

Nihilism-In-Tension

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A Theology of Kenosis as a Response
to Some Nihilistic Inclinations in the
Context of Contemporary Slovakia

Martin Šebo, S.J.



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in the Context of Contemporary Slovakia*

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*TO ALL WHO ARE PASSIONATELY AND
PATIENTLY ENGAGED IN SEEKING GOD
IN THE MOST IMPROBABLE PLACES*

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O.A.M.D.G,
Martin Šebo, S.J.

Introduction

In 1985, two English mountaineers, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, climbed Silua Grande, a mountain in the Peruvian Andes. After successfully reaching the summit, on the way back, one of the mountaineers slipped and fell into a glacier trench. Receiving no response from his friend in the trench, the other mountaineer, thinking his friend was dead, decided to leave him. However, the fallen mountaineer had landed on a small ledge inside the crevasse and was not dead. He regained consciousness and realized the gravity of his injuries. One of his legs was broken. Since he was alone, he felt that he was destined to die there. In this desperate situation, unable to climb the slippery walls of the glacier, he decided to do the unthinkable—descend to the darkness of the crevasse. The mountaineer eventually found a passage that had been formed by a creek of the melting glacier. He was able to save his life and later expressed in his memoirs that he had experienced “touching the void.” He had found himself in the void of desperation of losing his life. But he also found a spark of hope by making an apparently “irrational” decision.¹

I would like to relate this story of the mountaineer analogically to the context of Slovakia. The mountain may be the Slovakian social and religious context of nihilistic tendencies, the crevasse may be the dangerous impact of nihilism, and the mountaineer may be anyone who, although affected by nihilism, tries to overcome its impact (it might also be seen as the Slovakian Church’s effort to address the nihilist context theologically).² Viewing the Slovakian social and religious context

¹Joe Simpson, *Touching the Void* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

²‘Nihilism’ is a term often used ambiguously, both in philosophy as well as in the wider colloquial or vulgar contexts. The root of the term ‘nihilism’ is the Latin *nihil*,

through this story, is there any hope for this mountaineer? Could he descend into the darkness and find a passage out of the crevasse? Could the fall into the nihilistic trench, in the end, be a blessed, and therefore, necessary therapeutic principle (*felix culpa*)?

In the contemporary Slovakian society, the dangerous impact of nihilistic tendencies can be observed in various ideologies, attitudes, programs of action, and patterns of behavior. However, the nihilism that I want to analyze is not only an opinion, attitude, or program that we could decide to support or oppose. It is not just a name by which a general philosophy of culture could label the Slovakian social context. In the present study, nihilism not only refers to something that is simply psychological or sociological, or a state of affairs “out there.” It is also something beyond the mere empirical description of culture. Therefore, I will also construe nihilism as the process of the eroding of foundations, the loss of objective values, and the dissolution of the strong structures that have their bases in metaphysics.³ The reason for this particular approach is that nihilism, as the process of the eroding of foundations, could plausibly be considered a mechanism for enhancing the proper functioning of democracy in Slovakian society and the healing of the internal *nihil*-inclinations of the Church.⁴ I propose that the

meaning ‘nothing’. It carries with it the connotations of nothingness and negation; it has been employed in a wide variety of ways to indicate philosophies or ways of thought, belief, or practice that primarily negate or reduce to the point of leaving nothing of value. Nihilism can be understood very generally as a negative attitude towards life. See Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009), 7. I am aware of the complexity and ambiguity of the notion of nihilism, and will address the concept in more depth in Chapter Two.

³This is a tentative description of nihilism. To be clear what kind of nihilism I have in mind, I work in this project with Nietzsche’s definition of nihilism and my own interpretation of it. For Nietzsche, nihilism means that “the highest values devalue themselves.” Nietzsche explains two senses of his definition of nihilism: (1) The highest values previously (before Nietzsche) posited by Western thought and culture are dead or have ended. (2) The highest values underlying Western thought and culture do not find this world hospitable to their realization. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Arnold Kaufmann, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), bk. 1, sec. 2–3.

⁴What I call *nihil*-inclinations in the Slovakian social and religious context, because of their *nihil* signs, tendencies, or consequences, someone else would call crisis, a call for reformation, or secularization. I call them *nihil*-inclinations because some of their consequences may manifest themselves as the loss of orientation and meaning, or disorientation, which has some similarity with the condition of nihilism conceived as the

end of objective, representational, “metaphysical” thinking allows for the development of democracy and the reduction of violence and abuse of power in the different spheres of social, cultural, and religious life.⁵

Why have I chosen the problematic impact of *nihil*-inclinations as the specific subject of my study? The topic is significant in the contemporary Slovakian context. The nihilistic approach (dissolution of the strong structures) is symptomatic of Slovakian civil society as well as of the Church’s *nihil*-inclinations toward a non-clerical Christianity, posing great theological and pastoral challenges for the local Church. What we need today is to reorient these *nihil*-inclinations to a new mode of “life-affirming commitment.”⁶ The current way of doing theology (as well as art, politics, science, ecology, mysticism, and human relationship) is inadequate to this purpose.⁷ Theology has remained largely on

death of highest values. This is a very tentative definition of *nihil*-inclination, and more description is provided in Chapter One.

⁵Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 83.

⁶‘Life-affirming value’ is Nietzsche’s original term, which refers to the necessity to re-evaluate nihilistic values in areas such as western metaphysics, Christianity, and bourgeois ethics, to “affirm the life.” See Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche On Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 15. To distinguish my approach from Nietzsche’s, I slightly modify his term ‘life-affirming value’ to ‘life-affirming commitment’. The reason is that Nietzsche’s term ‘value’ has been criticized by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion for being associated with voluntarism in the sense of *sic volo sic jubeo*. I am using the term ‘life-affirming commitment’ to signify that which stands as a positive alternative or response to nihilism.

⁷Stephen Bevans names a number of internal and external factors as to why today’s theology must be contextual. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 9–15. His account of the inadequacy of traditional theology also applies to the Slovakian religious context. Traditional theology is understood as a reflection on faith within the two theological sources of scripture and tradition. The dualistic concepts of anthropology and cosmology and the absence of an anthropological dimension of the Incarnation contribute to the oppressive nature of traditional theology, where male superiority and its consequent distortion regarding the notion of God in liturgical language and the role of women in ministry prevail. Other factors to consider are the elitism of the clergy, the emphases on interior salvation and morality, the exclusivity of Catholicism, and the ignorance of feminist, queer, and liberation theologies. There is also a proclaimed unity but factual separation from other religions (Eastern Catholics, Orthodox, Protestant Churches, non-Christian religions, and Judaism). Traditional theology has been used politically to justify the *status quo* of the governing regime of the Slovak State—during the Second World War and in contemporary Christian politics. See Teodor Münz, “Ohlas novovekej sekularizácie a krízy teológie na Slovensku,” *Filozofia* 53 (1998): 269–284.

a doctrinal, moralistic, and ritual level, without offering a constructive faith response to the ‘signs of the times’.⁸ The belief that ‘God is an alien God’ (*Deus absconditus, Deues ignotus*) is held by a number of Slovaks in the post-communist era of non-constructive expectations in which traditional ideals have failed and there is an absence of the search for “new commitments.”

My pastoral experience of encountering religious and non-religious people in Slovakia has prompted me to think that it is high-time to re-imagine and redefine the way we do theology. The “God of philosophers” that we communicate does not reach the people. Moreover, it is evident that Slovakian society has become more materialistic and is losing its traditional sense of transcendence. The looming problem is how to authentically convey the message of the Gospel, especially its “already-and-not yet” dimension, in today’s Slovakian context.

My aim in this work is to find an adequate way to revive memory and effectively communicate the disappearing *kerygma* of the Gospel to Slovakian society, which has been deterred by the nihilistic inclinations of the times.⁹ The greatest challenge for the Slovakian Church today, I believe, is to enable its people to revive their memory of the already proven experience of the Gospel *kerygma* and also to inspire the experience of other cultures and traditions in the transformation of their nihilistic orientations, where nihilism is positively understood as the eroding of foundations. The question then is whether the nihilism as construed by this study can be seen as an emerging chance, a historical

⁸“Signs of the times” is a phrase associated with Roman Catholicism in the era of the Second Vatican Council. It was taken to mean that the Church should listen to and learn from the world around it. In other words, it should learn to read the ‘sign(s) of the times’. This phrase, though it comes from the Gospel of Matthew, was used by Pope John XXIII when he convoked the council in the encyclical letter *Humanae Salutis*, see S.S., et al., ed. Rev. John F. Cronin, *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII* (Washington, D.C.: TPS Press, 1964). It came to signify a new understanding that the Church needed to attend more closely to the world if it was to remain faithful to its calling, and it marked a significant shift in theological method. The phrase has continued to be used in papal encyclicals by every pope since then. See *Dictionary of the Council*, s.v. “Signs of the Times.”

⁹(Gr. *kerygma*, “proclamation”): The content of the early Christian gospel message as proclaimed by the apostles. It centered on God’s saving actions in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:4). Faith and conversion are responses to the gospel. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, s.v. “Kerygma.”

momentum, a possible resource, and an opportunity to remodel theology and the search for God in a post-secularized (re-Christianized) era in Slovakia.¹⁰ Tendencies such as generalizations, a unitary view of history, or universal claims on the cultural, social, and religious levels are not absolute in themselves. The question is whether the nihilism eroding these foundations can be viewed as an opportunity and catalyst, functioning inside a period of transition from meaninglessness to meaningfulness. I argue that the emptiness or “void” of nihilism (“after the death of God”) holds potential and challenge for the revival of Christianity in its postmodern form.¹¹ Contemporary Slovakian theology should reconsider its ways of conceiving God and of communicating the Gospel. The Slovakian Church today needs a God with a “human face” and a theology with more humane concerns in order to counter the absence of the anthropological dimensions of the Incarnation within current forms of theology. Perhaps this points to the fact that contemporary Slovakian theology is too concerned with *dis-incarnation*, in which the humanity of God is overshadowed by theological thematization.

I argue that the inadequacy of effectively delivering the message of the Gospel within the context of the *nihil*-inclinations of contemporary Christianity in Slovakia can be addressed by a transformative approach to nihilism and its concealed vital resources. This goal may be achieved by retrieving “the kenotic process” hidden in nihilism (“pro-kenotic-*nihil*”) as one of the possible exit options of standard nihilism and by

¹⁰This is rather an *active* principle or approach to nihilism as a possible source for seeking God and doing theology. However, we may also think of it as a *passive* approach to nihilism in the view of the Gospel acclamation: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths” (Mt 3:3). In other words, let us allow the historical forces (God) to make changes.

¹¹The emptiness or “void” of nihilism is treated as an offshoot of “the death of God.” What Nietzsche called “the death of God” was both a cultural event—the waning and impending demise of the “Christian-moral” interpretation of life and the world—and also a philosophical development: the abandonment of anything like the God-hypothesis, all demi-divine absolutes included. See *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* 2nd ed., s.v. “Nietzsche.” An indication of the hidden potentiality of nihilism can be traced in Hölderlin’s poem *Pathmos*: “The god is near, and hard to grasp. But where there is danger, a rescuing element grows as well.” Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, trans. James Mitchell (San Francisco: Ithuriel’s Spear, 2004), 39.

providing meaning (*'nada para todo'*, or 'emptiness as fullness') to its nihilistic orientation from a faith perspective.¹²

The methodology of the research is both hermeneutical and dialogical. Hermeneutically, I will be fusing the horizons of the Gospel with the present context.¹³ I will look at the reality of *nihil*-inclinations through the optic of the Gospel and interpret the message of the Gospel according to the signs of the times. Dialogue is one of the key tools I will use to do this. These methodological tools will help me to explore in detail the issue of Slovakian *nihil*-inclinations and support me adequately in addressing this problem.

In order to understand the specificity of the problem, I will utilize present-day social and cultural data within the Slovakian religious context as well as the analyses, resources, and insights provided by the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and by contemporary Slovakian sociologists, historians, and political scientists. In addition to this, I will use the views of contemporary Eastern European theologians on the relationship between Christianity and culture in Slovakia. A socio-cultural critique, comparisons, and verification will be necessary tools to diagnose the *nihil*-inclinations in this context. This analysis will serve as a platform to look at the contextual religious reality of Slovakia through the lens of a theology of *kénōsis*.¹⁴

¹²Pro-kenotic-*nihil*' is the decisive discriminant in the transformation of *nihil* by kenotic force. "*Nada para todo*" may be understood as a dual process of "conversion" (to be emptied is to be filled) to the nothingness that imitates the kenotic emptiness of Jesus. '*Nada para todo*' may be translated variously as "nothingness/emptiness in order for transformation into all/fullness," or "nothing as all." 'Pro-kenotic-*nihil*' and '*nada para todo*' are my terms, and will be explained in a later section.

¹³The term 'hermeneutics' refers to the theory of interpretation that is involved in the understanding of knowledge. One form of the practice of hermeneutics involves also a form of circularity, meaning that understanding or knowledge is a cycle of exposure to information or text, interpretation, and then re-exposure to texts. Subsequent exposure to a text is influenced by the interpretation of the previous text. The structural model for the cycles of iteration is an expanding spiral. Each iteration builds on knowledge from the previous cycle. See Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–8.

¹⁴*Kenosis* (from the Greek word for 'emptiness', κένωσις, *kénōsis*) is the view, drawn from New Testament passages such as Philippians 2: 7, that in becoming incarnate, the second person of the Trinity somehow emptied himself (*ekenosen*) of certain divine attributes in order to become truly human. Kenotic love is constitutive of God's being. Expressed through reciprocal divine-human self-giving in Christ, God's love overcomes

To further understand the impact of *nihil*-inclinations on Christianity in Slovakia, I will study the significance of nihilism as envisaged by Friedrich Nietzsche, who provided a detailed diagnosis of nihilism as a widespread phenomenon of the Western culture of his time. Nietzsche's conviction consists of two premises: "the death of God," or the conviction that the highest values cannot be realized, and the negation of life, which is the stance motivated by an endorsement of life-negating values. Recognizing Nietzsche's overarching philosophical project to overcome nihilism (as a European mental impasse), I will attempt to address the problem of nihilism from theological and philosophical perspectives. However, I do not intend to submit the philosophy of "the death of God" to a critique. My aim is to utilize the emptiness and despair of the post-death of God moment as possible resources in the search for the meaning and dynamism of authentic faith.¹⁵ I will attempt to show that a theology of kenosis offers a transformative vector to Slovakian society and to the religious context of a failed or inactive meaning dimension.

I will therefore place nihilism and kenosis in dialogue as potential partners. I will analyze both functional concepts and study their inner architecture as a possible point of reference and correlation. A comparative approach will provide a platform for correlating these concepts in a way that will enhance our understanding of them. The correlation of nihilism, kenosis and the experiential theory of the sublime will be a preparatory step to seeking a deeper function within these two theories. I assume from my religious perspective that kenosis implies a transformative power which can serve as a possible exit option to standard forms of nihilism. Furthermore, I believe that through kenotic

evil and creates salvation through death and resurrection. Theories of *kenosis*, arising in sixteenth-century Lutheran debate, were revived in the nineteenth-century to reinterpret classical doctrines of incarnation. Much criticized, e.g. by W. Temple and D. M. Baillie, they have been explored again, notably by Barth and Rahner." *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, s.v. "Kenosis." More about kenotic theories will be discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁵Vattimo argues that we should embrace nihilism positively in two senses: "it means that there is very little of Being left in the metaphysical sense; that is, considered as an objective and eternal structure. Instead, Being is dissolved in the history of interpretation, in which there are no facts, only more or less cogent interpretations." Ashley Woodward, "'Weak Thought' and Its Discontents: Engaging the Philosophy of Gianni Vattimo," *Colloquy* 15, (2008): 182. Nihilism, as Vattimo conceives it, differs from, but does not oppose, metaphysics because it operates within metaphysical conceptual and linguistic structures. Rather, it undermines their absolute pretensions. See Woodward, *Nihilism*, 211.

convergence, nihilism can become a potentiality for life-giving and life-affirming values/commitments. It can also have a therapeutic effect on the *nihil*-inclinations of the Slovakian social and religious context.

Chapter One introduces the Slovakian social and religious context with its problem of *nihil*-inclinations. It provides a description of *nihil*-inclinations in this context and factual evidence of how this phenomenon is present in Slovakian society and the Church today. The goal of this chapter is the diagnosis of the problem and analysis of its contextual setting.

Chapter Two explains the concept of nihilism in the works of Nietzsche as understood by Alan White.¹⁶ I will articulate my objections to White's categories of nihilism and propose a modification of his triadic model. I want to argue that between Nietzsche's passive and active nihilism can be located a third category of nihilism that I designate as 'nihilism-in-tension'. As my own interpretation of nihilism, this category provides a framework for my research, which traces the unknown function or operation of nihilism.

In Chapter Three, I explore the theological concept of kenosis as the dialogue partner of 'nihilism-in-tension'. The main reason I bring a theology of kenosis into dialogue with 'nihilism-in-tension' is that I hypothesize that kenotic power is the unknown decisive discriminant or transfer-switch that can work within nihilism under certain conditions. With regard to a particular kenotic theory, I find Sergius Bulgakov's (1871–1944) rich and multi-faceted kenotic Christology appropriate in correlation to 'nihilism-in-tension'.

Chapter Four considers the theory of the sublime from the philosophy of aesthetics. In this project, the sublime has an auxiliary function as the mediator between kenosis and 'nihilism-in-tension' and as the "lens" of introspection to both concepts. By indicating the fundamental emptiness

¹⁶Alan White (1951–) is a professor of so-called continental philosophy (structural-systematic philosophy) at Mark Hopkins Professor of Philosophy, Williams College. His major publications include: *Schelling: an Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth* (New York: Routledge, 1990); *Nothing Matters: A Philosophical Romance* (published in Kindle format, 2011); *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything: Contributions to the Structural-Systematic Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Lorenz B. Puntel and Alan White, *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion* (Northwestern University Press, 2012). See Alan White, "Alan White," accessed September 20, 2015, <http://sites.williams.edu/awwhite/>.

of kenosis, the sublime provides an essential mean in seeking and delimiting the kenotic power, which has a transformative potency from annihilating *nihil* to fructifying *nihil*.

In Chapter Five, I use Gianni Vattimo's philosophy of "weak thought" and St. John of the Cross's concept of *nada* as two theories and lived experiences by which we can trace the unknown operation or transformative kenotic power within nihilism.¹⁷ I describe how this experience can be translated into an applicable formula. John's *nada* and Vattimo's "weak thought" are two modalities that can help us understand 'nihilism-in-tension' and how this transient state or way of thinking can be managed positively.¹⁸ In the lived experience of *nada* of John of the Cross and the philosophy of the "weak thought" of Vattimo, I demonstrate how the transformative kenotic power can be translated into a practical pursuit of wisdom and right relation. In order to articulate how the *nihil* of love, or kenotic self-emptying, functions relationally, I employ Emmanuel Levinas' idea of "substitution," in which the place of the "I" is emptied for the other. Levinas' concept elucidates our understanding of kenosis as the event in which God and the human, in their mutual self-emptying, "make room" for each other. This pattern should be mirrored in all our relationships to the "others."

Chapter Six deals with the pastoral applications of my study. It includes promoting the richness of thinking in the way of weak thought, and of willing in the way of *nada*, in Slovakia in general and in the Church's theology and social presence in particular. I propose that the

¹⁷"Weak thought" is a form of post-Heideggerian philosophy that criticizes objectivist metaphysics of beings and entities. One can think of weak thought as the attempt to awaken awareness of the experiential and hermeneutical character of objective structures and the rise of hermeneutics as the primary method of philosophical investigation. With Nietzsche, Vattimo's weak thought constantly reminds us that there are no facts, only interpretations. One of the main implications of weak thought is the way it liberates human experience from the domination of dogma, be it secular or religious. See Gianni Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 39–51.

¹⁸In this project, we are attempting to relate John of the Cross's *nada* and nihilism. *Nada* can be conceived as a form of annihilation on the spiritual way to perfection when a person negates everything ("absolutes" and attachments) that prevents or hinders him or her from receiving God's self-gift. What emerges in *nada* as the transformative power is the kenotic love. However, there needs to be made a clear distinction between John of the Cross's *nada* and nihilism. My aim is to apply John's overarching spiritual theme of *nada* to my understanding of 'nihilism-in-tension'.

methodology of this project will help to foster interreligious dialogue, tolerance, solidarity, and compassion among religious people, atheists, secular humanists, and nihilists.

My project is unique in its interpretation of Nietzsche's nihilism in that it provides a new terminology/category: 'nihilism-in-tension', which I locate between his passive and active nihilism. In relating 'nihilism-in-tension' to Bulgakov's kenotic theory and to the theory of the sublime as dialogical partners, I seek to retrieve the unknown operation of the transformative kenotic power working within this tensive state. In placing 'nihilism-in-tension' into dialogue with Vattimo's philosophical theory of "weak thought" and the spiritual theme of *nada* of John of the Cross, I show how these two modalities can adequately engage this way of thought. Vattimo's theory of "weak thought" and the *nada* of John of the Cross also help me to formulate the analogical code or formula that expresses the kenotic transformation ('pro-kenotic-nihil') of an annihilating *nihil* to a fructifying *nihil*. In brief, this project creatively addresses the problem of the *nihil*-inclinations of the Slovakian social and religious context through a positive take on nihilism in dialogue with a theology of kenosis.

The scope of my study is manifold. I believe that it demonstrates that a transformed nihilism ('nihilism-in-tension') can become a resource for doing theology. Further, the methodology of this project will represent a valuable resource to engage nihilism. I am also convinced that a redefined and reinterpreted Christian kenotic theology in dialogue with the Slovakian religious context will be able to help the Church, with its *nihil*-inclinations, to revive its memory of the Gospel *kerygma* and search for undiscovered and forgotten meaning in life. Consequently, the Church will be helped to reflect critically on its use of ecclesiastical/theological categories and thus provide an adequate method for theologizing and pastoral practice in a nihilistic context. The use of my new categories and formulas will further help the Church by providing a philosophical base to address the concerns emerging out of such a contemporary post-ideological situation. This could also create a platform for dialoguing with people, irrespective of class, creed, or religion, who seek faith amidst the difficult realities of our times. Moreover, I find a theological potential in this project that may blur the compartmentalized view of the sacred and the secular.

CHAPTER 1

Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Slovakian Context of Nihilism and its Historical Roots

The religious situation in Slovakia is important primarily to those who are directly involved. However, as a part of the universal Church and as a member of the European family, Slovakia and its religious situation may interest not only Slovaks but also those who seek to find new ways to relate and create mutually enriching relations between religion and today's society. It might also interest those who trace nihilistic tendencies in contemporary Slovakia and observe how nihilism manifests itself in diverse ways. I structure this chapter in three parts: religion and society during Communism, religion and social context after Communism, and nihilistic presence in society and Church. Since the contemporary religious situation in Slovakia has ties with the relatively recent past, I will concentrate my research on historical and social elements primarily in the period after the Second World War. More specifically, I will limit my historical research to the key factors that influenced religion in the country during the period of Communism (1948–1989) and after Communism (1989–present).¹ Next, I will limit my research of religion only to Slovakia within the

¹Communism (from Latin *communis*—common, universal) is a socioeconomic system structured upon the common ownership of the means of production and characterized by the absence of social classes, money, and the state; as well as a social, political and economic ideology and movement that aims to establish this social order. Communism is represented by a variety of schools of thought, which broadly include Marxism, anarchism and the political ideologies grouped around both." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Political Philosophy."

Eastern (Central) European context. Before I begin my study of the Slovakian religious context, I need to define three key terms of this chapter: religion, nihilism, and the Slovakian context. To narrow my focus even further, the Roman Catholic Church, as the dominant church in Slovakia, will be my main concern, without excluding other Christian denominations or non-Christian religions. The goal of this chapter is to analyze the historical and social context of religion in Slovakia, articulate nihilistic inclinations and pathologies, among other contemporary problems and challenges of religion in this country, and identify areas that need to be addressed in view of the guidance and strategic planning of the Church.

First, I need to define the term 'religion'. The sociologist Emile Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, defines religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."² To avoid a number of definitions of 'religion', I will use Miklós Tomka's description of the social form and development of religion.³ For Tomka, 'religion' (1) is an existential standpoint, a system of experience, emotion and belief, and a specific perspective; (2) includes the tools of faith, worship, aesthetics, and mysticism, references that point beyond experience (transcendence); (3) attempts to combine into a coherent unit the whole of reality that the individual, the community, and the culture may potentially reach; (4) is a constituent part of the identity

²Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 44.

³See also Peter Mandaville and Paul James, who define religion as "a relatively-bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence, and in which communion with others and Otherness is *lived* as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing." Paul James and Peter Mandaville, *Globalization and Culture, Vol. 2: Globalizing Religions* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), xii. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines religion as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Fontana Press, 1993), 87–125. The psychologist William James defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2002) 3. For the theologian Paul Tillich, faith is "the state of being ultimately concerned." Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) 8.

of the individual and the community; (5) has an impact on behavior and human and social relationships; (6) is organized into a cultural pattern; (7) may become the object of social expectation (or refusal); and (8) provides a cultural connection—and possibly even real, literal relationships—among those with a similar way of thinking while at the same time distinguishing them from others and, in this way, serving as a social organizer.⁴

Second, I need to introduce the context of my study of religion. Slovakia is a sovereign state in Central Europe. It has a population of over five million and comprises an area of about 49,000 sq. km (19,000 sq. mi.). Slovakia is bordered by the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Ukraine, and Poland. The largest city is the capital, Bratislava. Slovakia is a member of the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations, among other bodies. The official language is Slovak. Present day Slovakia became an independent state on January 1, 1993, after a peaceful split from Czechoslovakia.⁵ Stanislav Kirschbaum holds that the historical roots of the first state of the Slovaks need to be traced to the “Great Moravia, a state on the territory of contemporary Slovakia that existed in the ninth century.”⁶ From the eleventh to the sixteenth century, “old Slovaks” were under the administration of oligarchs, i.e., Hungarian and Polish reigns. During the seventeenth century (1604–1701), much of the present-day territory of Slovakia became a province of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a nation, Slovakia was recognized for the first time in the nineteenth century in a petition to the Habsburg Emperor in 1849. After the First World War, in 1918, the

⁴Miklós Tomka, *Expanding Religion: Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 10–11.

⁵Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, “European Roots: The Case of Slovakia,” in *Central European History and the European Union: The Meaning of Europe*, ed. Stanislav J. Kirschbaum (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11–12; Milan Stanislav Ďurica, *Die Slowakei: In Zeitlicher Abfolge von Zwei Jahrtausenden* (Bratislava: LÚČ, 2014).

⁶Kirschbaum, “European Roots,” 12. Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Kirschbaum offers a comprehensive and up-to-date history of Slovakia, from its establishment on the Danubian Plain to the present. While acknowledging Slovakia’s resilience and struggle for survival, it describes contributions to European civilization in the Middle Ages; the development of Slovak consciousness in response to Magyarization; its struggle for autonomy in Czechoslovakia after the Treaty of Versailles; its resistance, as the first Slovak Republic, to a Nazi-controlled Europe; its reaction to Communism; and the path that led to the creation of the second Slovak Republic.

Habsburg Monarchy collapsed, and the Slovaks and Czechs formed the First Czechoslovak Republic. The first independent Slovak State existed during the Second World War (1939–1945).⁷ In 1945, the victorious powers restored Czechoslovakia. In 1948, communists seized power, making the country effectively a satellite state of the Soviet Union.⁸ The communist regime lasted in Czechoslovakia until 1989, and after peaceful negotiations the country was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on January 1, 1993.

In terms of religious origins, Slovakia received Christianity initially from Irish missionaries, but it saw the faith strengthened from Byzantium. One great influence on the religiosity of the “old Slovaks” came from the East through the 9th-century missionaries of Byzantium, Saints Cyril and Methodius from Thessalonica. The other can be found in the Western half of Christendom as a result of the influence and pressure of the Frankish clergy that competed with Cyril and Methodius in the Christianization of the Slavs.⁹ The legacy of the Eastern tradition helped the Slovaks to contribute to Christianity in Eastern Europe through the Slavonic liturgy and the Cyrillic alphabet.¹⁰ In sum, it is generally received that the deep historical roots of the Christianization of the “old Slovaks” need to be sought in both the Cyril-Methodius tradition and the Christianization from Western Europe.¹¹ Christianity is what has defined the religiosity and identity of the Slovaks throughout their thousand-year history to the present day.

The latest census (2011) shows that 62% of Slovaks belong to the Roman Catholic Church, 5.9% to the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, 3.8% to the Slovak Greek Catholic Church, 1.8% to the Reformed Christian Church, 0.9% to the Czech and Slovak Orthodox

⁷Kirschbaum, “European Roots,” 12. See also Róbert Letz, *Slovenské dejiny V 1938–1945* (Bratislava: Ústredie slovenskej kresťanskej inteligencie, 2012). The Slovak War State was under an indirect Nazi administration mainly after 1944 when the deportation of Jews and gypsies began. This raises the question whether the Slovak War State, at the dawn of its existence, experienced in some way nihilism in the history of extermination of the Jews and gypsies.

⁸Ibid., 12–13.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Milan S. Ďurica offers a historical account of religious tradition since the coming of Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Great Moravia. See Milan S. Ďurica, *Svätí Konštantín a Metod: Dielo a dedičstvo u Slovákov* (Bratislava, Slovakia: LÚČ, 2013).

Church, 0.3% to Jehovah's Witnesses, and 0.2% to the Evangelical Methodist Church; 13.4% identify as non-religious or atheist, and 10.6% are not specified, including Muslims and Jews.¹² Miroslav Tížik and Milan Zeman's recent research (2014) finds that while 76% of Slovaks affiliate with Christian churches, only 27% are active members (either attend weekly liturgies or some regular religious activity). Though 76.7% of Slovaks belong to some form of Christian religion, 59.5% of Slovaks either do not practice religion, do not feel the need of church affiliation, or do not believe in God. From the whole population, about 35% do not believe in God or in a higher principle.¹³ Because there is a large discrepancy between declared and practiced religion, a condition which reflects, in my view, nihilistic symptoms, the data on religiosity provided by the Slovak Statistical Office requires further study and explanation. To understand the problem of the religious situation in Slovakia today, in the next section we will study its historical and social conditions.

1.1. Religion and the Social Context during the Communist Regime

Answering the question of why the institutionalized religiosity of major Christian churches in Slovakian society is in decline today is not an easy task. It would be superficial to say that it is solely the outcome of the forty years of the communist totality.¹⁴ Certainly the atheistic

¹²Ivana Juhaščíková and P. Škápik, Z. Štukovská, *Obyvateľstvo podľa náboženského vyznania* (Bratislava, Slovakia: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2012), 7. The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic is the central body of state administration of the Slovak Republic for the branch of statistics.

¹³Miroslav Tížik and Milan Zeman, "Demokratickosť a občania na Slovensku DOS 2014," Institute for Sociology of SAS, August 11, 2014, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/en/podujatia.php?id=1974&r=1>.

¹⁴For the history of Churches in Slovakia in the 20th century, see Juraj Dolinský, *Cirkev a Štát Na Slovensku v Rokoch 1918–1945*, Dialógy (Trnava: Dobrá kniha, 1999); Juraj Dolinský, *Cirkevné dejiny Slovenska II*, (Bratislava: Trnavská Univerzita, 2000); Róbert Letz, "Úsilie o vytvorenie slovenskej cirkevnej provincie v rokoch 1918 a 1938," in *Katolícka cirkev a Slováci: Úsilie Slovákov o samostatnú cirkevnú provinciu*, ed. Peter Mulík (Bratislava, Slovakia: Bernolákova spoločnosť 1998); František Vnuk, *Náрт dejín katolíckej cirkvi: S osobitným zreteľom na dejiny katolicizmu na Slovensku v 20. Storočí*, (Bratislava, Slovakia: Univerzita Komenského, 1995). František Vnuk, *Katolícka cirkev v 20. storočí na Slovensku*