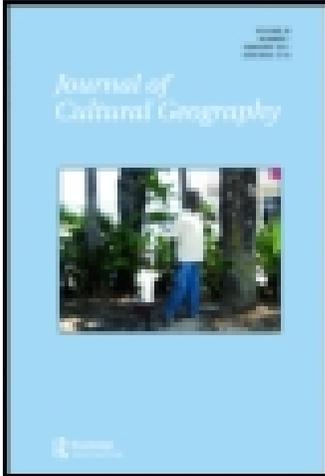


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Daniel Reeves<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

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## Religious themes in Central European postage stamps, 2006–2010

Daniel Reeves\*

*Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic*

The countries of Central Europe present a suitable arena for studying the interplay of religion and nationalism. This study explores religious expressions of national identity through the issue of postage stamps, from 2006 to 2010, in seven Central European countries: Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. While the national societies in question exhibit very different religious inclinations, as expressed through a variety of recent, comparable data, quantitative and qualitative analyses of the stamps they issued over a 5-year period enrich our understanding of the religious elements and traditions that form an integral part of Central European identities. As expected, states with higher relative numbers of religious adherents—Poland, Slovakia, and Austria—produce relatively more religiously themed stamps, particularly stamps that depict “living religion.” Protestant or Catholic traditions can also be traced in the relative frequencies of stamp issues. The stamps demonstrate how states employ religious traditions and heritage to perpetuate a sense of national community.

**Keywords:** Central Europe; religion; national identity; postage stamps; living religion

### Introduction

“All societies that maintain armies maintain the belief that some things are more valuable than life itself.” So begins Billig’s (1995, p. 1) *Banal Nationalism*, a treatise detailing our generally passive acceptance of a global order of nation-states and countries. In his words, banal nationalism refers to “the powers of an ideology which is so familiar that it hardly seems noticeable” (Billig 1995, p. 12). This ongoing yet subtle reproduction of nations encompasses many aspects of local and regional culture, including religion.

The subtle nationalism that Billig (1995) describes has much in common with organized religion. Banal nationalism includes recognizable symbols,

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\*Daniel Reeves is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Email: [danreeves@gmail.com](mailto:danreeves@gmail.com)

colors, holidays, and rhetoric, all of which were utilized in religious practices long before the invention of the modern nation-state.

This study examines religion as an aspect of banal nationalism in seven Central European countries: Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Although they border one another as geographical neighbors, the people of these countries exhibit very different collective religious inclinations. Specifically, the study focuses on state-sanctioned expressions of “banal religion” in recently issued postage stamps.

Purchasing and using postage stamps is a routine activity for many people. Every stamp we see bears an image along with the name (or symbol) of the political state that issued it. The coupling of such images, which frequently commemorate significant national events, personalities or traditions, with a political designation of territory clearly demonstrates stamps’ role as “messengers” of national identity and as powerful, everyday elements of visual culture (Billig 1995; Raento and Brunn 2005; Brunn 2011). Stamps convey messages about which historical events, which heritages or even which character traits can be remembered, cherished, or developed as national ideals. As such, stamps are influential elements in the creation and perpetuation of imagined communities (Anderson 1991).

The relationship between national identities and religious identities has been researched numerous times (e.g., Geyer and Lehmann 2004, Tomka 2005). Researchers agree that a critical component of our understanding of this relationship lies in the initial formation of modern national identities, the so-called national awakening. In Central Europe, this occurred primarily between the revolutions of 1848 and World War I (Johnson 1996) although as a process it clearly began much earlier and continues today in the banal reproduction of national identities. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991) describes a radical transition from communities with an underlying framework of religious order to societies based upon political order. Over time, the increasingly popular notion of nation replaced the combination of religious affiliation and ethnicity to become the dominant form of collective identity. This was neither a clean nor a complete replacement. Emerging national identities were not constructed in a vacuum. They were built in a complex context which included competing religions and religiously motivated traditions.

Efforts to define German identity had to weather a rough transition from a religious to a political frame-of-reference. Cramer (2004, p. 35) describes discordant nineteenth century histories of the Thirty Years War which “attempted to establish the legitimacy of two opposing visions of the German nation, one Catholic, the other Protestant.” These competing ideologies frequently employed religious themes and comparisons in their respective histories of the German people. Not only did this facilitate a better connection with the common person, it also lent a sense of divine approval or ultimate truth to their arguments:

As national thinking is premised on conflict, that is, the identification of those who belong and those who do not, so too is historical narrative: it defines the criteria of “chosen-ness” and membership through a depiction of the eternal struggle for God’s favor. (Cramer 2004, p. 35)

In another article from German historiography, Hogg (2004) details the difficult position of Silesian Catholic clergy in regards to the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Although frequently accused of being sympathetic to Hapsburg (Austrian) rule and the *großdeutsch* notion of a unified empire for all Germans, Catholic leaders in Silesia repeatedly declared their loyalty to Prussia, in spite of Prussia’s Protestant majority. Moreover, they decried the efforts of “newspapers ... so shameless as to stir up Catholic and Protestant Germans against each other and to goad them into war in the holy name of religion” (Hogg 2004, p. 58). Clearly being German—in the *kleindeutsch* sense of Prussia and the subsequent North German Confederation—had become a more prominent cohesive force than being Catholic.

On the other side of this conflict, Emperor Franz Joseph I (1866) of Austria-Hungary calls upon “his nations” (or “his peoples,” depending on the translation) to unite with him in prayer before going to battle to right the wrongs committed by “selfish” Prussia. He refers to the impending conflict as a war of the worst kind, Germans against Germans—conveniently ignoring the fact that the vast majority of his own subjects were not German (Martínek 2014). Franz Joseph boldly declares that “One and the same feeling pervades all the inhabitants of my kingdoms and countries—the feeling that they belong to one and the same empire, the feeling of the power that lies in their unity ...” (1866 translated in Harrison von Wright 1907, p. 588).

It is very doubtful that *all* of the inhabitants of the kingdoms and countries ruled by Franz Joseph I—including Austrians (Germans), Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, and Slovenes—felt a great sense of belonging under the Hapsburg throne, with its German and Catholic predilections. In reality, the various nations of Austria-Hungary were formulating ever stronger reasons for their own respective existence and independence. Hašek’s (1923) satirical stories of the “good soldier Švejk” humorously portray the rifts and inter-ethnic tension that plagued the empire during its final years.

Hanebrink (2004) describes the formation of an ecumenical Christian form of Hungarian identity, based upon *othering* the local Jewish population (Johnson and Coleman 2012). Although Jews in Hungary had been effectively emancipated in 1867, with the establishment of the dual monarchy; in the aftermath of World War I, they took on the unfortunate role of societal scapegoat. Prominent Catholic and Protestant leaders, accustomed to disagreeing with one another, found a common enemy in the Hungarian Jewish community. Jews were blamed for all sorts of problems—of which there was no shortage in postwar Hungary—as political and religious leaders sought to “redeem Christian Hungary” (Hanebrink 2004, title). In spite of their

ideological differences, Catholics and Protestants agreed with and actively promoted the idea that Hungary was a Christian nation.

What happens, however, when the object of nationalistic *othering* goes away? Zubrzycki (2004) examines four contrasting ideological camps that have emerged among Polish Catholics since the fall of the communist regime. “Under communism the Catholic Church held a quasi-monopoly over the production and reproduction of national identity ... because of the party-state’s perceived illegitimacy” (Zubrzycki 2004, p. 176). Now, as the 1998 “war of the crosses” demonstrates, various groups within Poland express very different views on the church’s role in their independent state. And yet, regardless of their different opinions all of these groups recognize and support strong ties between Catholicism and the Polish nation. “Catholicism is so closely associated with the Polish nation that there is no perceived tension between the universalist reach of the religion and its nationalist interpretation” (Zubrzycki 2004, p. 197). In the words of Polish poet Mickiewicz: “Only under this cross, only under this sign, Poland is Poland and a Pole is a Pole” (quoted in Zubrzycki 2004, p. 197).

While the above examples of religious themes in the construction of imagined communities are situated primarily in the past, their influence continues in the present:

Both in the past and in the present the churches had a significant role in maintaining national identity in Central Europe, especially among ethnic minorities. Different ethnic groups adopted different beliefs. “Their” religion helped them to preserve their distinct socio-cultural identity. This is the case, of course, with the Poles. There are parallels in most other countries. German diaspora in Hungary and Romania adopted Lutheranism as “its” religion. Hungarians defined Presbyterianism as “the Hungarian religion” against “Hapsburg Catholicism.” The Czechoslovak National Church emerged as the new Czechoslovak nation and state was born. Romanians emphasized Orthodoxy as “their” religion. Serbs, Croats and Bosnians differ not by their language, but by their Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim traditions. In all these examples, religion is not only a label but an expression and a dimension of identity, including some and excluding others. Most motives for the protection of this identity are non religious [*sic*]. (Tomka 2005, pp. 18–19)

Tomka (2005) insightfully recognizes non-religious motives for the perpetuation of religious national identities. Each of the above examples of identity formation in different areas of Central Europe has its own utilitarian ingredients.

While it is clear that each of Central Europe’s nations retains its own flavor of historic, religious heritage, it is also clear that processes of secularization have impacted the way modern nations commemorate or *employ* this religious heritage, in the present.

Put very simply, the secularization paradigm states that “the project of organized religion loses its social significance as societies modernize” (Wilford 2010, p. 329). This is generally accomplished through the compartmentalization

and privatization of religion. Wilford (2010) advocates the recognition of differentiated and fragmented space—"sacred archipelagos"—in regard to religious activities and appropriately identifies the local, micro-scale as deserving greater attention in studies of the geography of religion. Increased attention to the micro-scale, however, should not lead researchers to ignore the bigger picture. Nation-states continue to communicate "banal religion" at the macro-level. And postage stamps, "products of the state that illustrate how it wishes to be seen by its own citizens and those beyond its boundaries" (Brunn 2001, p. 315), are a prominent example of such communication. By issuing a stamp with a religious theme, a political state publicly commemorates a religious tradition, heritage or hero, thereby validating the role (contemporary or historic) of a particular type of religion in its national society.

Brace *et al.* (2006, p. 28) wish to see geographic analysis of religious identity formation move "beyond the 'officially sacred' ... to explore ... everyday, informal and often banal, practices." Recognizing the contested nature of any process of identity formation, they call for additional research at various scales that will "restore sensitivity to the historic and contemporary, symbolic and communal aspects of religious identity formation and its spatialities" (Brace *et al.* 2006, p. 35).

In her recent review of geography of religion research, Kong (2010, p. 769) applauds efforts to examine "spaces of everyday life that may occasionally ... be infused and shaped by religious values but which are not overtly nor primarily about religion." She hints at the existence of parallels between functional or symbolic dimensions of religion and other phenomena—including nationalism—encouraging work that would "draw appropriate analytical implications of geographical research on religion for these other phenomena and for human geography more generally" (Kong 2010, p. 770).

This examination of banal religion in the postage stamps recently issued by seven Central European nations seeks to deepen our understanding of religion's role in the banal reproduction of nations.

### **Initial expectations**

Considering the vast differences in basic indicators of religiosity in the selected countries (Table 1), one can certainly expect to find significant differences in portrayals of religion on recently issued postage stamps. Specifically, I anticipate that Central European states with a higher percentage of people declaring belief in God or affiliation with a church will exhibit a higher ratio of issued stamps communicating a religious theme.

While such quantitative outcomes are enlightening, they only tell part of the story. Qualitative content analysis techniques enable one to unlock many of the subtle messages conveyed through religiously themed stamps. Through coding and enumerating common themes, I expect to find relatively more stamps celebrating a specific religious denomination (Catholic or Protestant) in countries with more homogenous profiles of religious adherents (e.g.,

Table 1. A sampling of international survey responses on the topic of religion.

Country	I believe there is a God <sup>a</sup> (%)	Religion important in life <sup>b</sup> (%)	Attend services at least once a month <sup>b</sup> (%)	Traditional/rational value score <sup>b</sup>	Unaffiliated with any religion <sup>c</sup> (%)
Austria	54	54	43	0.25	14
Czechia	19	20	12	1.23	76
Germany	47	39 W 16 E	34 W 12 E	1.17 W 1.44 E	25
Hungary	44	42	18	0.4	19
Poland	80	84	78	-0.43	6
Slovakia	61	58	50	0.67	14
Slovenia	37	37	31	0.95	18

Note: Data for *Religion important in life* and *Attend services at least once a month* are aggregate values combined from multiple answers (e.g., very important and rather important). Data from the 1999 World Values Survey were collected and published separately for East (E) and West (W) Germany.

Sources: <sup>a</sup>European Commission (2005); <sup>b</sup>World Values Survey (1999); <sup>c</sup>Pew Research Center (2012).

Poland or Austria), and more balanced ratios of denomination-specific stamps in countries with multiple prominent denominations (e.g., Germany or Hungary).

Beyond these simple expectations, I am interested in answering a number of research questions. How directly—or indirectly—do the stamps approach religious themes? To what degree do the religiously themed postage stamps of various countries present subject matter that could be considered “living religion,” i.e., very recent events, people or practices? How do the seven Central European countries compare in issuing religiously themed stamps that celebrate (1) art and architecture, (2) people and events, or (3) traditions?

## Methods

A study of the messages conveyed through postage stamps is clearly a form of content analysis and requires careful coding (Cope 2005). Considering the unique subject matter and objectives of this research, I developed a coding system specific to this study. It was implemented in two primary phases: first, compiling all stamps issued and determining those that convey religious themes and, second, reviewing and categorizing religiously themed stamps into a number of interpretive codes.

Cope (2005) is careful to point out the necessity of recognizing both the manifest and latent messages present in any content analysis. Because the primary focus of this research is on banal religion in Central European national identities and because latent messages are a vital part of said banality, this study does not gather or present data on local populations’ perceptions of the studied stamps. Simply stated this research asks whether or not religious

messages are being conveyed through issued postage stamps. It does not examine the degree to which such messages are received or comprehended by the communities they are meant to represent.

Using data from the various postal services and from the World Association for the Development of Philately (WADP 2011), I compiled a database of stamps issued by the seven selected countries from 2006 to 2010. In determining what constituted a stamp issue, this study utilizes the methodology employed by Brunn (2001, 2011), Raento and Brunn (2005, 2008), and Covington and Brunn (2006), recognizing all visually distinct stamps that were issued, within the period from 2006 to 2010, with a monetary value and for the purpose of sending mail. "Visually distinct" is defined rather loosely, so as to reduce duplication within stamp issue totals. For instance, stamps that were otherwise identical, but which were issued with two different borders, are counted as one issue.

Because data on the number of stamps included in each issue are not consistently available for the seven countries, this study examines stamp *issues* with religious themes. It does not concern itself with how many of each visually distinct stamp were published and distributed as part of a single issue. Consequently, for the comparisons presented below, a stamp issue is equal to all other issues regardless of its relative size.

With every stamp issue, the issuing national postal service publishes an image of the new stamp on its website. Generally, each image is accompanied by a short text detailing the theme and significance of the new issue. I carefully examined each stamp and its accompanying text (where available) to determine whether or not it merited inclusion as a religiously themed stamp. In passing judgment on stamps that were not immediately clear to me, I asked the following questions. What is being commemorated? Which themes are primary and which are secondary? What might people think about as they view this image? Does the text specifically mention religious elements alluded to in the stamp's design? In the end, I focused on being as consistent as I could for the entire collection of assessed stamps. For example, I excluded stamps that commemorated a cityscape and happened to include a cathedral, but included stamps that celebrated cathedrals or monasteries, themselves, as architectural monuments or cultural symbols for a town or region. I realize that some of my classifications, concerning what is or is not religious, could be disputed. With this in mind, I was careful to make all of the judgment calls myself, so as to make a subjectively consistent comparison from country to country.

After compiling this collection of Central European stamps that communicate a religious message, I created some thematic categories (codes) as a means of adding structure to the content analysis. Similar to what Covington and Brunn (2006) present, in their case with music stamps, these thematic categories make it possible to expand the analysis of religiously themed postage stamps along a number of dimensions.

### **The political process of stamp issue selection**

As noted above, processes of identity formation are dynamic and contested, and this leads to certain questions regarding the messages conveyed through postage stamps. Who decides what images and themes to place on a new postage stamp? How do these decision makers come to their ultimate decisions?

According to J. Novotný (personal communication, 3 March 2014), director of Czechia's Postal Museum, the common practice in most countries is to organize a committee of specialists that is tasked with reviewing stamp proposals and selecting stamps that would appropriately represent their respective national community. Institutions, individuals, or other entities may submit stamp proposals for review. In Czechia, this committee of "external specialists" (representing a variety of professions and cultural interests) operates under the direction of the Ministry of Industry and Trade to finalize a production plan for all of the next year's stamp issues. This plan is then passed on to Czech Post, whose Division of Stamp Creation implements it.

In some cases, government mandates will provide selection committees rough outlines of a desired series of stamps and ask them to work out the details necessary to effectively prepare and issue postage stamps in fulfillment of the country's annual emission plan. Vančo (2010) describes how this process was realized to prepare the first set of Slovak stamp issues based on the Euro (January 2009). Recognizing the need for national stamp selection committees to be in touch with the imagined communities they represent, Vančo (2010, author's translation) points out:

As both a fee stamp and a miniature graphical composition, a postage stamp should not be a mere utilitarian fossil, rather it should reflect the period of its origin. Similar to a work of art that is not merely an aesthetically pleasing object or a private statement of the artist, but which is also a testimony to contemporary society.

Proceeding under the assumption that selection committees and postal societies seek to prepare stamps that accurately represent the national communities for whom they are made, we can explore the religious characteristics of the national societies in this study and then consider what the stamps themselves have to say.

### **Religious attitudes and behavior in Central Europe**

Vast differences are evident within Central Europe, in terms of societal values, attitudes, and practices relating to religion. Data from a number of large international surveys paint an informative picture of the religious climate of these seven Central European countries. They provide a useful context for understanding and interpreting the stamps issued by the same countries.

Table 1 presents a small sampling of statistics on religion for the seven countries in question. The selected data are indicative of broader trends and represent the most relevant and revealing statistics from the datasets explored in this study. Poland and Czechia stand out with extreme values, respectively, in religious and non-religious sentiment. East Germany (treated independently in the 1999 World Values Survey) does appear to be even more secular than Czechia; however, as it represents less than a quarter of Germany's total population, these figures fail to even approximately describe the situation for all of Germany. Thus, available data point to Poland as the most likely of these countries to exhibit a strong religious component of national identity. The Czech nation, on the other hand, seems least likely to collectively endorse organized religion.

Special Eurobarometer 225, prepared and published by the European Union (EU) in 2005, asked respondents: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your beliefs?" While 80% of those questioned in Poland selected the statement "I believe there is a God," only 19% of Czech respondents selected this same affirmation (Table 1). Among the other five countries in this study, the percentage of respondents professing belief in a god ranges from 37% (Slovenia) to 61% (Slovakia). Looking at the other side of responses to this same question, 30% of those surveyed in Czechia selected the statement "I don't believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force;" compared with 2% of the Polish sample. Again, the remaining countries lie between the Czech and Polish extremes (ranging from 25% in Germany to 8% in Austria).

The World Values Survey from 1999 is the most recent to include all seven of these Central European Countries. Table 1 includes two specific questions on religion and one of two value scores—the traditional/rational values dimension, derived from views on religion and local traditions in contrast with so-called, rational and logical responses. Respondents in Poland are clearly most likely, from the seven countries in question, to attend religious services at least once a month and to consider religion to be an important component of life. Czech respondents are at the other end of the spectrum on both of these questions (with the notable and previously mentioned exception of East Germany). The traditional/rational value is particularly relevant to this study. As an aggregate raw score between traditional (-2) and secular-rational (+2) poles it accounts for a wide variety of societal positions (Inglehart and Welzel 2010):

The Traditional/Secular-rational values dimension reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. A wide range of other orientations are closely linked with this dimension. Societies near the traditional pole emphasize the importance of parent-child ties and deference to authority, along with absolute standards and traditional family values, and reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride, and a nationalistic outlook. Societies with secular-rational

values have the opposite preferences on all of these topics. (World Values Survey 2012)

Significantly, this paragraph alludes to a correlation between societies in which religion is important and societies that have high levels of national pride. In accordance with these findings, societies with a strong sense for tradition and religion could be expected to publish such sentiments in their postage stamps.

The traditional/rational dimension exhibits a greater departure from the general ordering of the seven countries from most to least religious. While Slovakia ranks as the second most religiously inclined nation in all of the other indicators in [Table 1](#), it is fourth in this dimension, behind Poland, Austria, and Hungary. This indicator is Hungary's only appearance in the upper half (the top three positions) of the more religiously inclined, a group that is otherwise limited to Poland, Slovakia, and Austria.

The final column in [Table 1](#) presents data from a study recently published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Center 2012). The column lists the percent of respondents from each of the seven countries that claim no affiliation to any religion. As with the traditional/rational value score, lower values of this indicator signify a society that exhibits greater affinity for religion. The extreme contrast between Czechia (76%) and the other six states is remarkable. Germany (25%), the second highest result of the seven, is more than 50 percentage points lower. Polish respondents to this survey again represent the opposite extreme, with only 6% claiming no religious affiliation.

Whether or not Czechs believe in God, they seem to have more negative attitudes toward various forms of organized religion. This will likely be reflected in the amount and types of religiously themed stamps issued in Czechia, as compared with the other states in the sample.

In addition to general statistics indicating how these national societies regard religion, it is important to look at the types of religion they tend to prefer. [Figure 1](#) displays the percentages of respondents to the World Values Survey that claim affiliation with various religious denominations. It is important to note that these percentages are taken from the total number of religious adherents and not from the total number of survey respondents in a given country. Thus, only a third of Czechia's respondents to the question "Do you belong to a religious denomination?" are represented in these percentages (World Values Survey 1999). The remaining two-thirds claimed no religious affiliation and are, therefore, not included in [Figure 1](#).

Germany and Hungary appear to be the most religiously diverse of the seven countries in the study. Roman Catholicism dominates among the religious adherents of Poland, Slovenia, and Austria, and to a lesser degree in Czechia and Slovakia. Noticeable concentrations of Muslims are apparent in the data for Germany and Slovenia. Higher relative numbers of Orthodox are

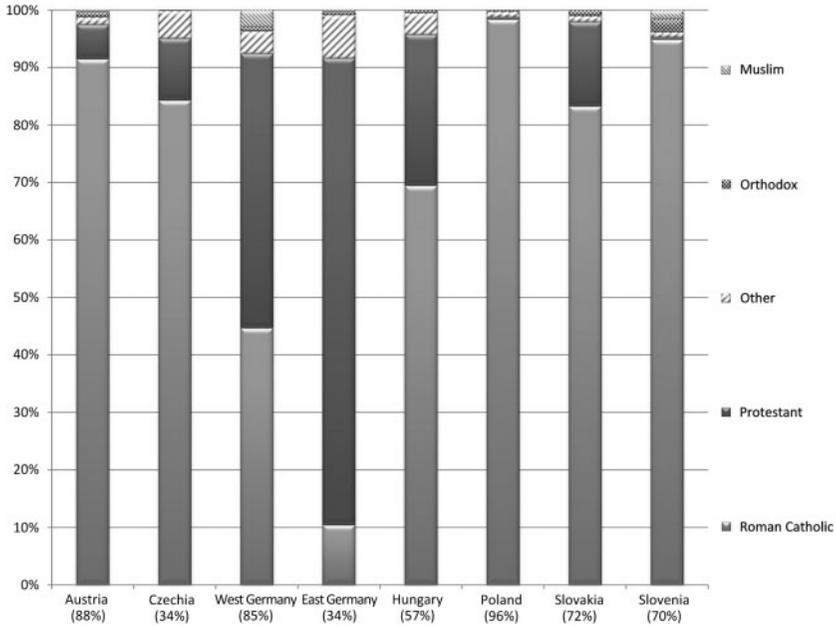


Figure 1. Structure of religious adherents by country in 1999.

Note: Percentages in parentheses after country names denote the ratio of respondents that answered this question, i.e., those that claim affiliation with a religious denomination.

Source: World Values Survey (1999).

found in Slovenia, Slovakia, and Austria. I expect to find these denominational ratios reflected in the qualitative analysis of stamp issues.

### Religious stamp issues: ratios and trends

A simple comparison, in the seven selected states, of the portion of issued stamps that have a religious theme shows evident international differences in state-sanctioned religious expressions of national identity. Table 2 presents annual totals of stamps issued with a religious theme as a portion of all stamp issues, both by year and for the entire 2006–2010 period. Slovakia (31.4%) and Hungary (21.4%) emerge as the clear leaders. The percentage of religiously themed issues in Poland is not quite half (14.3%) as much as that of Slovakia, its neighbor to the south, while the remainder of the selected countries shows progressively lower percentages, ending with Slovenia (8.4%).

Viewing Table 2, in light of the anticipated results (as stated above), it is immediately clear that Poland—statistically the most religious nation—does not have the highest ratio of religiously themed stamps. Neither does Czechia

Table 2. Stamps issued with a religious theme as a portion of all stamps issued from 2006 to 2010.

Country	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		Entire period		
	R	T	R	T	R	T	R	T	R	T	R	T	%
Austria	8	59	8	64	5	91	7	60	10	59	38	333	11.4
Czechia	7	42	3	40	5	45	6	34	4	44	25	205	12.2
Germany	5	59	8	57	8	52	6	53	7	54	34	275	12.4
Hungary	14	75	14	62	10	56	13	76	21	68	72	337	21.4
Poland	7	70	8	47	7	63	10	58	8	41	40	279	14.3
Slovakia	3	21	7	24	6	24	14	30	8	22	38	122	31.4
Slovenia	2	34	4	55	4	33	4	48	4	44	18	214	8.4

Note: R denotes stamps with a religious theme, while *T* represents the total number of stamps issued in a given year.

Sources: Deutsche Post (2011), Magyar Posta (2011), Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu České republiky (2011), Österreichische Post (2011), Poczta Polska (2011), Pošta Slovenije (2011), Poštová filatelistická služba (2011), WADP (2011), author's analysis.

—the least religious of the seven nations—exhibit the lowest ratio. The hypothesis of higher religiosity being related to a higher ratio of religiously themed stamps does not appear to be valid, at least not completely. There is clearly more to the story.

To achieve a better understanding of the relationship between the data presented on religious behavior (Table 1) and ratios of stamp issues with religious themes (Table 2), I considered the rankings of the seven countries in both areas. Table 3 aggregates information from Tables 1 and 2 and simply displays the rankings of the seven countries in the study in terms of religiosity (a mathematical average of intraregional rankings compiled from Table 1, in which 1 represents the most religiously inclined of the seven nations) and production of religiously themed stamps (ratios from Table 2, in which 1 is the highest ratio).

Table 3. Collective rankings in terms of religiosity (Table 1) and production of religiously themed stamps (Table 2).

Country	Religiosity	Religious stamps
Austria	3	6
Czechia	7	5
Germany	6	4
Hungary	4	2
Poland	1	3
Slovakia	2	1
Slovenia	5	7

Source: Author's calculations.

For the most part, the rankings of a given country in [Table 3](#) do not differ much although none of the countries holds the same ranking in religiosity and religious stamp production. Austria is the only country of the seven that exhibits a discrepancy larger than two between the two rankings presented (see below for a possible explanation). The statistical principle of regression to the mean is helpful in understanding why Poland and Czechia do not stand out from their peers in terms of issuing stamps with religious themes. The likelihood of these countries exhibiting extreme values in *two* distinct measures (religiosity and religious stamp production) is considerably less than the likelihood of an extreme in one or the other.

Recognizing trends in special commemorative stamps can aid in explaining larger-than-expected discrepancies between the rankings in [Table 3](#) as well as some of the year-to-year fluctuation, in terms of religiously themed and overall stamp issues. For example, Austria issued 41 unique stamps, during 2008 alone, to celebrate the Union of European Football Association's 2008 European Cup, which took place in Austria and Switzerland. In the same year, Austria issued eight stamps commemorating the 2008 Vienna International Postage Stamp Exhibition, only the sixth such exhibition since 1881 and certainly a significant event for the international community of stamp collectors. Not only do these 49 commemorative stamp issues represent more than half of Austria's stamp issues in 2008 ([Table 1](#)), they also help explain the very low relative number of religiously themed issues (only five stamp issues out of 91). This was the lowest single year percentage (5.5%) of religiously themed stamps issued by any of the countries, during the entire 5-year period.

In contrast, the highest annual percentage of stamp issues with a religious theme (46.7%) was recorded in Slovakia, in 2009. This was, again, due to the introduction of a special set of stamps, this time with a religious theme. Twelve of Slovakia's fourteen religiously themed stamp issues (from a total of 30 issued stamps in 2009) commemorate the Roman architecture of a number of the country's oldest Christian churches. [Figure 2](#) is one of the stamps from the special series. The wide variety of incremental monetary values connected with these particular stamps (from 0.01 through 2.00 EUR) as well as the fact that they were all issued on 2 January 2009 confirm that this commemorative series was an integral part of the transition from stamps based on the Slovak Crown to stamps based on the Euro; a transition that began with the new year, when Slovakia officially entered the Eurozone and adopted the Euro as its currency (Vančo 2010). The inclusion of latent religious messages in such an integral series of stamps makes a significant statement regarding how Slovakia views its own religious identity and how it wishes to be perceived by other nations.

### Stamp categories and messages

Exploring religious themes as numbers and percentages is only one method to begin to uncover what various countries are communicating through the issue



Figure 2. Hamuliakovo 2009. This stamp was printed in Slovakia's first series of Euro-based postage stamps.

Source: WADP 2011. Image reprinted with permission from Slovenská pošta, a.s./D. Kállay.

of new postage stamps, in other words what types of national identity political states choose to promote. To take this analysis of religious expressions of national identity further, I employed qualitative methods of assessment to the collection of Central European stamp issues. Table 4 summarizes a number of thematic divisions, made after going through the stamps several times and considering the messages they convey.

The first of these divisions looks at the dominant religious tradition upon which each of the 265 religiously themed stamps appears to be based. The three primary categories: Christian, other traditions (i.e., Judaism and Islam), and generally spiritual (clearly religious but lacking a definitive connection to any one tradition), are exclusive, meaning that each stamp was placed into one and only one of these categories. Not surprisingly, the Christian category dominates, even to the point of being the only category represented in Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. And so, at a time when EU leaders were hotly debating the issue of whether or not to include a statement about Christian heritage and Christian ideals in the preamble to an EU Constitution, the postage stamps of seven EU

Table 4. Percentages of religiously themed stamps issued by category.

Country	Religious tradition				Holidays		“Living religion”	Other common themes			
	Christian				Clearly religious	Less evident	Recent themes	Art and architecture	People and events	Traditions	
	From which		Other traditions	Generally spiritual							
	Catholic	Protestant									
Austria	97	43	–	3	–	18	13	16	55	37	5
Czechia	96	21	17	4	–	16	20	–	64	16	20
Germany	82	18	18	9	9	29	–	18	53	50	6
Hungary	86	16	10	14	–	15	7	3	78	18	7
Poland	100	33	–	–	–	25	33	25	28	23	28
Slovakia	100	13	8	–	–	11	13	–	74	18	13
Slovenia	100	33	6	–	–	22	33	11	28	28	33

Note: The Catholic and Protestant categories show percentages based on the number of stamps categorized as Christian and not the total number of religiously themed stamps.

Sources: Deutsche Post (2011), Magyar Posta (2011), Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu České republiky (2011), Österreichische Post (2011), Poczta Polska (2011), Pošta Slovenije (2011), Poštová filatelistická služba (2011), WADP (2011), author’s analysis.

Member States continued to proclaim close ties to Christianity without facing much, if any, political opposition. Clearly, the question of whether to acknowledge Christianity in a constitution represents a significantly different scale level than the celebration of Christian heritage on a postage stamp.

Rounding out the religious tradition division are the “other traditions” and “generally spiritual” categories. In Austria, Czechia, and Germany, all of the other-tradition stamps commemorate Jewish themes, celebrating World War II era historical events and personalities, a much older historical figure (Prague’s Rabbi Löw) or cultural artwork. In Hungary, 6 out of 10 other-tradition stamps present Jewish synagogues while the remaining four honor historic Islamic architecture in the city of Pécs. [Figure 3](#) displays stamps that exemplify these various religious traditions, including both Catholic and Protestant Christian themes, as well as Jewish and Islamic “other traditions.”



Figure 3. Examples from the primary divisions of religiously themed stamp issues. The Polish stamp (upper left), celebrating 30 years since John Paul II’s election as Pope, is a “clearly Catholic,” Christian stamp. The stamp in the upper right commemorating the 500 year anniversary of John Calvin’s birth is a “clearly Protestant,” Christian stamp. Stamps in the lower left (Prague’s Rabbi Löw) and in the middle of the upper row (a mosque in Pécs, Hungary) represent the “other-traditions” category. The *Ehrenamt* [Volunteerism] stamp in the lower right is a “generally spiritual” stamp.

Source: WADP (2011). Images courtesy Deutsche Post AG, Hungarian Post Ltd/Elekes Attila, Polska SA/Marzanna Dąbrowska, and Czech Post/K. Zeman and J. Tvrdoň.

Evaluating stamps from Germany led me to create a new category for generally spiritual stamps: those that, although they reference religion in a general sense, cannot be categorized in accordance with established religious traditions. For example, the *Ehrenamt* [volunteerism] stamp, shown in [Figure 3](#), clearly celebrates religion (*Kirche*) as an important element of society, without giving any indication of what type of religion might be preferred. With these “non-denominational” stamp issues, Germany presents itself as an innovator, among these seven countries, promoting a multi-cultural and more broadly accepting view of various religious traditions. Considering its geopolitical and economic position as a Western world leader and its long-term role as a receiving country for international immigration, this is not surprising. It will be interesting to observe if, when and how other Central European countries might begin to follow this lead and more conscientiously celebrate increasing diversity—religious and otherwise—within their own borders.

To further explore what types of Christianity these various political states are celebrating, additional sub-categories account for clearly Catholic and clearly Protestant stamps. Essentially, these sub-categories take the broad religious division, described above, a step further—where such a step is possible. Findings from the Catholic and Protestant divisions shed light on national attitudes, concerning religious heritage and current trends in religious participation. I found it difficult to draw a distinct line between Christian-themed stamps that were either “clearly Catholic” or “clearly Protestant” and those that were not. Many stamps could not be definitively placed in either of these categories. This means that the Catholic and Protestant sub-categories do not add up to 100% of the Christian-themed stamps. As a matter of fact, they do not even add up to 50% of the Christian stamps in any of the seven countries ([Table 4](#)).

Austria and Poland demonstrate a dominant Catholic tradition by publishing a large portion of clearly Catholic stamps and no clearly Protestant stamps during the researched time period. Slovenia has a similarly high ratio of Catholic-themed stamps with a comparatively small sampling of Protestant-themed stamps. Catholic themes also outnumber Protestant in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia, but to a lesser degree. Germany’s equal ratio in this measure reiterates its apparent intention to be viewed as a religiously neutral, multi-denominational state.

These results correspond quite well with the data presented in [Figure 1](#), describing ratios of religious adherents—from each of the seven countries—that claim affiliation with various religious denominations. In this regard, religiously themed stamps communicate a form of national identity that is in line with the dominant religious traditions of their respective nations. In many cases, however, these religious traditions are relics of earlier periods. While they might still be present in local and regional folk traditions, with few exceptions, religious beliefs and behaviors no longer accurately represent the majority of people in modern, Central European societies (Tomka 2005).

Recent holiday stamp issues provide an example of folk traditions outpacing more overtly religious themes in many of these Central European countries. While I did include all stamp issues that commemorate traditionally religious holidays, I divided such stamps into two groups: “clearly religious” and “less evident.” The clearly religious holiday stamps include images that present religious holiday themes in a prominent manner, with limited attempts to downplay religious elements. In some cases, particularly for Christmas and Easter, the presence or absence of the name of the holiday was a deciding factor for placing a stamp into one or the other of these two holiday categories. “Less evident” holiday stamps generally depict modern holiday scenes or folk traditions—dyed eggs, Easter whips (Czechia and Slovakia), Christmas trees, etc.—and either do not include or significantly downplay any overtly religious themes. Figure 4 presents examples of “clearly religious” (on the right) and “less evident” (left) holiday stamps. Although the Hungarian Easter stamp (lower right) in Figure 4 does include the name of the Easter holiday (Húsvét), the themes in the stamp itself caused me to place it in the “less evident” category.

Holiday stamp issues are most common—as a percentage—in Poland and Slovenia, accounting for more than half of all issues with religious themes. In both countries “less evident” holiday stamps outnumber clearly religious, in Slovenia by a three-to-two margin. Czechia and Slovakia also issued more less-evident than clearly religious holiday stamps; although in Slovakia, the difference was only one stamp (two percentage points). Austria, Hungary, and Germany, on the other hand, published more clearly religious holiday stamps. Hungary issued twice as many clearly religious holiday depictions as it did less evident holiday stamps. Surprisingly, *all* of Germany’s holiday stamp issues fit into the clearly religious category. They are all clearly labeled Christmas stamps with artwork depicting the Nativity of Christ. Perhaps the greater religious plurality of Hungary and Germany motivates these countries to commemorate religious holidays more directly than their neighboring countries. In a general sense, Christian holidays can be viewed as a unifying element for Germans and Hungarians with differing, yet Christian, religious views. On the other hand, in countries with a single dominant religion—i.e., Catholicism in Austria, Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—more nuanced depictions of holidays that focus on common folk traditions could be seen as a means of promoting unity among believers (primarily Catholics) and non-believers.

To further explore the notion of modern manifestations of religion, or “living religion,” as opposed to the mere recognition of religious heritage in postage stamp issues, I made a separate count of recent religious themes. I consider stamps commemorating events or personalities that occurred or lived during the past 40 years to be examples of “living religion.” In addition to datable stamp themes, the category also includes two stamps from Germany that reference religion as they promote modern societal values: volunteerism and thanksgiving. I did not include stamps commemorating longstanding



Figure 4. Examples of holiday stamp issues. The two stamps on the left are “clearly religious” holiday stamps from Slovenia and Austria, while the Slovak and Hungarian stamps on the right represent “less evident” holiday stamps.

Source: WADP (2011). The Slovakian stamp is reprinted with permission from Slovenská pošta, a.s./Vladimír Machaj. Other images courtesy Hungarian Post Ltd/Szalma Edit, Österreichische Post AG/A. Tuma, and Pošta Slovenije d.o.o./A. Čufer, J. Fink and J. Košnik.

traditions that still happen to be observed (i.e., Christmas trees), *unless* the stamps present a strong case of modern-day relevance. I chose to include six such stamps. Five of these depict Catholic pilgrimages and indicate that pilgrimage activities continue today (Figure 5). The other: *Mój szczęśliwy dzień*, is a Polish stamp celebrating what appears to be an individual's first Catholic communion as "my happy day" (Figure 6). The subject and presentation of this stamp communicate the importance that modern Polish society ascribes to an individual's first communion. Figures 5 and 6 present a sampling of the living religion stamps.

As with the other categories described above, the percentage of *recent* religious themes out of the total number of stamp issues with religious themes facilitates country-to-country comparison within Central Europe. Fully one quarter of Poland's religiously themed stamp issues convey messages of living religion. Germany and Austria exhibit relatively high percentages for this category followed by lower relative numbers in Slovenia and Hungary.



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Figure 5. Three pilgrimage stamps. These stamps from Poland, Hungary, and Austria commemorate Catholic pilgrimages that continue to this day. They are classified as "living religion" and "clearly Catholic" stamps.

Source: WADP (2011). Images courtesy Hungarian Post Ltd/Baticz Barnabás, Poczta Polska SA/Patrycja Orzechowska, Österreichische Post AG.



Figure 6. *Mój szczęśliwy dzień* [My happy day] 2007; a “living religion” stamp. Source: WADP (2011). Image courtesy Poczta Polska SA/Joanna Górka.

Czechia and Slovakia issued no living religious themes on their postage stamps from 2006 to 2010.

It appears that while Czech and Slovak societies recognize the role of religious heritage in their national identities, they are less eager to celebrate modern manifestations of religion. In Czechia, in particular, any depiction of modern religious practice on a postage stamp would only speak to a small minority of the country’s population (Table 1). Reasons for Slovakia’s apparent aversion to living religion stamps, and for that matter to clearly religious holiday stamps, are less clear. On the other hand, Austrian, German and especially Polish societies seem to be relatively more comfortable with modern religious themes as expressions of their own respective national identities.

Germany’s high number of living religion stamps, particularly in light of its relatively low ranking in terms of religiosity (Table 3), suggests greater acceptance within German society for a variety of religious views. A number of Germany’s living religion stamps seem to speak to the “spiritual but not religious” ideology (Fuller 2001), including those that make up the generally spiritual category discussed above. Perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of a shift, within Central Europe, toward more favorable societal attitudes regarding spirituality. Again, time will tell if and how Germany’s Central European neighbors follow this lead.

Poland issued four stamps during the 5-year period commemorating popes. These are all included in among the living religion stamps. Three of the four stamp issues depict Pope John Paul II, a native Pole who served as Pope from 1978 to 2005. As Karol Józef Wojtyła (name before being elected Pope), he was a respected leader of Polish Catholics during the communist period. Pope John Paul II continues to be revered in Poland as a spiritual father to the



Figure 7. Traditions; art and architecture; people and events. These three stamps provide examples of three thematic categories from Table 4. Slovenia's stamp portrays a religious Christmas tradition. Slovakia's stamp depicts religious artwork and Germany's stamp commemorates Pope Benedict XVI.

Source: WADP (2011). The Slovakian stamp is reprinted with permission from Slovenská pošta, a.s./Pavol Choma and Martin Činovský. Other images courtesy Pošta Slovenije d.o.o./Gorazd Učakar and Deutsche Post AG.

Polish people and embodies the close relationship between Catholicism and the Polish nation.

Table 4's living religion column presents perhaps the most significant results of the study. Not only do Czechia and Poland actually find themselves at their corresponding religious-sentiment poles (very secular or very religious, respectively) in this measure; Slovakia and Hungary—the two most productive countries of the seven, in terms of relative religiously themed

stamp issues—are noticeably absent. This measure of stamp activity holds the promise of being a better barometer of the current attitudes of the societies represented. It would be interesting to track living religion stamps in this region over a longer period of time.

The final columns presented in [Table 4](#) categorize religious stamp issues into three broad classifications: art and architecture, people and events, and traditions. These classes are not exclusive—the same stamp could be counted in more than one. Nonetheless, they do provide a comparative typology of the religiously themed stamps issued by the seven countries in question from 2006 to 2010. From the three categories, depictions of religious art and architecture are the clear leader for most of the states, followed by people and events and then traditions. The two exceptions to this progression are Poland and Slovenia, both of which issued equal or higher ratios of religious tradition themes. [Figure 7](#) presents one example from each of these three broad categories. Slovenia's stamp depicting a Nativity Wreath is a religious holiday tradition. Slovakia's stamp displays religious artwork and Pope Benedict XVI is a prominent religious figure, depicted here on a stamp from Germany.

## **Conclusion**

As I set out to collect, compare, and analyze Central European stamp issues with religious themes, I expected to find higher ratios of religiously themed stamps in countries with greater collective affinity for religion. In a general sense, this is true for the seven countries in this study, from 2006 to 2010. It is not, however, a particularly strong relationship. I was surprised, initially, to find Czechia and Poland—extreme examples, respectively, of non-religious or religious sentiment—in the middle of the pack ([Table 3](#)) in terms of religious stamp production. However, considering the influence stamps can have as expressions of national identity to both domestic and international consumers ([Brunn 2001](#)), it is not so surprising to see decision makers in Czechia and Poland shy away from issuing what could be considered too few or too many religiously themed postage stamps. People—whether in groups or as individuals—tend to seek understanding and respect, both of which can be difficult to attain by harping on extreme differences.

Production of clearly Catholic and clearly Protestant stamp issues within the scope of the study roughly corresponds with the structure of religious adherents in the respective countries. Countries with higher ratios of Protestants proved more likely to issue clearly Protestant stamps, while countries with dominant Catholic traditions—in particular, Austria and Poland—issued the highest relative numbers of clearly Catholic stamps and very few, if any, clearly Protestant stamps. As the most religiously diverse of the seven countries, Germany and Hungary issued the highest ratios of both Protestant and other-tradition stamps.

Stamp issues depicting examples of living religion along with those that explicitly convey religious holiday messages seem to offer the most potential

as a measure of religiosity, similar to Brunn's (2015) work with stamps and secularization in Western Europe. Further research could examine such stamp issues over a longer period of time to study societal change in Central Europe or other regions of the world.

Another avenue for additional research could consider the way that messages of banal religion in postage stamps are received by members of the societies they are meant to represent. How much of these latent messages remain latent? Do people recognize monuments of religious architecture or masterpieces of religious artwork as being inherently religious or are they merely representative of cultural heritage, specific to a time and place?

These recent stamp issues demonstrate that national identities in Central Europe cannot be entirely or cleanly separated from religion and its far-reaching traditional influences. Much of the initial work to define the Central European nations that are currently represented by political states was accomplished during the nineteenth century. At this time, imagined communities structured around a combination of religious and ethnic identities passed the torch, so to speak, to emerging nations. Consequently, the national identities of Central Europe incorporated, and continue to include, a great deal of religious heritage and tradition. Modern political states in Central Europe continue to communicate banal religion through the issue of national postage stamps.

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