identifies about 5% of the population as Russian Orthodox or Old Believer, a number that more or less equals the population figure of the Russian minority. No other religion reaches even 1%; 16% of the respondents gave no religious affiliation (Statistics Lithuania 2013).

The question we set out to address in this paper is how such images of homogeneity in present-day Lithuania’s religious field can be understood with regard to the historical contexts of diversity. We will present brief sketches of two examples of such diversity, ethnic pluralism and the complex understanding of the role Catholicism plays in the idea of the Lithuanian nation and its cultural heritage. Theoretical approaches to religious homogeneity invite reflections on hegemony, which invoke an old political-economic tradition in the anthropology of Christianity propagated by the likes of Ellen Badone (1990), Eric Wolf (1991), and Mart Bax (1991). Religion is understood there as a political reality, a social relationship that aligns groups and individuals vis-à-vis the sources of social power. The concept of hegemony was introduced by Antonio Gramsci in his effort to theorize subaltern consciousness as the product of power inequalities (cf. Gramsci 1971, Crehan

2002, Kurtz 1996, Morton 2007, Smith 2004). In Gramscian terms, hegemony emerges out of a widely varied set of actions and ideas that are rooted in the class experience and historically accumulated understandings. It represents a view of the world that naturalizes elite domination through a diverse set of strategies in the realm of culture. Culture structures people's perception and experience of the everyday reality in such a pervasive way that the hegemonic view is accepted as absolute throughout society. The subaltern people's common-sense view of the world, on the other hand, remains inchoate and fragmented and can only under specific historical circumstances be orchestrated into counter-hegemonic resistance. In Gramsci's writings, hegemony encompasses a wide range of power relations from direct coercion to willing consent, which structure a world of inequality where subaltern people are prevented from producing coherent accounts of the world from their own perspective. Any religion has the potential of constituting a "common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur" (Roseberry 1994: 361), as well as legitimating a unified "tradition" of historical vision, described by Raymond Williams as the most evident expression of hegemony that offers a "historical and cultural ratification of a contemporary order" (1977: 116).

What a hegemonic idiom strives to overcome is the "spontaneous philosophy" of common sense. Common sense as the concepts and beliefs held by ordinary people is viewed by Gramsci as a fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions drawn from differing philosophies, ideologies, religion, folklore, and experience (Gramsci 1971; cf. Green and Ives 2009). While common sense is by its very nature disorganized, incoherent and fragmented, its resilient strength lies in the fact that it represents an accumulated local history, everyday experience, and social relationships that contradict a unified hegemonic idiom. Religion plays an important role in the common-sense perspective: on the one hand, because of the lasting influence of "folklore", i.e. local historic culture and its popular religious beliefs on the current common sense, which tends to encompass aspects that are in opposition to the church doctrine. On the other hand, because of people's different individual religious experiences and everyday life scenarios that may contradict the official doxa (cf. Fulton 1987). In the following, we will sketch some aspects of the hegemonic process through which the Catholic Church has struggled for the establishment of a consensual discourse of a homogeneous Catholic Lithuanian nation by overcoming heterogeneity in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity.

## Catholicism and the Creation of Lithuanian National Identity

Even if the Catholic Church has been celebrated as the “oldest national institution of Lithuanian society” (Vardys 1978: 7), its role in the struggle to gain and regain Lithuanian national independence has been far from unambiguous. In historical retrospect, notions of the Lithuanian nation and its cultural heritage do by no means automatically encompass Catholicism (Balkelis 2009, Krapauskas 2000, Spires 1999, Valantiejus 2002). Romantic interest in the Lithuanian cultural heritage dates back to the first half of the 19th century. The so-called “first national awakening” gained political momentum with the emergence of the middle class by mid-century, particularly in response to the intensified oppression and Russification pressure by the Tsarist government after the aborted Lithuanian–Polish insurrection of 1863. The Lithuanian nationalists were a motley array of intellectuals that included clerics as well as cultural Romanticists and secular, even some anti-clerical minds. The movement was marked by a constant struggle between the clergy and the secular intelligentsia over dominance. The church hierarchy was divided between Lithuanian and Polish national identification and viewed the Lithuanian renaissance with skepticism, fearing that it would weaken the Catholic influence by alienating the Polish population. Many among the liberal intelligentsia, on the other hand, had only superficial ties to Catholicism. They envisioned the national culture that was expressed through language and customs, the roots whereof went much deeper than Christianization and glorified the late-medieval pagan Grand Duchy as the golden age of the Lithuanian nation. In general terms, the Catholic influence on the national awakening was represented by the activities of individual clergy rather than by a unified policy of the church as an institution. Political cooperation notwithstanding, there never developed a consensus about the nation as essentially Catholic, as did in Polish nationalism. As the national fervor increased after the failed revolution of 1905, a network of patriotic associations, clubs, and periodicals flourished across Lithuania, and for the first time intensive efforts were made to educate the peasantry in national culture. Here the Catholic Church enjoyed great support and thus came to play a more important role in the years preceding independence in 1918.

During the first years of the new Lithuanian Republic the Catholic Church truly dominated both the political arena (through the Christian Democrats and allied parties) and civil society (through its numerous lay associations). Religion became a compulsory subject in all schools. This

period of dominance was short-lived, however, ending in 1926 with the coup by Antanas Smetona who established an authoritarian regime with a populist-nationalist agenda, which was decidedly secular. In practice, Smetona entered into a compromise with the church which shared many of his nationalist views and was still too powerful to be alienated completely.

Severe repression notwithstanding, the time of Soviet occupation (1940–1989) of Lithuania allowed the Catholic Church to maintain a moral reputation among at least part of the population (Streikus 2011; Vardys 1978). This was possible because the Church was the only institution able to retain at least some degree of independence from the Soviet rule and create an image of suffering, as it were, in the name of the Lithuanian nation. Thus for a long time the church became a symbol of national opposition partly by default, due to the lack of concerted activity by any other dissident group. In the final phase of Lithuanian nationalist resistance, it could be claimed, probably in something of an overstatement, that “most nationalists, irrespective of their religious beliefs, support the church as an institution that is fostering national values” (Girnius 1989: 113). The Catholic Church and the nascent secular nationalist “folk culture” movement of the late 1960s indeed shared the concern that Lithuanian culture, whose essential symbolic markers were seen to be language and religion, was under threat by the project of Soviet modernization. The secular nationalists, much like their 19th-century forebears, created an image of a glorious past, remnants of which could still be traced in the “traditional” peasant culture, as the foundation for revitalizing national identity. In their neo-Romanticist vision of cultural authenticity there was little room for Catholicism. In fact, three perspectives on Lithuanian nationalism that converged only in the final phase of the independence movement can be discerned – the Catholic Church, the “folk culture” movement that pursued the preservation of an essentialist image of cultural heritage and secular political activists like the Lithuanian Helsinki group. To some extent, the strategic alliance of these three groups came to be dominated by the church in the final phase of the independence struggle partly because of the latter’s infrastructural advantages (cf. Christophe 1997, Lane 2001, Senn 2002, Vardys and Sedaitis 1997).

At the moment of independence there might have been a widespread feeling of consensus about the history of the Lithuanian nation, but like public support for the Catholic Church, this soon evaporated. In conversations with young urban middle-class individuals of today we generally met two kinds of answers to the question in what way Catholicism was connected to Lithuanian national identity. One came from the minority of

people who professed to be Catholic believers who – not unexpectedly – accorded to Catholicism a prominent role. The other kind came from the majority of “others” and was less clear-cut. Most interlocutors did not see a strong link between Catholicism and their understanding of national identity (less so than sports anyway, as some jokingly remarked), although many were willing to acknowledge the important role played by the Catholic Church in the country’s history. In general, they were much more likely to invoke the pre-Christian past as the historical roots of authentic Lithuanianness. Those who were active in or at least sympathetic toward folk culture and folklore even described Catholicism as a foreign intrusion and as something ultimately alien to true Lithuanian identity. Such ideas of national identity are matched by public and official views of the nation’s history that glorify the pagan Grand Duchy and its rulers.

It thus appears quite obvious that the Catholic Church is by no means able to dominate the politically charged discourse on national identity, and has hardly ever been able to do so since the time of the first national awakening. It seems much more appropriate to view both discourses – nationalism and Catholicism – as ideologies that have been struggling, with each other and with other competing ideologies, for hegemony throughout recent Lithuanian history.

## Lithuanian Catholicism and Polish Ethnic Identity

In addition to having to secure the role of Catholicism in creating a Lithuanian national identity, the Catholic Church in Lithuania had to establish itself as an independent national institution representing the new Lithuanian nation. Until the late 19th century, regional Catholic religious identity had often been equated with Polish cultural identity (“a Catholic equals a Pole”; cf. Magocsi 2010, Kruszewski 1996) and Polish was the only language besides Latin to be used in mass. Although some of the key figures of Lithuanian national movement had been clerics, the position of the Catholic Church toward the Lithuanian national movement was by no means unequivocal, as mentioned above. The Church itself became a site where the competition between national ideologies was played out (cf. Raškauskas 2007; Streikus 2011; Staliūnas this issue).

Nationalist antagonism within the Catholic community was especially exacerbated by shifting state borders that affected organizational structure of the Church (Streikus 2011). When two independent nation-states were formed in the aftermath of World War I, the Polish-Lithuanian conflict over territorial control of the Vilnius Region did not leave the Catholic Church unaffected.

In addition to local conflicts over what languages should be used in mass and tensions among the clergy (Matulaitis 1998), serious diplomatic disagreements had developed between the new nation states and the Holy See over the establishment of church provinces (Kasparavičius 2008). After the Concordat of 1925 had established the church province of Wilno, thereby acknowledging Poland's claims to the city, Lithuania broke off diplomatic relations with the Holy See and renewed them only after important advances toward establishing a Lithuanian church province had been made in 1927. Although the establishment of a separate Lithuanian church province helped to ease the strained relationship with the Lithuanian political elite, the unresolved Vilnius question continued to remain a source of tension not only in the political but also in the religious field.

The conflict came to a head in 1939–1940, after a part of the Vilnius region, including the city, was returned to Lithuania by the Soviet–Lithuanian Mutual Assistance Treaty and the Holy See appointed the Lithuanian Archbishop Mečislovas Reinyš as apostolic administrator of Vilnius. Laukaitytė (2007) has provided a detailed account of how attempts to integrate the Vilnius archdiocese into the Lithuanian Catholic Church were met with open hostility not only in parishes, but also in the highest diocese offices. In the aftermath of World War II, the conflict was not resolved but rather silenced. After the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union, religious life was severely constrained and following deportations of priests to prison camps or their forced repatriation to Poland, the clergy's potential to play a role in forming a national identity was drastically reduced (Miklaszewicz 2001).

Under these new circumstances of state-church relations, the Catholic Church was no longer able to actively support either one or the other national ideology, but only to put itself in a position of uneasy opposition to the communist regime (Miklaševič 2012). Nevertheless, conflicts between Poles and Lithuanians continued to resurface in the religious field, even if at a much lesser degree. During a pilot survey in 2010, a sacristan in a parish in Vilnius remembered that in the 1960s–1970s conflicts<sup>2</sup> between the two ethnic groups in churches were rather common but never turned violent. Anti-Polish sentiments of local communist party leaders are mentioned by Miklaszewicz (2001: 270) as an important reason for closing down of the Vilnius seminary that led to the lack of Polish priests in the Vilnius region. Signals that the conflict between Polish and Lithuanian Catholics had not been resolved became especially visible during the Lithuanian national independence movement of the

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<sup>2</sup> Such as preventing the other ethnic group from entering the church or interfering with their singing during mass.

late 1980s and early 1990s. After the restitution of the main Roman Catholic Cathedral to the Church in 1989, disputes over what languages should be used during church services reemerged in public discourse.

Although Polish demands for regional autonomy in the Vilnius and Šalčininkai regions challenged the Lithuanian nationalist ideology in the quest for independence (see Sirutavičius, this issue), a similar challenge never arose in the religious field. Important steps to strengthen the role of the Church in the newly re-established nation state were made by the Holy See. In 1991, the Lithuanian church province was reorganized and two metropolitan archdioceses established that incorporated Vilnius into the ecclesiastical structure of the Lithuanian church province. After more than fifty years of status ambiguity, the sensitive issue of the Vilnius archdiocese was resolved in favor of Lithuania. The position of Pope John Paul II was especially important for the strengthening of the Lithuanian clergy role in Vilnius. During his visit to Vilnius, the Pope sought to alleviate ethnic tensions within the Catholic community and called for a closer cooperation of Polish and Lithuanian bishops.

The Catholic Church in Lithuania made an effort to attend to the needs of Polish parishioners – at the time of the field research in 2010, most parishes in the city of Vilnius were bilingual and masses were held in both Polish and Lithuanian several times a day. The parishioners' communication with priests and church administration rarely gave rise to ethnic conflict, as most priests in Vilnius were fluent in both languages and communicated with parishioners in the language most convenient for the latter. Contrary to other areas (education, local administration, minority rights, etc.) there appeared to be no ethnic conflicts within the Catholic community, although several interlocutors indicated that such conflicts had existed in the past. They noted, however, that there was little communication between two language communities in parishes and the relationship between the groups was “smooth, but like water and oil - close proximity, yet no interaction”.

The Polish community has, to some extent, maintained a distinct identity within the Lithuanian Catholic Church. This identity is first and foremost based on the language but further strengthened by a shared historical experience, the differential importance accorded to religious symbols (such as the pilgrimage site of *Aušros vartai/Ostra Brama*, the painting of Mercy Jesus, the Church of the Holy Spirit etc.). This part of identity – not the Catholic identity per se but the ethnic experience of religion – can be describe as subaltern with regard to the Lithuanian Catholic Church at large.

A conflict over the transfer of the painting of the Divine Mercy is illustrative of how under specific historical circumstances the religious common



sense of Lithuanian Poles can be orchestrated into resistance. The conflict started in 2004 when Archbishop Audrys Juozas Bačkis of Vilnius issued an order to transfer the painting from the Church of the Holy Spirit, where services were conducted only in Polish, to the Church of the Holy Trinity nearby, which, as stated in the decree of the archbishop, would be open to believers of all nationalities.<sup>3</sup> Several interlocutors remarked that the painting of a vision of the Polish nun Maria Faustina Kowalska, who was canonized in 2000 by Pope John Paul II, had great symbolic value for the Church of the Holy Spirit community and maintained that it was the Polish community of Vilnius that started the cult of the painting. The connection between the church and the painting was furthermore strengthened by the fact that a meeting of Lithuanian Poles with Pope John Paul II in 1993 took place in the Church of Holy Spirit, where he came to pray at the painting of Divine Mercy. Annual week-long festivals of divine mercy, organized at the Church of Holy Spirit, used to attract many members of the Polish community of Vilnius.

Immediately after the decree was issued in 2004, protests against it were organized and soon developed into a serious and drawn-out conflict with petitions, the collection of signatures, letters from churches and NGOs in Poland, and a vigil at the painting that lasted for about one and a half years, before the painting was finally forcefully removed from the church. The conflict finally ended in August 2006, when the court acquitted a priest accused of physically injuring a parishioner who attempted to prevent the removal of the painting. In 2010, after four years had elapsed since the conflict came to a close, all Polish interlocutors unequivocally stated that they still remembered the incident with a bitter feeling. They claimed that the behavior of the church hierarchy was unacceptable as the feelings of the religious community had been completely ignored and no compromise had been sought. The arguments against the transfer often included remarks that the decision to transfer the painting was made without consultation of the parish community, that the new church was too small to accommodate all the pilgrims and worshippers and that the transfer itself was humiliating to the holiness of the painting. Yet none of the interlocutors framed this conflict in terms of an ethnic conflict (unlike some statements by the archbishop and the Lithuanian media suggest); they viewed it rather as a conflict between the Archbishop of Vilnius and the parish community. The interlocutors also noted that Lithuanian Catholics remained indifferent to the outcome of the conflict and did not interfere, mainly because they knew too little about the painting. Currently the painting is displayed in the Church of the

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<sup>3</sup> Decree of Archbishop Audrys Juozas Bačkis, March 8, 2004, available in Lithuanian at <http://vilnius.lcn.lt/ganytojai/arkivyskupas/dekretai/d20040308/> (June 7, 2010).

Holy Trinity, as prescribed by the Archbishop's decree, but, as one interlocutor noted, only few of the local Polish Catholics go to worship there.

While the controversy over the painting cannot be described as a predominantly ethnic conflict, the common ethnic background has undoubtedly helped to create an oppositional identity vis-à-vis the Lithuanian Catholic Church. However, the fact that throughout the conflict the authority of the Lithuanian Catholic Church or the identification as Lithuanian Catholics was never seriously questioned by the Lithuanian Poles indicates that the Lithuanian Catholic Church has been successful in establishing a hegemonic consensus concerning the terms of a shared identity.

## Concluding Remarks

Anthropological studies of historical processes of state-making have stressed the importance of the creation of a hegemonic notion of culture and nation, aside from the standard repertoire of coercive means (cf. Joseph and Nugent 1994, Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005). History is also a key factor in understanding the reasons why a Catholic hegemony exists in Lithuania – history in the double sense of a past and the cultural construction of this past. Throughout this history, Catholic hegemony has not been the opposite of pluralism, but has rather accommodated the latter within an idiom of shared identity and a shared tradition. Thus, the “full internalization of the hegemonic form” (Williams 1977) does not necessarily imply the spread of a unified faith across the society, but the rather general acceptance of a long-term, durable identity that includes the recognition of – or the acquiescence to – the dominant position of the Catholic Church. In other words, hegemony has produced a widely internalized, naturalized mode of thought concerning the societal role of Catholicism. The hegemonic discourse allows for a wide range of modes of belonging to the Catholic Lithuanian nation, the unifying element whereof is the lack of contestation rather than the agreement to all aspects of this identity.

The existence of different “traditions”, that is, different trajectories of local experience, fails to subvert the dominance of the Catholic Church in the religious field, because these traditions do not pose a fundamental challenge to the consensual understanding of the Lithuanian identity that includes the notion of being Catholic. The differential understandings of Lithuanian nationality and experiences of being ethnically different sketched above have obviously failed to erode the hegemonic idiom of Lithuanian identity or to weaken the dominant position of the Catholic Church in the religious field. The persistence of a Catholic habitus can be linked to a number of socio-historical factors,

the most obvious among them being the specific historical situation of Lithuania that prevented any other religious domination from attaining a powerful position throughout the Lithuanian territory – except for Russian Orthodoxy, which was rejected as the religion of the oppressors – and the politics of the Catholic Church of striving for an alliance with the dominant political forces in Lithuanian society, rather than ever opposing them, thus successfully laying claim over time to ideological dominance.

However, while the Catholic Church has succeeded in curtailing Polish-Lithuanian common-sense challenges to a unified Catholic identity, it has been less successful in overcoming the prevailing ideas of Lithuanian nationality and cultural heritage, let alone the widespread secularism and religious indifference of today. For this reason, Catholic hegemony in contemporary Lithuanian society is concentrated on the field of religion (and possibly related fields like family or gender roles), whereas the outcome of the struggle of Catholicism with the competing ideologies in other social and political fields is much less certain.

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# Tradicijų pliuralizmas katalikų daugumos visuomenėje: katalikiškoji hegemonija santykyje su nacionalizmu ir etniniu skirtingumu

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**SANTRAUKA:** Antropologinėse studijose, kuriose analizuojami valstybės kūrimo procesai, pabrėžiama būtinybė analizuoti hegemoninės tautos ir kultūros sampratos įtvirtinimą, peržengiantį etninę ir kultūrinę visuomenės įvairovę. Straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į keletą istorinių procesų, kurių metu Katalikų bažnyčia Lietuvoje siekė įtvirtinti bendrą sutarimo diskursą dėl homogeniškos katalikiškosios lietuvių tautos sampratos. Remdamiesi A. Gramsci'o hegemonijos analize, autoriai pateikia du prieštaros katalikų hegemonijai Lietuvoje pavyzdžius – nevienareikšmę katalikybės vaidmens lietuvių tautos istorijos ir kultūros paveldui sampratą ir tautinės lietuvių ir lenkų nesantaikos atspindžius katalikų bendruomenėje.

**PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** KATALIKŲ BAŽNYČIA, LIETUVIŲ TAUTINĖ TAPATYBĖ, LIETUVOS LENKAI.