

Public justifications in differentiated symbolic spheres: Czech restitution of church property

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the media statements by Czech church representatives on the restitution of church property. It traces the debate from the fall of communism in 1990 until 2019 via two centre-left and centre-right newspapers and the official periodicals of the two largest Czech churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. At the theoretical and methodological level, I show the advantages of combining pragmatic and cultural sociology approaches, specifically Boltanski and Thévenot's modes of justification and Alexander and Smith's civil and non-civil spheres. This analytical approach allows for a better understanding of the dynamics of symbolic discursive dominance in public disputes. The churches' efforts to achieve public credibility have primarily relied on emphasising efficiency, expertise and transparency. Surprisingly, these attributes, typical of the Czech civil sphere, were also prevalent arguments within intra-church discourses.

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Introduction

This text shows the advantages of combining American cultural sociology approaches (Alexander & Smith, 1993, 2003) with those of French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) via analysis of media debates on topics that resonate strongly with the public. Specifically, I pursue the following goals:

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- (1) present media analysis results of the debate on church property restitution in the Czech Republic, which showed interesting counterintuitive similarities in the argumentative approaches of church spokespersons in both religious and secular media; and
- (2) discuss, using this case, how the theoretical and methodological connection of Boltanski and Thévenot's modes of justification alongside Alexander and Smith's conception of civil and non-civil spheres, constructed by different symbolic codes, allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of symbolic discursive domination in public disputes.

The data is based on a three-year project that investigated how selected Czech and Slovak churches dealt with the restitution of church property and possible separation from the state after the 1989 Velvet Revolution that brought about the fall of the communist regime in then Czechoslovakia. In the partial study presented here, I focus only on the Czech Republic and examine the arguments about restitution made by representatives of the two largest Czech churches, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB), in selected mainstream and intra-church media.

Many authors claim that mass media, whereby various value clashes take place, is probably the most important discursive platform for modern democracies (Alexander & Smith, 2003, pp. 121–122; Alexander, 2006, pp. 69–105; Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016, p. 2). Regarding the possible secular-religious clash, Jürgen Habermas (2001, 2006) points out that the liberal state places a special demand on its religious citizens to 'translate their religious convictions into a secular language before their arguments have the prospect of being accepted by a majority' (Habermas, 2001, p. 4). For believers and representatives of Czech churches, the search for a rhetorical balance that was adequate for the newly established democracy was all the more difficult because, before 1989, they could not operate publicly without the strict control of the then-communist regime. Czech churches therefore had to go through a complex process of learning to address the public (Tichý, 2011).

Following Habermas's claim, due to the different audiences they aim to address, churches should present themselves differently in mainstream media than in the intra-church media. However, when I compared the arguments of RCC and ECCB representatives in mainstream daily news with the accounts released in intra-church periodicals, I was surprised by their similarities. Habermas's assumption was partially fulfilled – some

arguments in church periodicals were built on spiritual rhetoric. What seemed analytically more interesting, however, was that most claims were constructed identically in both intra-church and mainstream media discourse in a very rationalistic way: the argumentation focused on transparency, efficiency of management and so on. There was no significant difference between internal church discourse and the proclamations of church representatives in mainstream media. I therefore focused on both these partially divergent and commonly shared narratives.

The corpus covered the period from 1990 to 2019, allowing emerging variables and stable phenomena to be distinguished. After the first phase of open and theoretical coding, it was clear that a specific self-evident, non-negotiable structure also appeared as a subliminal but essential feature in the debate, in addition to the modes of justifications provided by the public justifications analysis. It was as if all sides of the dispute – those who supported restitution and those who opposed it, believers or not – related discursively to the idea of two parallel structures: the religious sphere and the civil sphere. How this disjunction manifested itself in concrete terms will be the subject of the following analytical chapters.

To capture this interplay of emergent argumentation and more structural discursive features, I employ Hajer's notion of discourse, which posits that this duality of social action by clever, creative individuals operating within social structures both enables and constrains their actions but also allows these to be produced and reproduced by their practices (Hajer, 2002, p. 58). In Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis, actors use narratives as tools to convey their arguments via stories with a basic structure of 'a beginning, middle, and an end' (Hajer, 2006, p. 69). In this article, I propose approaching the debate on church property restitution using Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) *pragmatic sociology* as developed methodologically by Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (2016) and combine it with Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) *strong program* in cultural sociology. This connection allows for an innovative combination of the dimensions of discursive agency (pragmatic sociology) and discursive structure (a strong program in cultural sociology).

Restitution of church property in the Czech public discourse: What is so interesting about that?

Czechs are often labelled atheists or *apatheists* to emphasise their disinterest in religion rather than outright rejection of it (Václavík, 2016). New religious trends, in contrast, find a warm welcome provided they

are not tied to classical church institutions (Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009; Nešpor, 2020; Václavík et al., 2018; Vido et al., 2016; cf. Tížik, 2023). The lukewarm attitude towards churches after the Velvet Revolution was reflected in the fact that despite the well-known persecution of church members and the expropriation of church property by the previous communist regime, the churches in the Czech Republic were not fully compensated in property immediately after the regime change. Compared to other post-communist countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland), the Czech Republic took the longest time to decide upon the form of settlement with the churches, and this settlement was, in the end, bound together with the financial separation of church and state (Minarik, 2020, p. 3). The restitution of church property was promised soon after the 1989 revolution, but it was enacted only in 2012. This was significantly helped by the Blocking Act (Act No. 229, 1991), which froze the ability to dispose of church property, owned mainly by municipalities, until the property issues were resolved in law.

Over the more than twenty-year-long public debate on restitution, churches had to respond to doubts oriented both towards the past (whether they were the rightful owners of the property subject to restitution proposals) and the future (whether they could manage the property properly and not have ownership devalue the idealised notion of a poor church). In spite of the final enactment of the Act on Property Settlement with Churches and Religious Societies (Act No. 428, 2012), Czech public discourse remains polarised regarding the restitution and the role churches should play.

In our previous study on the narratives dealing with the restitution, we analysed the processes whereby various storylines (see Hajer, 2002, 2006) were gradually institutionalised in Czech mainstream newspapers. We showed that religious and secular narratives intersected in their emphasis on anti-communism and the neoliberal emphasis on efficient management and private property, demonstrated, for instance, through expectations that churches would be better stewards of property than the state. This juxtaposition seems to have helped despite persistent scepticism against the churches to push the restitution law through (Frantová & Haas, 2023).

It was expected that church representatives would strategically stress arguments that could presumably resonate positively in public. On the other hand, they could also be successful in pushing their internal agenda into the mainstream media. Thus, I was particularly interested in the comparison of the different types of legitimisation churches applied in internal media and that of the mainstream.

Methodology and data

The media analysis was part of a broader project that mapped the differences in the restitution process and how it was reflected in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. One of its specific goals was to capture the main medialised narratives about the restitution of church property throughout the ‘restitution debate’ from 1990 to 2019 in both mainstream and intra-church media. I decided to limit the media sources to print, allowing for the comparison and tracking of changes over time both within and between periodicals and between similar sources in both countries. Unlike online news, which emerged later, printed media covers the entire period under study; these periodicals also target different reader groups than those of online periodicals or television. The analysis presented here, however, is limited to the Czech Republic.

The issue of church property restitution is politicised in the Czech Republic, with opinion coalitions forming against restitution on the left of the political spectrum and representatives of the right tending to speak in favour. In order to capture the key and the most polarised arguments for and against restitution, I therefore focused on the most widely read (see [Mediaprojekt](#)) serious opinion dailies representing the centre-left (*Právo*) and centre-right positions (*Lidové noviny*). For the analysis of the intra-church argumentation, I chose the official church periodicals of the two largest churches in the Czech Republic: the RCC’s *Katolický týdeník* and the ECCB’s *Český bratr*.

I used a media monitoring application, Newton Media Search, to select the dataset. This platform collects content from Czech print newspapers and magazines, TV and radio stations, and online and social media. It automatically searches all grammatical categories of keywords, so there is no need to search only by radices. At first, I searched using the keyword ‘church restitution’ (‘church’ AND ‘restitution’)¹ from 1990 to 2019. Based on a cursory reading, I adjusted the keywords to also include texts related to the topic but that did not mention ‘restitution’ explicitly – the final keywords were (‘church’ OR ‘taxation’) AND (‘restitution’ OR ‘separation’ OR ‘property’ OR ‘funding’ OR ‘compensation’).² Finally, I selected the years that showed the steepest increase in the number of articles in a long-term trend. These increases were caused by the critical legal and political measures or events related to restitution that incited a media debate (see [Table 1](#)). To the years identified in this way (1993, 1996, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2018, 2019), I added 1990, when the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic was founded; the number

Table 1. Key restitution-oriented events related to the surge of media mentions.

1993	A split within the governing coalition, with the Christian and Democratic Union– Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-CSL) pushing for the entitlement restitution law and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) pushing for the enumeration law.
1996	KDU-ČSL categorically advocates for the restitution of all church property, while the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) opposes the executive restitution of property. ČSSD uses restitution as an ultimatum: if it is supported, ČSSD will vote against the minority government in a confidence vote.
2008	KDU-ČSL offers to support Václav Klaus (ODS) in the presidential election in exchange for his approval of church restitution. Three ODS MPs unexpectedly vote against the restitution law.
2012	ČSSD conducts a billboard campaign against restitution, the Catholic Church wants to restore the Marian Column in the centre of Prague, and the separation of church and state is addressed. At the end of the year, the law on restitution is approved.
2013	The possible consequences of the newly adopted restitution law are addressed.
2018	The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) conditions its support for the government of Andrej Babiš by endorsing the adoption of a law that would tax financial compensation for restitution granted to churches.
2019	Act No. 125/2019 Coll. on taxing financial compensation is passed but later annulled by the Constitutional Court (judgment file no. Pl. ÚS 5/19).

of reports was relatively small, but it was also the first year when restitution could begin to appear as a public issue.

I followed the argumentative lines of the texts, focusing on the key narratives around restitution. To limit the total number of reports to those that are argumentatively the richest, I subsequently chose only the front pages and opinion sections (opinion pieces, columns, letters from readers) in the mainstream media. Both dailies dedicate their front pages to current affairs, the common strategy being that the article starts on the front page and continues in the opinion section. For intra-church media, due to their different design and more limited periodicity (weekly and monthly), we, with my colleague (see acknowledgements), checked the entire content of the issue. Older editions of *Lidové noviny*, *Právo* and *Katolický týdeník* were not available in the Newton Media Search database, so we used library archives and, in the case of *Katolický týdeník*, the editorial archive where my colleague, Petr Haas, manually photocopied the contents of the issues for the selected years.

The pragmatic approach does not offer precise guidance on how to empirically process data. However, a way to translate Boltanski and Thévenot's theoretical propositions into empirical research is offered by Luhtakallio (2012) and further developed by Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (2016). A specific software tool introduced by pragmatist theorists for discourse analysis is called *Prospéro* (Boltanski, 2010, p. 13). Its advantages are particularly applicable for linguistically-oriented analyses, which use a wide range of vocabularies collected and lemmatised by

the users themselves in each country. In the Czech Republic, a group led by Simon Smith is developing this tool (Klabíková Rábová et al., 2019). However, the disadvantages of Prospéro are the considerable input cost: an unfriendly, relatively static user interface; lengthy work with dictionaries; and outputs that are, by their nature, suitable for quantitative rather than qualitative analysis.

I therefore preferred the program Atlas.ti for sorting the data and methodological suggestions of Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio's (2016) justification analysis. For each text, I coded descriptively – the main topic, the specific cases mentioned in the text, the key actors (authors, quotes, interviews, mentions, etc.) and intertextuality (the interconnect-edness of texts within and between different types of media) (see Hajer, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) – and analytically. In the first round of analytical coding, I recorded connotations in relation to restitution (pro, con, neutral), types of arguments and key metaphors. In the second round, I noted the orders of worth related to the justification types used.

In the analytical part of this article, I illustrate the results of this analysis with the citations most typical for the categories studied. In order to clarify the context in which the church narratives were produced, I also use selected quotes from other media texts that formed the data corpus of the entire original project. The project mapped the accounts of both church and secular actors over a wider range of periodicals. In these cases, the quotations serve as a shorthand through which I could briefly depict the outcomes already described in previous texts (Frantová, 2023; Frantová & Haas, 2023).

Theoretical reflections: Analysis of justifications within symbolic spheres

In our previous research, we found it possible to find strong similarities between the arguments of both opponents and supporters of church property restitution in the Czech mainstream media. These similarities represented deeply encoded sentiments almost impossible to avoid in the Czech public debate – anti-communism, an emphasis on private property and economic efficiency (Frantová & Haas, 2023).

However, similar (and often surprising) types of argumentation also appeared in intra-church discourse. Therefore, I want to offer a theoretically anchored approach that would allow for a better understanding of the interrelations between the declared arguments. This is what the

combination of a *justification analysis* and a concept of a symbolic civil society code based on a *strong program in cultural sociology* can offer.

Boltanski and Thévenot work with an undifferentiated a priori notion of the public sphere. Alexander, on the other hand, sees civil society as a sphere of solidarity that is analytically and, to some extent, also empirically separated from the ‘non-civil’ spheres – political, economic, familial and, last but not least, religious. This analytical distinction allows observation of how these spheres interact with each other.

Actors within the civil sphere discourse are led by the symbolic cultural structure of a binary code. Matthew Norton (2014) calls a code a ‘system of conventional rules and relations through which meaning can be communicated and understood’ (p. 170). There are always three levels of characteristics that share the same moral drive and are, according to Alexander and Smith, therefore, mutually compatible. The democratic code of liberty defines (ideal) citizens as calm, rational and autonomous; presupposes that relations between them would be open, honest and friendly or critical and deliberative; and civil society institutions that stem from such relations would be constructed as inclusive, egalitarian, impersonal and based on the rule of law. The content and meaning of codes are shaped relationally – in the public sphere, actors try to sacralise and purify themselves through a positive code of liberty and tarnish their potential opponents by identifying them with a negative code of repression (Alexander & Smith, 1993, pp. 161–164). In a recent debate with Charles Taylor, Alexander stresses the transcendent aspect of civil society. Despite the differences we might see between such a transcendent aspect of civil society when compared to transcendence in a classical religious sense (for the discussion on the differences, see Nelson, 2021; Taylor, 2021), Alexander stresses the symbolic dimension of the shared ideal of society. This is also evident in the vocabulary he uses to define the civil sphere (‘symbolic sacralisation’ and ‘symbolic pollution’). According to Alexander, the civil code refers to a transcendent ideal, the full realisation of which would be sheer utopia. It is the tension between the ideal and reality that is the driving force, with liberating potential for society (Alexander, 2006, p. 402).

What particular role could the division of civil and non-civil spheres play in our investigation of mainstream and intra-church media discourse? Believers are, no doubt, also citizens. Belonging to the religious sphere is based on a shared belief, but it is also bound by a specific set of hierarchical positions and related rights and duties. Membership limited by common intention in faith and specific requirements

whereby a particular faith is expressed (including, for example, restrictions on women's participation in certain positions) means that the religious sphere is also closed to some extent. According to Alexander, the religious sphere is based on a different symbolic code than the civil one: on hierarchies instead of egalitarianism, loyalty rather than criticism, passion rather than rationality. Alexander constructs the possible disruption of the civil sphere discourse as an external threat caused by the rigid codes of non-civil spheres permeating the civil sphere from the outside (Alexander, 2006, pp. 193–195). This idea of an undesirable interpenetration of spheres or even the disintegration of one sphere caused by another has its precursor, for instance, in Habermas's colonisation of the lived world by the system (Habermas, 1984).

From Alexander's point of view, however, the civil sphere also has emancipatory potential – the ability to effectively intervene in other spheres and change unequal relations that predominate there (Alexander, 2006, pp. 33–34). From this perspective, the civil sphere helps to effectively bridge inequalities which can be apparent in other spheres. In the concept of 'dual membership' in society, the civil sphere, on the one hand, places demand on shared humanity, a precondition of which is the symbolic equality of civil society members. On the other hand, we are also members of various social institutions. Our position in the civil sphere should be seen as parallel rather than directly dependent on these other components of our social status (Alexander, 1997, p. 129).

Membership in the civil sphere of those whose membership may be questioned – of believers and churches in a perceived as secularised society such as the Czech Republic, for example – can be achieved only through the symbolic purging of the formerly polluted attributes of these individuals, groups or the institutions they create, that is, through a 'translation' of their characteristics into the widely shared civil code. Church representatives, for example, defended their claim for the return of confiscated property by arguing that churches must be independent of the state and, at the same time, must make a profit so they would, as was tradition, manage their own property. This argument was perceived by the opponents of restitution as the churches' desire for money and power, but it was also reflected positively in the civil discourse – as fair legal compensation protecting private property. But how is such a translation achieved?

A cultural-structuralist understanding of the analytical sub-spheres in which agency takes place presupposes a certain persistence in the prevailing discursive rules and the types of ties between actors. In contrast,

Boltanski and Thévenot's regimes of justification are tied to the shallower layer of public accounts, emphasising the actor's perspective; although they represent a shared mode of argumentation and are objectified in that sense, they are not structurally anchored in the same way as cultural-sociological symbolic spheres.

In their initial work, Boltanski and Thévenot identified six types of 'worlds' based on different types of justifications – characteristics that are appreciated and, therefore, construct the evaluative stances. For instance, creativity and non-conformity are of worth in the *inspired world*, efficiency and investment in the *industrial world*, esteem and reputation in the *domestic world*, renown in the *world of fame*, price in the *market world* and collective interest in the *civic world* (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, pp. 159–211; Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 368). Two additional worlds later enriched these: the *environmental world*, with its worth being *environmental friendliness* (Thévenot et al., 2000) and the *project world* and its worth of *flexibility* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

The worlds that Boltanski and Thévenot describe are constructed similarly to Alexander's spheres: they follow a 'higher common principle'. Through the most valued characteristics (*worth*) they establish qualified objects and subjects that possess these qualities and relations, perceived as 'natural' for the given world (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, pp. 140–158). Nevertheless, Boltanski and Thévenot explicitly distance themselves from the possibility that the different 'worlds', which invoke different modes of justification, could, in fact, be treated as distinct spaces, as separate spheres (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 150). Instead, they emphasise that actors actively choose and switch between different modes of justification. Thus, some churches could be praised for their long-standing tradition (referring to *domestic worth*). Still, when a church cooperates with the municipality and organises a rock music festival on its property, it gains another type of credit (*inspired worth*). However, in mainstream and intra-church periodicals, the actors formulated their opinions on church property restitution as if they were implicitly referring to some strongly imaginary-anchored religious sphere. Although they had different expectations as to its 'proper' functioning, they shared the idea of a religious sphere as being something demarcated by deeper discursive boundaries. In the media accounts, the religious sphere consisted of specific actors, relations and 'sacralised' symbolic narratives (e.g. believers; intra-church media; symbolic actions, such as the visit of the Pope or the rebuilding of the Marian Column in Prague's Old Town Square; etc.). For all the actors involved

in the debate, the religious sphere functioned as a necessary point of reference, which they protect or, contrarywise, attempt to undermine through the specific modes of justification. The civil and religious spheres can be defined as separate spheres both narratively and institutionally, so they should be included as important components in the analysis below.

Both a strong program in cultural sociology and pragmatic sociology point to a kind of shared moral-argumentative basis that is difficult to avoid in public debates (cf. Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016, p. 17). While Boltanski and Thévenot work with 'tests', Alexander and Smith speak of symbolic recognition or exclusion. In the case of church property restitution, the main accounts related to the *industrial*, *civic* and *project orders of worth* (see below), testing whether churches can combine their mission with effective money management. To give proper weight to the strength of these arguments, it is worth linking them with the idea of distinctive symbolic spheres (civil/economic and religious), whose existence appeared as an implicit point of reference for those who participated in media discussions.

Analysis: The search for credibility

A typical in vivo code repeated in intra-church media was the 'search for credibility'. Credibility could be achieved by offering appropriate legitimation for the churches' actions. Since the early 1990s, the credibility of Czech churches has been built in response to narratives emerging in public discourse. From the huge number of church restitution mentions in the Czech media, it is possible to deduce that restitution became the emblematic theme (cf. Hajer, 2006) of the relationship between churches, the state and society. This means that restitution became a topic in public discourse through which churches started to be automatically judged.

The churches' pro- and anti-restitution arguments were oriented towards their current and future roles. Restitution was described as a new and difficult challenge, but one for which the churches were prepared. This narrative stands on the Christian argument of a 'task', the fulfilment of which is an expression of faith. Alternatively, it takes on a new progressive dimension: in both mainstream and intra-church media, representatives tried to present their churches as relatively open and modern platforms, emphasising the changes they would have to undergo as a result of restitution. They pointed to the competences

they already had as well as to the awareness that they would also have to gain some new skills. The first part of the narrative mainly emphasised the permanence and well-known longevity of the Christian churches in the society (*world of fame*) and the stability of its values (*domestic world*):

The mission of the Church is not the possession of buildings, fields, forests, etc., but elsewhere. Its task is, among other things, to take a slap. For two thousand years, it has been creating something here, but it has also been losing something else continually. Yet, it shouldn't be bitter! We take care of what is most important, and the rest will come. (Příhoda, 1993, *Katolický týdeník*)

However, even more often claimed in both mainstream and intra-church media was a narrative constructed in relatively progressive terms that was oriented towards the future. It is built upon three main arguments – *efficiency*, *expertise* and *transparency* – based on Boltanski and Thevenot's *industrial* (efficiency, expertise) and *civic* (transparency) worth. The following part of the analysis attempts to introduce these types of justification in more detail and link them to cultural sociology's symbolic spheres to provide a novel perspective on the restitution debate.

Christian ethics and the spirit of capitalism: Pressure for efficiency

In the intra-church periodicals, investment was described as necessary and desirable. This was not for the purpose of accumulating money, that is, with an emphasis on monetisation, but for the long-term sustainability of the churches' economic viability, which would make it possible to fulfil the deeper mission of the Church. Linking the *emphasis on efficiency*, not for the sake of earnings alone but for the sake of higher goals, refers both to Weber's (1998) Protestant ethics as well as Boltanski and Thevenot's project worth. The project world values not only *efficiency and flexibility* but also *an overarching vision*, a strongly shared message – in our case, spreading the spiritual mission.

The emphasis on efficiency valued in industrial worth corresponded strongly with the mainstream transitional political narrative of the early 1990s, which portrayed the post-communist Western democratic orientation in a distinctly economising way:

TWO PRIORITIES OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC:
Mr Pithart presented a programme statement to the Czech National Council:
Prime Minister Petr Pithart identified the transition to a market economy through privatisation, the development of private business and the liberalisation of prices, and the development of local self-government as priorities. (Sirota & Váňa, 1990, *Právo*)

The economising rhetoric showed that the economic sphere strongly influenced the discourse of the civil sphere in the Czech Republic. However, in the debate on restitution, economic growth was legitimised in the mainstream media via arguments of solidarity, which is typical of the symbolic cultural code in the civil sphere. Secular opponents of restitution, for example, stressed that state spending must target the socially vulnerable – the elderly or families with children – and they simultaneously undermined the justice dimension of church restitution by describing it as a ‘giant gift’ (Hanák, 2013) to the churches at the expense of the needy.

How did the churches respond to this rhetoric? In the church representatives’ narratives in both the intra-church and mainstream media, restitution was perceived as a new challenge and a new project that churches would finally be able to manage independently of the state, as ‘private entrepreneurs’ – as the quotes later in this subsection show, terms such as *company*, *prosperity*, *market leader*, etc. were used in these narratives.

Protestants dealt with economic efficiency in a specific way. Compared to the media coverage of the RCC, the internal narratives of protestants (as observed in the monthly magazine *Český Bratr*) were mostly directed inward towards the church as an organisation. The Protestants discussed possible options for managing their assets in an efficient and solidarity-based way to make their activities sustainable. They stressed that the regular donations to the church from believers would have to increase. Their narratives emphasised redistribution between the parishes out of solidarity, but they gradually started to place particular emphasis on the individual activism of believers manifested by the regular payment of costs. Financial independence would lead to greater autonomy of the church from the state. Effective asset management has thus become a pragmatic part of how the ECCB functions. Nonetheless, implicitly, it has also carried a strong spiritual mission:

As with the whole national economy, we will also have to embark on a cost-efficient path in the church. [...] I believe there are savings, for example, in the modesty of some of our buildings, in the reduction of administration, business trips and, possibly, in the revision of congregational divisions, in order to spread the burden of preachers and congregations more equally and reduce travel costs. (Dušek, 1990, *Český bratr*, reader’s comment)

Some church voices took into account that the pressure for efficiency and effectiveness could bring the ‘work’ of the churches closer to the broader

society – the churches should be seen providing good services at low cost. Economically-oriented narratives became what connected the two spheres, the religious and the secular, which speakers had previously distinguished from one another. The latter, however, implicitly referred to the civil sphere in general. Believers thus simultaneously described themselves as members of a specific religious sphere as well as members of the civil sphere (see the concept of dual membership in the theoretical part above), although they have not yet been given full recognition in this sphere. They sought to publicly emphasise a spiritual narrative of authentic humility and solidarity with neighbours, but they did so consistently on the assumption that the public would appreciate the effective (low-cost) service provided by churches:

It [meaning restitution] is a place of controversy but also a place that connects the Church with the secular public because it is understandable to everyone. I believe that if economically independent churches are able to help the needy, if they manage their property honestly, preserve their landmarks, and develop their service for the whole of society, their contribution to it will be appreciated even by those who do not believe in God and do not trust the Church. (Pištora, 2013, *Katolický týdeník*, perspectives supplement)

The emphasis on morality and spiritual values was sometimes reflected by the churches' spokespersons in both mainstream and intra-church media as almost lacking in the public debate. At the same time, the intra-church discourse also followed a primarily pragmatically-oriented economic line. The emphasis on moral and spiritual values was stressed as the main goal, but economic growth was seen as a necessary means. As Miloslav Fiala, then spokesman for the Czech Bishops' Conference, said:

Neither democracy nor economic stability can be permanently sustained without the moral and cultural values represented by Christianity. This view of the Church's mission and of the work of individual Christians in the field with respect to the moral and cultural renewal of society is completely absent from the debates on the return of property, and yet it is only this basic function of Christianity that gives meaning to everything else. [...] The dynamics of development and the pursuit of economic growth also apply to **church enterprises**³ [highlighted by the author of this article], which are not an end in themselves but are meant to support the main mission of the Church, which is purely spiritual. (Fiala, 1993, *Katolický týdeník*)

The emphasis on efficiency, typical of industrial worth, was thus strongly present in intra-church narratives. Those who were speaking for the churches, in line with the code of the civil sphere, positioned themselves

as rational actors who understood the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness as self-evident and necessary. It was here that one could perceive the merging of the civil, economic and religious spheres:

Nineteen employees now take care of the tourist operation of the Sedlec parish, nicknamed 'the Firm'; in the summer, temporary workers are added. In 2011, the parish opened its own information centre. What prompted it to do so? 'We discussed the fact that we wanted to be the number one visitor attraction in the city, to set quality criteria and to work towards being the most visited attraction here,' says Father Tobek. [...] It is necessary to think ahead and to secure a return over a period of years. [...] The key, in his experience, is to surround yourself with people with a sufficient level of responsibility. In the past, for example, he used to go 'round the hired guides to wish them a good day and ask about any problems. Today, he realises that it's primarily the director's business; he only stops by when he's walking by and has time. That leaves him more room for the parish itself. (Palán, 2013, *Katolický týdeník*)

As the excerpt above illustrates, industrial worth-based justification regimes seemed to be actively transforming events within the religious sphere. Whereas the civil and religious spheres narratively converged through a shared emphasis on efficiency in the first part of the quotation, we noted a widening distance between them in the second part of the quote, in how the father, as interpreted by the editor, referred to the steps he had decided to take to increase efficiency. As a result of the effectiveness narrative, the pastor reached out to parish members and the general public. At the same time, however, he professionalised his actions in a way that omitted 'superfluous' concerns about staff. The pastor partially abandoned his original paternalistic position towards these employees, that is, the bond formed through a caring but inherently hierarchical power typical of the religious sphere. This move referred to the emphasis on expert autonomy that he expected from these employees, but it also referred to the professionalisation of the pastor's function through the division of labour. It was *expertise* that became another key narrative in the restitution negotiations.

Pressure for expertise: How lay people become experts

Part of the narrative against restitution was the fear that churches would not manage their property well and would be duped by profiteering banks and other dubious entities. Church representatives mitigated these concerns in the mainstream and intra-church media by pointing to examples of good practice. Interestingly, in line with the *industrial worth* argument, their narratives fully embraced the idea of the Church as a company, a

private enterprise. The expertise in intra-church periodicals was also reflected in the greater provision of space for economists who worked with churches on restitution. For example, the economist Václav Petříček responded to the editor's question in a lengthy interview as follows:

Do you think that some church entities could start their own business? If so, in what way? 'There are already a number of church entities that are already doing well economically, such as some religious orders. The way these companies do business is no different from that of civil companies.' (Příhoda, 2013, *Katolický týdeník*, perspectives supplement)

Expertise was emphasised on two specific levels: (a) there were already experts in the church but (b) more should be recruited, especially from the laity. New procedures and new forms of management should be introduced. More space should be given to the laity, and solidarity and cooperation across dioceses should be encouraged. Some responsibilities should become more localised, while at the same time, the functional central management of finances, a joint financial fund within the church, should be maintained. As stated by the President of the Czech Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Jan Graubner:

'We will behave economically and choose the most profitable ways to invest,' he said. Minister Jehlička has no doubt that the church will be able to take care of its finances: 'The church has good economists. During the negotiations on the law, the finance minister offered some of them important positions in the ministry,' he noted with a smile. (Macháně, 2008, *Katolický týdeník*).

Alongside the industrial worth argument, there was also the rhetoric of *project worth*. The churches assumed 'limited' flexibility in their activities: they started businesses in various fields (winemaking, forestry, renting, etc.) but emphasised continuity with their traditions (*domestic worth*) and the future sustainability of the projects created. The RCC, and even more strongly the ECCB, drew attention to the use of EU subsidies in the intra-church periodicals. Thus, the emphasis on new projects while maintaining the spiritual mission also corresponded to the flexibility of the *project world*.

When *Katolický týdeník* interviewed the new director of the archbishopric, Antonín Juriga, in 2018, Juriga fully embraced the economic criteria that had successfully colonised the civil sphere:

'I have my own management style focused on the fulfilment of specific goals and the related remuneration. I want to prevent unnecessary waste and achieve savings and use resources efficiently,' said Antonín Juriga. As he added, he wants the archdiocese to place more emphasis on professional

competence, hard work and the diligence of employees rather than on their personal piety. According to him, their financial remuneration will also correspond to this. ‘So it depends on the skill and personal commitment of each member of the team,’ he clarified. ((pri), 2018, *Katolický týdeník*, Diocesan news supplement)

Juriga supplemented the emphasis on management efficiency (*industrial worth*) with a fully merit-based principle and distanced himself from the symbolic code of the religious sphere by considering not faith but professional prowess as the key criteria for working in the archbishopric. His emphasis on transparent remuneration referred to the last key narrative characteristic that responded to public expectations reproduced in the media – transparency and accountability.

Pressure for transparency: Economic charts for believers

The emphasis on transparency was taking shape in response to repeated doubts raised in the mainstream media. Especially before the adoption of the restitution law, anti-restitution narratives questioned whether the RCC (as the largest potential restitution recipient) had ever owned the property subject to restitution, as the following excerpt from Petr Uhl’s (a former dissident and, after 1989, leftist journalist and politician) op-ed shows:

What has been stolen must be returned! But the ecclesiastical property never belonged fully to the church, it had a distinctly public character, and since the time of Joseph II, this has been legally clear. The church administered the property and had various rights of disposal. The lists of items would help to prove this and are therefore kept secret from the public. (Uhl, 2012, *Právo*)

The topic of financing brought the need to clearly explain to church members how the churches will manage their assets. Articles in *Český bratr* repeatedly reported that the synod is dealing intensively with translating economic charts into a form understandable to ordinary believers. The civil sphere’s demand for transparency has been translated into intra-church discourse. *Industrial worth* argumentation and *civic worth* argumentation have thus been coupled. The transparency of economic reporting has been essential not only for external scrutiny, it has also served to increase the credibility of the church internally and activate its members:

If the Church earns between CZK 3 and 4 billion annually in this way, it would be necessary for it to finally present its complete management transparently at the national level. Otherwise, it risks not only being easily embroiled in scandal

but also losing the motivation of the faithful to continue contributing to the Church. And that would be the worst outcome ever because, sooner or later, these contributions will be the decisive source of the Church's economy. (Zajíc, 2008, *Katolický týdeník*)

Pressure on transparency led to an emphasis on the accurate reporting of property-related activities right from the beginning of the restitution negotiations. But the transparency argument had a broader dimension than just accounting: it called for openness, a deepening in the dialogue with the public and dialogue within the Church. It underscored the deliberation (*civic worth*) to be fostered at all levels of the church hierarchy. The combination of emphasis on efficiency, transparency and accountability can be interpreted as recalling the *project and civic worths*. A *project world proof* aimed to link efficiency with the spiritual mission, as aptly illustrated in the gloss from *Český bratr*: 'discussing money in a non-calculating way' (Hoblík, 2013).

Conclusion

Pragmatic sociology explains the interplay of different modes of justification when examining the legitimations actors used to defend or obstruct the restitution process. The symbolic codes offered by the strong program in cultural sociology represent the layer that lies analytically beneath these pragmatic legitimations. Compared to the analytical tools of pragmatic sociology, the notion of symbolic spheres is more multidimensional and topological. Discursive structures in the symbolic codes explain specific long-standing expectations and taken-for-granted imaginations related to the different spheres of action. In the case of church property restitution, the civil and religious spheres played a particularly significant role in media accounts. By grasping the discursive demands on the actors and the relationships and institutions of the two potentially distinct public and religious spheres, this analytical tool helps us to reflect on the interplay or power imbalance among the symbolic spheres. However, their changing relationships become more evident when the analysis focuses not only on structures but also on actively negotiated, voluntarist-based tools, such as modes of justification.

In analysing the debate on church restitution, I noticed that the intra-church and mainstream media discourses showed significant and initially unexpected similarities: an emphasis on efficiency, transparency and, for example, solidarity. At the same time, the various sub-legitimations that the actors uttered inherently mirrored their awareness that two analytically

distinct spheres, the civil and the religious, were interacting with each other. Although these spheres were interconnected at least among church members (believers are also citizens), the discursive rules were different, and the awareness of this difference was manifested in the cultural (referred to as ‘taken-for-granted’) background of the actor speeches.

I was interested in how exactly the predefined religious and civil spheres interacted and negotiated each other. To fully understand these relations, I connected the theories of Boltanski and Thévenot with those of Alexander’s to analyse how one sphere reshaped the other, ‘forcing’ a specific justification for restitution.

For example, the influx of such a ‘mundane’ factor as money into the religious sphere has led to internal pressure for expertise in the religious sphere because the civil society code demands accountability. Expertise requires, within the civil code, a search for someone who will perform the office successfully, regardless of his/her previous position in a power structure not directly related to the expert qualification in question. In other words, an appointment to office is no longer based on the criterion of most remarkable piety. Economic expertise has now started to play the main narrative role alongside the faith of the laity, always understood – at least narratively – as being crucial to these administrative functions. Materiality, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, has thus widened the ranks of those who could speak in the name of the Church in intra-church and mainstream media. These were often lay people, especially economic experts, and Christians, but not necessarily fervent, passionate ones – even atheists became able to speak publicly for the Church (cf. Alexander, 2006, p. 138). To sum up, this pressure has disrupted the Church’s hierarchical non-civil cultural code by emphasising the need for greater lay involvement in internal church structures.

The emphasis on the economic dimension also affected the interaction between the public and religious spheres in several other ways. The repeated goal in the intra-church Catholic and Protestant media was to strengthen their church credibility by providing a sustainable amount of money for social services and evangelisation. The RCC wanted to demonstrate its credibility through sound asset management. The material aspect, however, was in tandem with the spiritual and was defended as something necessary, but only second to the spiritual mission of the church. The ECCB oriented itself more intensively towards the internal sustainability of the church, achieved via solidarity-based redistribution of resources among congregations. However, this solidarity has gradually weakened narratively in favour of individual activism – each believer should contribute financially

to the work of the church. The emphasis on asset management highlighted the specific path to pastoral responsibility. Moreover, effective stewardship was also reflected in church narratives as a point of contact with the public.

By enriching the analysis of the justification with a structural dimension, I obtained a more structurally anchored picture of what general expectations and which deep cultural codes were confronted in media argumentation. The hierarchical code of the religious sphere was disrupted in our study by the requirement for economic expertise to prove industrial worth. This strengthened the position of the laity and their ability to speak for the Church. In contrast, we saw a synergistic reinforcing effect of the project world and the cultural code of the religious sphere, where faith as a vocation and a task – the task of coping with efficient management – was promoted as an important contemporary form of evangelisation.

Notes

1. In Czech ('církvní' OR 'církvev') AND ('restitute').
2. In Czech ('církvní' OR 'církvev' OR 'zdanění') AND ('restitute' OR 'odluka' OR 'majetek' OR 'financování' OR 'náhrada').
3. In Czech 'církvní podniky'.

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