

ON THE HILL OF CROSSES

ON THE HILL OF CROSSES:  
CATHOLICISM AND LITHUANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity, focusing on Kryžių kalnas (the Hill of Crosses), a Catholic pilgrimage site.

The historical link and symbiosis between religion and nation in Lithuania shape Lithuanian Catholicism and identity, as well as the discourse and experience of the Hill of Crosses. The dominant narrative about the site draws upon and adds to this connection. It is narrated as a locus for simultaneously religious and politico-nationalist dissent against foreign occupation.

The ethnographic reality at the Hill of Crosses reveals the production of religious and political meanings for present-day pilgrims at multiple levels. Behaviors at the site are expressed in an idiom and through symbolism largely dictated by the parameters set by the amalgamation of the dominant narrative and the visitors to the site. For all visitors the production of meaning takes place within the context and constraints established by the dominant narrative, the behavior of other visitors, visitors' own preconceptions, and other factors. The site itself is constantly (re)constructed and (re)produced.

Analysis suggests that the post-Soviet era has opened the way for more plurality in meaning-making and that there has been gradual but incomplete loosening of the bonds between religion and nation, but the two remain inextricably linked for most Lithuanians and inextricably linked at the Hill of Crosses.

This work contributes to an understanding of meaning-making at this pilgrimage site. It also contributes to our understanding of how the relationship between religion and

nation has been molded by history. Furthermore, by examining the narrative about Lithuania's Soviet legacy, this thesis sheds light upon the post-Soviet transition. Finally, in exploring the interactions and relationships between "religion" and "nation" in changing socio-political contexts, this thesis offers a corrective to our tendency to think of the two as separate or separable.

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## INTRODUCTION

I pulled my scarf tighter against the breeze that raced up the steps to the shrines of Jesus and Mary, following the path of thousands upon thousands of visitors. A man paused, head bowed, in front of Mary's shrine before tending to the offerings of the day, removing dead flowers from the vase at her feet. He picked up the dozen or so small wooden crosses placed carefully before her and deposited them on top of the thousands of others by her left hand. Most of the crosses had long since faded to the grey of wood left exposed in a country with rainy summers and bitter winters, and the fresh crosses, many bearing writing in permanent marker, stood in contrast to those on which they lay. Hundreds of larger crosses were planted in the earth all around, some as tall as trees, and statues and folk shrines peppered the hillside among the crosses. In the windy twilight, they crashed and dissolved into one another.

The man noticed me and glanced my way as though, it seemed, I were intruding on his devotion. As I turned away one of the sun's last rays pierced the center of an iron sun-cross that stood in stark relief against the orange and navy sky. Walking home through the grasses that threatened to overgrow one of the dirt paths on the hill, I was struck by the contrast between the bustling daytime pilgrimage site, often covered in people speaking dozens of languages, and its nighttime avatar, peopled only by one or two stray visitors, crickets its only soundtrack.

Located near the city of Šiauliai in northern-central Lithuania, Kryžių Kalnas, or the Hill of Crosses, is a large saddle-shaped mound covered in a wide variety of crosses

placed by visitors to the site. It has drawn people for over a century, and is often cited as an example of non-violent nationalist resistance to the atheist Soviet regime which occupied Lithuania from 1940 to 1991.

Using the Hill of Crosses as a starting point from which to examine the relationship between religious and national identities, this thesis seeks to answer the following set of questions: What is the role of Catholicism in the (re)constructed concept of Lithuanian national identity? How do “religious” and “national” identities overlap and relate to one another in changing socio-political contexts? How do these and other issues play out at the Hill of Crosses?

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Most literature about the site states that the first written record of crosses on the hill dates to the middle of the nineteenth century (Anon n.d. d.; Šiukščienė; Smilgys 2000: 9; Anon n.d. a.; Anon n.d. c.), during which time Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire. Almost all of these sources attribute the appearance of crosses to “the suppression of the rebellion of 1831” (Smilgys 2000: 9); one even goes so far as to claim that “[a]fter the uprisings of 1831 and 1863 the rebels were secretly buried [sic] there and they began erecting crosses both for the perished and the lost” (Anon n.d. b.). Though these rebellions were unsuccessful, Lithuania eventually declared its independence on February 16, 1918 (Stukas 1966: 28), after nearly a century and a half of being part of the Russian Empire, during which time the majority of the Lithuanian population remained Catholic despite efforts to convert people to the Orthodox Church of Russia (Bourdeaux 1979: 1). A republic was soon established, and in 1926 a bloodless

coup d'état ushered in the authoritarian regime which was to remain in place until the outbreak of World War II and the ensuing Soviet and German occupations of the region (Ashbourne 1999: 11-13). V. Stanley Vardys, an American academic of Lithuanian extraction, attributes the crumbling of Lithuanian democracy in this period in part to the religious issues dividing the major parties, particularly compulsory religious education and the "allotment of land to churches and monasteries" (Vardys 1978a: 70). Though Lithuania's new authoritarian state had "strained and frequently hostile" relations with the Catholic Church, the Church itself flourished in this period and received state subsidies, as did other religious groups (Vardys 1978a: 78-9).

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The Second World War found the territory that now comprises Lithuania caught between German and Russian forces, and "a Communist-enforced declaration of the Seimas [parliament] declared that the Lithuanian people desired to join the USSR;" Soviet officials and troops entered Lithuania in June of 1940 (Ashbourne 1999: 17). During the year-long occupation that followed, Soviet officials began implementing anti-religious policies. As historian of Eastern European church-state relations Dennis J. Dunn explains, "the Kremlin...wished to control the Church and break the back of Baltic nationalism (of any type). The Church, as a pillar of national identity for many Balts and an apologist for a world view irreconcilable with Soviet ideology, stood in the way of a rapid, successful integration of the Baltic republics" (1978: 155-156). Though relatively mild in comparison with earlier Soviet repressions, Soviet policy was "hostile toward the Baltic Catholic Churches" (Dunn 1978: 149). These policies included the following:

All churches and ecclesiastical properties were nationalized and assessed taxes. All schools were taken over by the state, and religion was eliminated from the curricula. All religious publications were proscribed. Almost all monasteries and seminaries were confiscated and usually used to quarter the Red Army. The monks and religious were dispersed and forced to find new housing. Atheistic propaganda was organized and supported by governmental authorities. Communication with the Vatican was disrupted and made exceedingly difficult. Arrests of clergymen began, and pressure was used to enroll some of them as informers for the secret police. And, finally, arrests and deportation of lay religious activists were initiated (Dunn 1978: 151).

Following a brief period of renewed independence and then occupation by the Nazis, during which the Lithuanian bishops reported to the Pope that during the Soviet occupation they had “become the people’s leaders and active defenders of religion” (Dunn 1978: 157), the Soviets again moved into Lithuania and resumed the process of adapting Lithuanian society to the Soviet model (Bourdcaux 1979: 3). This process included the “separation” of Church and State, which religious rights scholar and activist Rev. Michael Bourdeaux describes as “abolition of the power of the Church, so that it can be controlled by the State” (1979: 4). Some cite the period during and immediately following World War II as among the most active at the Hill of Crosses, explaining that people went to erect crosses for their loved ones who had gone missing, both as a sign of hope and to guide them home (Neringa 2008). This example is but one of many indicating that some Lithuanians conceive of the Hill of Crosses, and religion more generally, as intertwined with their nation’s history.

Soviet anti-religious policy following World War II continued in much the same vein as during 1940-1941, though Moscow was arguably less encumbered by the

concerns which had dictated its earlier leniency.<sup>1</sup> Soviet policy from 1944 to 1954 has been described by Italian scholar Vittorio Vignieri as the “moral and physical terrorization of the faithful,” as “[p]riests were arrested and deported, churches closed, and the faithful mocked and persecuted” (1965: 220-221). Following a three year period in which the focus of Soviet anti-religious policy was less intense and primarily ideological, Soviet authorities once again intensified their attacks; the Church was seen as particularly problematic due to its role as “the sole center of spiritual and national resistance” (Vignieri 1965: 222-4). From early in the Soviet period, then, the Lithuanian Catholic Church was viewed by authorities as a locus and vehicle of nationalist as well as spiritual concerns. According to Robert Goeckel, Professor of International and Comparative Politics at State University of New York, the churches throughout the Baltic both represented and contributed to “the strengthening of national consciousness” (1995: 219). Moreover, during the Soviet era, the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church “not only extensively documented religious dissent and repression but served as the unofficial organ of the nationalist opposition” (Goeckel 1995: 205). The Lithuanian Catholic Church was unique in that it “developed a vibrant grassroots movement of dissent” during the Soviet era (Goeckel 1995: 218). Thus, it is evident that, during the Soviet era at least, the Lithuanian Catholic Church encompassed both the “religious” and the “national”.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn identifies several reasons for leniency in Soviet anti-religious measures during the first Soviet occupation, many of which had to do with Soviet desire to curry favor with the Catholic Church for fear of Hitler’s power (1978: 149ff). Once the threat of war with Hitler was removed, many of these concerns became far less pressing.

Writing in 1965, Vignieri addresses the fate of Lithuanian pilgrimage sites and Marian shrines. He writes: “priests are barred from visiting these sites, and pilgrims are intimidated and discouraged: roads are blocked, transportation is refused, visitors are searched and arrested, and so on” (230). The Hill of Crosses is to be included among these sites; references to the destruction and attempted suppression of the site are numerous. One publication describes it as follows:

The Soviet government considered the crosses and the hill to be a hostile and very harmful symbol. In 1961, for this reason, they started to destroy the Hill of Crosses with bulldozers. Wooden crosses were burnt [sic], metal ones used as scrap metal, and stone and concrete ones buried. The ‘bulldozer atheism’ period, as it was called, lasted nearly twenty years. The hill was guarded by both the Soviet army and KGB. They even planned to flood the territory, leaving the Hill of Crosses as an unreachable island (Smilgys 2000: 9).

By June of 1986, a different political climate led to the formation of a nationalist group called Sajūdis (“Movement”), which began agitating for Lithuanian independence (Ashbourne 1999: 21). The movement began holding mass rallies in 1988, and in 1990, the first free elections in 50 years were held, in which Sajūdis gained 70 percent of the votes (Ashbourne 1999: 21). Sajūdis had close ties with the Catholic Church, and maintained these ties when it came to power as the new government following independence (Goeckel 1995: 211-212). On September 6, 1991, Lithuania’s independence was publicly recognized by the USSR (Ashbourne 1999: 27).

Lithuania’s new constitution, ratified in 1992, established a semi-presidential system (Ramonienė 2008). Though dominant early in the post-Soviet period, Sajūdis faced many difficulties when the party resumed power, according to Ainė Ramonienė of the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University in

Lithuania (2008). The standard of living, though relatively high in 1990, had declined significantly by 1992, with energy and food shortages coupled with rising utility rates and rent (<http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-8289.html>). Moreover, as in many post-Soviet countries, poverty, suicide and alcoholism rates rose considerably, as did the spread of diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS; Lithuania's suicide rate, for example, is more than three times higher than the average in the European Union (Beams 1999). Politically, Lithuanians faced difficulties as well; the party system, long subjected to the proliferation of parties, was destabilized in 2000 following economic problems (Ramonienė 2008). Political life as of the middle of 2008 was characterized by increasing fragmentation and decreasing voter turnout due to decreasing voter-party identification (Ramonienė 2008). However, Lithuania also had relatively stable government and economic growth, with neither radical nationalist parties nor anti-Western parties (Ramonienė 2008). Lithuania's geopolitical orientation is very Western, and historical ties with Poland have been somewhat revived (Ramonienė 2008).

For their part, churches in the Baltic region were "dramatically weakened as institutions" following decades of communist rule, though the Lithuanian Catholic Church fared better than other churches in the region (Goeckel 1995: 204). According to Goeckel (1995), churches in the early post-Soviet Baltic were conservative and heavily reliant on Western assistance to deal with many of the issues they faced, including the need to rebuild the Church as an institution, and the necessity of fostering an increase in church adherence, and financial dependence on the state. Following independence, churches in the Baltic region were seen "as bearers of national culture....facilitat[ing] the

revival of national culture under perestroika” (Goeckel 1995: 212). Thus, we observe a gradual and incomplete loosening of the relationship between religious and national identities as the Lithuanian Catholic Church maintained its ties with the nationalist Sąjūdis party and conceptions of national identity more broadly.

The Hill of Crosses also benefited from the activism of the late 1980s. In 1988, according to most literature about the site, the Hill of Crosses began to experience a marked revival (Smilgys 2000: 9; Šiukščienė 2). In September of 1993, Pope John Paul II visited the site and said mass; in 1994 he had a cross placed at the site (Šiukščienė 2). At his request, a Franciscan Friary was opened near the Hill in 2000 (Šiukščienė 2). The friars say daily mass and occasionally lead prayers to bless particular crosses placed on the Hill.

Just as the Lithuanian Catholic Church is frequently referred to as a vessel for nationalist sentiment, discourse about the Hill of Crosses has focused on its role in non-violent nationalist resistance during the Soviet era. The bulk of this discourse seems directed at international visitors, though much of it is certainly also directed at Lithuanians, both in Lithuania and abroad.

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It is my contention that, due to the strong links forged during the Soviet era between the Catholic Church of Lithuania and the Lithuanian nationalist resistance movement, Catholicism has played a crucial role in the project of nation-building in post-Soviet Lithuania. Moreover, owing in part to almost fifty years of restrictions, Lithuanian identity is, to a certain extent, a hybrid of religious and national affiliations.



This is not to suggest that religious and national identities are identical in Lithuania; there is, for example, antagonism between Lithuanians and Poles in Lithuania, despite their mutual Catholicism (Goeckel 1995: 212). Religion remains, however, significant in the imagining and construction of the Lithuanian nation; for example, one informant told me that her sister felt she had abandoned her ancestors by converting from Catholicism to Evangelical Christianity (Kazimiera 2008).

There is, however, more at work in the complex (re)negotiation of identities in the period following Lithuania's independence, and the historical Catholicism of Lithuanians is but one factor among many dictating the character and content of Lithuanian "national identity". Though the distinction between "religious" and "national" identity in Lithuania has long been unclear, challenges to the traditional association of Catholicism with "Lithuanian-ness" have arisen from the growth of Evangelical Christianity and other influences, particularly the state's ardent attempts at orienting the country to the West. These and other tensions have shaped the development of Lithuanian national identity, and are reflected in discourse about the Hill of Crosses and the behavior of its visitors. Ultimately, the way in which various actors narrate the Hill of Crosses mirrors its context. During the Soviet era, the site was envisaged primarily as an embodiment and site of Lithuanian national identity; in the post-Soviet era, the narrative has shifted to promote the site as a particularly Lithuanian but ultimately international symbol of hope and perseverance. This shifting narrative reflects the changing conception of the place of Catholicism in Lithuania as the removal of the object of religio-nationalist resistance – Soviet domination – has made space for a more plural narrative. The narrative of

resistance remains important, but is largely subsumed into a narrative which encompasses a wider variety of perspectives.

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Aside from Michael Bourdeaux's 1979 text on the religious and nationalist resistance in Lithuania between 1939 and 1978, the role of Catholicism and the Catholic Church in the conception and construction of Lithuanian national identity has received very little scholarly attention to date. This thesis aims to help fill this gap in the literature. Likewise, the Hill of Crosses has itself been little studied; a notable exception is Lithuanian cultural historian Dangiras Mačiulis' 1999 historical survey of the Hill and its environs, but this work is in Lithuanian and focuses primarily on the preservation of the area as a cultural monument. Scholarship on the site has not, to my knowledge, focused on the Hill of Crosses as a site through which to examine the interaction of the religious and the national. In addition to contributing to a scholarly understanding of this particular pilgrimage site and its shifting context, this thesis seeks to shed light on the broader relationship between "religious" and "national" identities and forces, and more specifically how they overlap and interact in changing contexts.

The bulk of the material for this thesis comes from several weeks of fieldwork I conducted at the site, which consisted of interviews, participant observation, and documenting the inscriptions left on many of the crosses stating the purported intention with which they were placed. Further data comes from publications about the site directed at tourists, newspaper and other periodical articles about the site, and Lithuanian scholarly works dealing with both the site itself and with the relationship between

religion and Lithuanian national identity more broadly. An examination of the discourse about the Hill of Crosses and the place of religious identity in Lithuanian national identity from these diverse sources will allow me to address the above questions from several different perspectives, thereby offering a more complete set of answers.

This thesis draws on recent scholarship that proposes an approach to the study of societies in transition that is more sophisticated than the macro-level, trajectory-oriented studies of the early 1990s. What emerges from several of these “deliberately ethnographic intervention[s]” (Berdahl 2000: 3) is the import of focusing on microperspectives (see Berdahl 1999, Berdahl 2000). In particular, many of these scholars insist upon the “multiplicity of experiences and trajectories of transition” (Berdahl 2000: 12; see also Burawoy and Verdery 1999). In this transition, “the past frames the present, imbuing it with distinctive memory.... civil society...is refashioned out of the old as a response to exigencies of the present” (Burawoy and Verdery 1999 11-12). Mathijs Pelkmans (2006) goes so far as to argue that the experiences of the Soviet era have actively shaped both identities and peoples’ conceptions of what these identities had been prior to the Soviet era.

We must consider that it is, as Carol Greenhouse (2002) tells us, the performativity of discourse that allows people to construct the present in relation to the past. The performances at the Hill of Crosses, and the discourse of and about the site, are the primary focus of the work that follows, with the aim of revealing some of the ways that people construct their present realities. Here, Pelkmans’ point is well taken, as the

dominant narrative about the Hill of Crosses reveals many ways in which the site's Soviet-era history frames the way people experience and converse about the site.

This work is also significantly informed by scholarship of nationalism. Taking Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of the nation as an imagined political community as foundational, I examine the imagination and construction of the Lithuanian nation. For purposes of this work, then, the term "nation" generally refers to the imagined community of Lithuanian people; "nationalist" in turn refers to the sentiment that this Lithuanian nation should be independent, and to the actions taken in pursuit of this independence.

Anderson's assertion that print language in particular is often of central importance in imagining national communities (1991: 84) is certainly well documented in the Lithuanian case, but to this factor must be added the oft-overlooked category of religion. As used in this work, "religion" generally refers to what participants and observers in the Lithuanian context would conceive of and recognize as such. I am therefore loosely following Durkheim's definition of religion as a socially constructed phenomenon: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (qtd. in Fields 1995: xxxiv). In this case, religion is recognizable as such by outsider observers as well (e.g. non-Lithuanian visitors to the Hill of Crosses). Both as part of the Russian Empire and as part of the Soviet Union, the Catholicism of Lithuania separated it from the religion (or atheism) of the broader polity. Religion thus provided one vehicle by

which Lithuanians could construct a nation resistant to ‘foreign’ rule; this resistance is also discussed by Anderson, particularly during the collapse of empire and ensuing rise of nations.

When examining how the Lithuanian nation is and has been imagined, it is important to note that nineteenth-century Lithuanian nationalists drew heavily on Herder’s romantic nationalism, often looking to linguistic, cultural, and social history rather than past political or military greatness (Krapauskas 2002: 143). As a significant component of Lithuanian linguistic, cultural, and social history, the influence of Catholicism on the construction and imagination of the Lithuanian nation is not to be underestimated. This emphasis on culture carried over into the twentieth century, and has been instrumental in shaping Lithuanian ethnic and national identity (Donskis 2002: 16). What follows is an examination of this enduring relationship between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity as constructed in discourse and performance at the Hill of Crosses.

## CHAPTER ONE

Following several centuries of conflict with the Teutonic Knights, including a conversion that was almost immediately renounced, the territory which now comprises Lithuania was converted to Catholicism between 1387 and 1413, primarily through the efforts of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila (Polish: Jagiełło) (Vardys 1978b: 1). Largely as a result of the Union with Poland between 1386 and 1795, the early Lithuanian Catholic dioceses were under the rule of a Polish province (Vardys 1978b: 1). During the period of union, Polish bishops contributed to the Polonization of the Church and of upper class and urban Lithuanians (Vardys 1978b: 2). It might thus seem unlikely that the Lithuanian Catholic Church would develop into an important factor in the emerging Lithuanian nationalist movement in the nineteenth century. However, despite early Polish dominance, the Catholic Church is arguably “the oldest national institution of Lithuanian society...[and] the oldest social institution of Lithuania” (Vardys 1978b: 1), and played an important role in early Lithuanian nationalism.

Alfred Erich Senn, an American academic of Lithuanian descent, argues that Catholicism was “one of the two major factors [along with language] in establishing the national identity of the Lithuanians” despite the fact that Catholicism “was neither an inclusive nor an exclusive characteristic of Lithuanian nationals” (1959: 6). Often, religious and nationalist ideas went hand in hand; one story Senn recounts refers to language as the “dearest gift of the Holy Ghost to every honorable man” (1959: 7). The

importance of Lithuanian as a national language is here situated in, and expressed via, a very religious idiom.

Catholicism played a critical role as the Lithuanian nationalist movement developed in the nineteenth century. Vardys goes so far as to state that “especially since the middle of the XIX century [Lithuanian’s modern development] has been distinguished by a nearly symbiotic relationship between Catholicism and nationality” (1978b: ix). Several factors contributed to this symbiosis. First, many of the nationalists “were put through school by members of the clergy” (Senn 1959: 8), and, as Russian persecution increased, priests were often “the only segment of the national intelligentsia which had some assurance of being allowed to remain in Lithuania” (Senn 1959: 9). Therefore, not only did many young intelligent men choose to become priests, but many of the nation’s best and brightest were priests or at least predisposed by their education to conceive of the world in religious terms.

Catholicism was influential in other ways as well. Catholic nationalist newspapers emerged alongside those with more secular orientations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Senn 1959: 12). Anderson notes the role of print media, including newspapers, in building national consciousness. In *Imagined Communities*, he argues that print languages allowed for the formation of national consciousnesses (1991: 44). He writes: “These fellow-readers, to whom [people] were connected through print, formed, in the secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (Anderson 1991: 44). That much of this printed material in Lithuania was put forth or otherwise influenced by the Catholic Church is further

evidence of the broader Catholic influence on the Lithuanian nationalist movement, and, in turn, Lithuanian national identity.

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Relations with the Russian Empire were also critical to the development of a Lithuanian nationalist movement. Tsarist policy was particularly harsh towards religion in Lithuania, as Catholicism was viewed as a threat not only ideologically but politically as well. The piety of Lithuanians was perceived to be “‘enormous’ and ‘fanatical’” by Russian authorities and “‘misdirected’” to Catholicism rather than Russian Orthodoxy (Vardys 1978b: 12). Moreover, Catholicism was problematic because, from the Russian standpoint, it was based on subordination to the Pope and helped spread foreign influence and Polish nationalism (Vardys 1978b: 4). State supervision, administration, and severe curtailing of Church affairs and activities marked Tsarist policy, and became particularly harsh after the Lithuanian insurrection of 1831. At this time, the Church “‘was singled out for repressive treatment because its monasteries and clergy were considered ‘the nests of Latin propaganda and the source of insurrection.’ The same charge would be repeated by the Tsarist government...after the insurrection of 1863” (Vardys 1978b: 6). Monasteries and other religious institutions were closed; the activities of priests, who had previously provided numerous social services including education, were limited; church construction and repair were hindered; the erection of roadside crosses was forbidden; and Church lands were confiscated (Vardys 1978b: 6-7).

These persecutions actually bolstered the Church and its support among the people. Moreover, insofar as group identity is often defined in opposition to an other, the



Russian Orthodoxy of the Tsarist regime proved crucial in the formation of a Lithuanian identity that was so largely Catholic. As Bourdeaux writes, “Catholicism...has for hundreds of years been the religion of the people, rather than of the government, and of an oppressed non-Russian nation, as opposed to the Russian colonial power” (Bourdeaux 1979: 294); Catholicism thus served as a distinguishing characteristic of the emerging Lithuanian nation.

The Tsarist decrees and the brutality with which they were administered, along with the sharpening distinction between Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy as identity markers, had the unintended consequence of strengthening the Lithuanian nationalist movement. The persecution of Catholicism united priests, liberals, and even some “anticlerical radicals in the opposition to the Tsarist regime” (Senn 1959: 9). When Lithuanian was banned by the authorities in response to the uprising of 1864, secret schools were organized by clergy to teach prayers and catechisms in Lithuanian (Vardys 1978b: 17). These schools fostered and strengthened not only the spread of Catholicism to a new generation, but also knowledge of the Lithuanian language, which was crucial to the development of nationalism. Furthermore, Catholic clergy organized much of the book smuggling network which brought Lithuanian-language books to areas of prohibition, though the content of these books was both religious and secular (Vardys 1978b: 17). This network further strengthened links between religion and nationalism. Finally, many important nationalist figures were clergymen; Msgr. Jonas Mačiulis-Maironis “dominated the Lithuanian literary scene as the classic poet of national awakening” (Vardys 1978b: 19). Catholicism was so intertwined with the development

of national consciousness during this time period that Vardys argues: “religious education that was organized by [Bishop] Valančius and his followers inspired and sustained not only Catholic beliefs but also Lithuanian nationality....Valančius’ program nursed both Catholicism and Lithuanian ethnicity” (1978b: 17).

As the nationalist movement gained momentum and Tsarist policy towards the Church eased in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, nationality – and later, nationalism – converged with Catholicism in Lithuania; by 1914, a clearly Lithuanian Catholic Church had emerged (Vardys 1978b: 15-18). Though oversimplifying the complex relationship between Catholicism and nationalism in Lithuania is to be avoided, it is fair to state that from the beginning of its development, Lithuanian nationalism has had a close and often symbiotic relationship with Lithuanian Catholics and the Catholic Church in Lithuania. In short, an historical connection between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity is already evident from the inception of Lithuanian nationalism during the time of Russian Tsarist rule in the territory. This relationship continued in several forms, including the mitigating effects of Catholicism on the authoritarianism of the 1930s, the association and cooperation of individual members of the Catholic Church and clergy with nationalist activists, and the multifaceted connections between religious and other forms of dissent in the Soviet era.

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Lithuania first emerged as an independent modern nation-state in 1918. In the ensuing period between the two World Wars, the Church was linked to nationalist and patriotic activities and ideas and enjoyed a high reputation (Donskis 2008). During this

time, “Catholicism flourished and the Church developed as never before in any period of Lithuanian history” (Vardys 1978b: 36). Clergy were often directly involved in politics, as well as journalistic, educational, and economic activities (Vardys 1978b: 20). Lay Catholics were also very involved in social and political processes in the interwar years, and the combination of lay and clerical participation resulted in the development of a Lithuanian statehood very much marked by Catholic ideas (Vardys 1978b: 20-21). The Church did lose some sway following the defeat of the Christian Democratic party in 1926, but this year also saw the creation of an independent Lithuanian Church province, thus finally rendering the Church independent of foreign supervision (Vardys 1978b: 22-23).

In the mid-1920s, there was a certain amount of backlash against the Church related to the defeat of the Christian Democrats, though its effects were minimal as the Church once again came to be seen as a bastion against an authoritarian regime, this time of Lithuania’s own Antanas Smetona (Vardys 1978b: 27-8). Vardys argues that conflicts between Smetona and the Church were “politically inspired....[Smetona]...did not distinguish between pastoral activities of the Church and partisan activities of Catholic parties” (1978b: 28). Here, Catholicism is presented as something that is not exclusively religious. Moreover, Smetona was demonstrably afraid of Catholic competition for power (Vardys 1978b: 29). Not only does this fear indicate the great political clout of the Church at the time, but it also suggests that religion and politics were, if not indistinguishable, then certainly inextricably and directly implicated in one another.

The same can be said of religious and national identity in Lithuania since the early nationalist movement. For example, “Catholicism pervades national literature and is closely identified with the national language itself” (Bourdeaux 1979: 294). Moreover, Catholic-oriented publications enjoyed larger circulations than other publications, and, as Vardys argues, the Church had an enduring “moral impact on the people’s behavior” (Vardys 1978b: 31-2). Given the political, journalistic, and other activities of Catholic priests and laity in interwar Lithuania, we must take into account the degree to which “religion” seems inextricable from other (“non-religious”) Catholic activities and ideas to contemporary actors.

In the late 1930s, secular Catholic intellectuals increasingly exerted leadership of the Catholic community, backed by the “credibility and influence” of the Church, which had increased “because of its willingness to take a stand against dictatorial policies” (Vardys 1978b: 31-2). The Church was able to remain “close to the average Lithuanian concerns and [thereby project] a socially progressive image” (Vardys 1978b: 33). As such, the Church was able to help “contain Smetona’s nationalistic regime from swerving to extremism and to Fascism” (Vardys 1978b: 34). Many Catholics clearly viewed their activities in light of both their religion and their nascent nation; one priest argued that “both religion *and* nationality... ‘constituted the two strong pillars of our life, the two powerful initiators and promoters of our cultural activity and progress’” (Vardys 1978b: 34, citing F. Kemėšis). Thus, religion and nationality, for those like Kemėšis, are distinguishable but closely and essentially linked.

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In the summer of 1940, the Soviet army moved into Lithuanian territory, thus ending Lithuania's two decades of independence. The Soviet Union immediately began to take action against the Church: state subsidies were cut off, Church lands were confiscated, Catholic societies and organizations were disbanded, the work of the clergy was severely curtailed, monasteries and seminaries were closed, anti-religious propaganda was spread, and roadside crosses and shrines were demolished (Bourdeaux 1979: 4-11). Many of these policies were continued when German forces occupied Lithuanian territory in 1941, and the Soviet Union subsequently resumed its persecution of the Church when it re-occupied Lithuanian territory in 1944 (Bourdeaux 1979: 23-5). Despite fluctuations in the severity of Soviet policy towards the Church, anti-religious policy remained in force until Lithuania gained independence in 1991. This treatment of the Lithuanian Catholic Church was largely in keeping with broader Soviet policy regarding religion.<sup>2</sup> In part, this policy was driven by the official atheism of the Soviet Union; it was also spurred by the Soviet perception – likely accurate – that the Church was a “center of spiritual and national resistance” (Vignieri 1965: 224).

That Soviet authorities viewed the Lithuanian Catholic Church as a threat that was simultaneously “spiritual and national” is but one indication that the Church served as a locus and vehicle of national as well as religious strength. Speaking of the Baltic states generally, Robert Goeckel (1995) argues that the Catholic Church played a significant

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<sup>2</sup> The long-standing preferential treatment of Russian Orthodoxy remained in place as well, though to a lesser degree. As Goeckel notes, “The creation under Stalin of two separate organizations – the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults – for dealing with religious organizations reinforced the preeminence of the Orthodox Church in official policy” (1995: 221).

role in nationalist opposition and dissent movements. For several reasons, this is particularly true in the Lithuanian case, where the historical symbiosis between religious and national identities was strengthened by Soviet policies. Just as Tsarist repression of the Church led to an increased association between the Church and nationalist activists, so too did the harsh Soviet measures designed to simultaneously reduce the power of the Church and bring down Lithuanian nationalism. The strengthening of this link between Catholicism and nationalism during the Soviet era, just as during the Tsarist period, was perhaps largely the result of the dearth of other options for the expression of dissent. In other words, in the limited and oppressive environment, dissidents were often united by their common enemy (the oppressive regime) even if their main quarrels with that enemy differed. This affiliation depended on a certain common ground among the various dissident voices – as we shall see, the *de facto* association of Catholicism with Lithuanian-ness and the “traditional” Catholicism of the Lithuanian populace were instrumental in providing this common ground.

The Soviet era ushered in new developments in the strong historical affiliation between the Lithuanian Catholic Church and nationalism as discussed above. The Church, administered nationally and long connected with Lithuanian nationalism, both represented and contributed to “the strengthening of national consciousness” (Goeckel 1995: 218-9). Writing in 1978, Vardys argues that “Lithuania’s Catholic struggle remains very closely intertwined with national dissent” (1978b: ix). This relationship between religious and national dissent continued throughout the Soviet era. Writing on the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Vardys argues that, with respect to Catholic

dissent, “Lithuanian activities are too numerous to be discussed in detail in this paper” (1990: 161). Among these activities, he describes underground activities including ordination, operation of convents and monasteries, lay prayer societies, and continuing religious education despite prohibitions, along with the publication of *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania*<sup>3</sup> and other “religiously inspired or Catholic oriented religious dissent periodicals in Lithuania” (Vardys 1990: 157; 160). In short, he argues, “the churches can and actually do contribute to the maintenance of national identity....[and] have served and can continue to serve as catalysts for domestic reform or opposition activities” (Vardys 1990: 152). Even Moscow was forced “to take seriously the convergence of national and religious dissent in Lithuania” due to the influence and activities of the Lithuanian Catholic Church (Goeckel 1995: 207).

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In addition to these longstanding connections, Catholicism played, and continues to play, a significant role in the imagination and construction of the Lithuanian nation. Many see Catholicism as a traditional and essential part of the Lithuanian nation, both in the past and present. As the oldest national institutions, the churches “are deeply rooted in national traditions and provide rallying points for the maintenance and furtherance of these traditions. In other words, they give strength to non-religious efforts to maintain national identity” (Vardys 1990: 152). Vardys attributes this essential relationship to the ethno-religious identity which made Lithuania unique among the Baltic states. He writes:

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<sup>3</sup> According to an 1989 article in the *Chronicle* by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, the publication “has appeared approximately five times a year since its beginning on the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1972” (<http://www.jesuit.lt/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=52&cid=20>).

“Lithuanian ethnicity was and generally still is virtually identified with Catholicity”  
(Vardys 1990: 153).

At the end of the Soviet era, as Goeckel notes, churches in the Baltic were seen “as bearers of national culture....facilitat[ing] the revival of national culture under perestroika” (1995: 212). In Vardys’ view, the Lithuanian Catholic Church was particularly successful “in identifying Catholicism and the church as an institution with national traditions and heritage” (Vardys 1990: 159). This identification with tradition and heritage is shared by the Church and nationalists, who often make claims about the ancient heritage of their nation in order to bolster its legitimacy. That the post-Soviet Lithuanian Catholic Church echoed the actions and claims of early Lithuanian nationalists is yet another indication of the deep and rich connections between Catholicism and the Lithuanian nation.

When they adopted the new constitution in October of 1992, newly independent Lithuanian citizens ensured the protection of religious rights for all religions:

Article 26

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion shall not be restricted.

Each human being shall have the right to freely choose any religion or belief and, either alone or with others, in private or in public, to profess his religion, to perform religious practices, to practice and teach his belief.

No one may compel another person or be compelled to choose or profess any religion or belief....

(<http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Constitution.htm>)

However, certain religious groups remained unrecognized: as of 1995, “the International Society for Krishna Consciousness [ISKC], long rejected for registration by former communist authorities, is active but does not appear to qualify as a ‘traditional Lithuanian church’ protected by the new constitution” (Goeckel 1995: 216). This emphasis on the



“traditional” nature of religions in Lithuania harks back to the importance of “tradition” and that which is essential and ancient in the romantic nationalism that was so influential in Lithuania’s development. That political actors are also concerned with protecting the “traditional” religions – at the expense of others like the ISKC – is further evidence of the substantial connections between religious and national identities.

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The symbiosis between nationalist and religious dissent manifested in several ways, some more tangible than others. Just as the distinction between Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy facilitated the association of religion with nationality during the Tsarist period, so too did the distinction between Lithuania’s Catholicism and the Soviet Union’s official atheism facilitate the connection during the Soviet period. Soviet atheism and anti-religious propaganda also provided a concrete target against which Lithuanians could rally. Furthermore, the main underground publication of Lithuanian nationalist dissent was published by the Catholic Church. Finally, the organized opposition movement that arose in Lithuania in the 1980s had (and retained) close ties with the Church.

Resistance to the official atheism of the Soviet Union is perhaps most clearly visible in what Bourdeaux terms “the battle for the minds of the young,” which he argues was considered “the key point of conflict by both Church and State” (1979: 215). This conflict is evident in the primary texts which he excerpts; for example, recommendations to the Vilnius school district state that “[a] teacher’s main task must be to win [the believer] over [to atheism]....” (*Chronicle* 15, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 217). Children

were encouraged and often pressured to join the Komosol and other atheist organizations; some parents feared reprisal and thus encouraged them to join, but others took a firm stance against such organizations and defended their religious rights (*Chronicle* 18, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 223-4). Questionnaires were distributed at schools in an attempt to “find out who influences the children, who teaches them, who gives them religious books to read, and so on. Some of the answers could be out and out betrayal, which the atheists would use in their war against religion” (*Chronicle* 10, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 227-8). That atheists were perceived as waging war on religion suggests that they served as an other against which Catholics could define themselves and from which they had to defend themselves.

According to Bourdeaux, “The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* contains dozens of texts of and references to petitions by parents concerning the atheist education of their children” (1979: 239). One letter, addressed from a child’s parent to his teacher, begins with an appeal: “We are both offspring of the same Lithuanian nation; we are both bound not only by blood, language and cultural inheritance, but also by our common concern for the future of our nation....” (*Chronicle* 5, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 239). The letter continues, arguing that the parent and teacher share the essential duty of bringing up the nation’s children, seeking common ground with the teacher based on nationality, and suggesting that the teacher is letting the nation down by undoing the work of parents (*Chronicle* 5, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 239-42). It concludes, “The atheists characterize parents who defend their children’s religious rights as fanatics. The real fanatic is the person who cannot tolerate anyone who disagrees with him. Is it not

from fanaticism that the present persecution of religious young people stems?”

(*Chronicle* 5, qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 242).

In this plea for the integrity and rights of religious education for children, this parent has articulated a tolerance of different viewpoints so long as Catholicism is among those viewpoints tolerated. It is thus not directly anti-atheist, but rather directly arguing against the undoing of the religious education provided to children outside of school. Here, the aggressive atheism of the Soviet Union is clearly perceived as problematic, despite coming from a co-national – or perhaps all the more so. Significantly, the parent considers it his essential duty to raise the child with a religious education for the sake of the future of the nation. For this parent, then, religion is an essential component of national identity, and the official Soviet atheism proves disturbing and offensive on several fronts, not least because it is perceived as aggressive.

The connection between religious and national identities is also evident in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, which “not only extensively documented religious dissent and repression but served as the unofficial organ of the nationalist opposition” (Goeckel 1995: 205). First published in 1972 and by no means the only religiously oriented dissident publication, it “quickly became not only the spokesman for religious interests and for the religious sector of society, but also an uncensored national voice for articulating a secular civil rights philosophy as well as national interests. It became a rallying-point for Lithuanian opposition” (Vardys 1990: 159).

Though Anderson’s ideas about the centrality of print language and print capitalism in the development of modern nations are primarily concerned with the

emergence of the modern nation as such (1991: 44-46), his ideas also suggest the import of the circulation of printed material in later nationalist endeavors as well. As the major dissident publication during the last two decades or so of the Soviet era, the *Chronicle* served a role not unlike the Lithuanian nationalist publications of the late nineteenth century in uniting people with a common language and a common enemy. In other words, though an ostensibly religious publication, the *Chronicle* served nationalist and other interests as well. Indeed, the *Chronicle* eventually “established itself as a voice that speaks for a nation” (Bourdeaux 1979: 307). In this case, the symbiosis between religious and other forms of dissent is quite clear; indeed, it is perhaps an example of how the distinctions between these various dissident concerns were elided, not only in this particular publication but also in daily life.

The use of a publication that was titularly and otherwise Catholic by civil rights activists and the broader Lithuanian opposition is thus an example of the amalgamation of dissent that is evident in Soviet-era Lithuania. With limited resources and opportunities, the pooled efforts of many dissidents – evident in, for example, the *Chronicle* – led to alliances and sharing across groups with similar but ideologically varied concerns and priorities. This amalgamation of multiple strands of dissent led to, and was facilitated by, the expression of dissent via a shared idiom, often in the same media. Furthermore, the diversity of concerns represented in the *Chronicle* is but one indication that the lines between “religious”, “secular”, “nationalist” and other forms of dissent are blurred and often obscured by the amalgamation of dissent. This amalgamation of dissent was significantly aided by the long-standing connections

between Catholicism and national identity. In other words, though partly facilitated by the limited resources and the benefits of having a dominant voice to speak for dissidents, the amalgamated dissent that is evident in the *Chronicle* also reveals the deep-seated hybridity of religious and national identities in Lithuania. One final thing to note with respect to the *Chronicle* is that Catholicism (here, the Catholic publication) is not exclusively “religious” in the way that many modern observers might expect. Instead, it is clear that the boundaries we are so quick to draw are in fact blurred; though the “religious” and the “national” are certainly not the same, they do overlap and intermingle in significant ways.

This interpenetration calls to mind Durkheim’s question: “if the totem is the symbol of both the god and the society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same?” (qtd. in Fields 1995: xxxv). The totem is less readily identifiable in the Lithuanian case, but the fact that here are any number of symbols used by both Church and State (e.g. the Lithuanian flag and the cross) suggests that Durkheim’s theory applies. Indeed, translator Karen Fields uses a Lithuanian example to demonstrate how sacredness comes to be imbued in objects of social significance. She writes: “leaders of a newly independent territory of Lithuania returned relics said to be the bones of St. Casimir to the People’s House of Culture, which they reconstituted and reconsecrated as the Cathedral of Vilnius. Lithuanians filed through the new cathedral and past the bones, participants in the birth of a nation” (Fields 1995: xlv). In this case, she continues, “the sanctification preceded, and was a tool in, the construction of a new moral community,” (Fields 1995: xlv), instrumental in the construction of the nation.

The ties between Sajūdis and members of the Catholic Church provided yet another connection between religious and nationalist dissent in late Soviet Lithuania. Founded in 1988, Sajūdis (“Movement” in Lithuanian) ostensibly began as a group to facilitate perestroika and eventually became a major force openly agitating for Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union (Ramonienė 2008). Though initially an umbrella movement encompassing religious, human rights, and even environmental activists, it focused increasingly on national independence (Goeckel 1995: 222). Goeckel attributes Sajūdis’ rapid success to support from Catholic dissidents: “The Lithuanian opposition in the Catholic Church nurtured the active opposition of the Sajūdis movement, although Sajūdis was largely a movement of the laity” (1995: 207).

Sajūdis was in some ways modeled on the Polish Solidarność (Solidarity) movement, and the success of Solidarność certainly bolstered Sajūdis in informal ways, primarily by providing a successful example of resistance to Soviet rule. Solidarność’s association with religious figures and ideals were also paralleled in Sajūdis. Given the historical ties between Lithuania and Poland, Solidarność’s influence makes a certain amount of sense. However, the Polish situation differs from the Lithuanian one in significant ways; the Polish Catholic Church, for example, became much more embroiled in politics than its Lithuanian counterpart. Indeed, as Lithuanian intellectual Leonidas Donskis argues, the Catholic Church has been more active in Poland, where it never lost its authority and influence, and the Polish Catholic Church has been radicalized and politicized to a much greater extent than its Lithuanian counterpart (Donskis 2008).

When Lithuanian elections were held in 1990, Sajūdis garnered seventy percent of the votes (Ashbourne 1999: 21). The group maintained ties with the Church when it came to power as the new government in 1990; Goeckel argues that it was precisely “[o]n the basis of the *Chronicle*’s network and experience [that] Sajūdis was able to gear up quickly a republicwide organizational capacity” (1995: 207). Moreover, the Lithuanian Catholic Church contributed to the development of the skills and attitudes necessary to create a stable democracy, which became crucial following independence in the early 1990s. During the Soviet era, the Church “developed a vibrant grassroots movement of dissent” and thus provided background and training for participants in the fledgling democracy (Goeckel 1995: 218). Thus, the Soviet-era ties between the Church, both through individuals and the *Chronicle*, and the resistance, particularly Sajūdis, carried through to the early period of independence as ties between the Church and the nation’s government.

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Not only was religious dissent closely linked with nationalist dissent, but it also became closely intertwined with yet another form of dissent: the broader civil rights movement in the Soviet Union. The growing involvement of religion in the broader Soviet human rights movement further indicates the amalgamation of dissent evident in the *Chronicle*. Vardys argues that the Soviet civil rights movement “in a sense secularized the Lithuanian religious dissent by transforming purely religious group concerns into universal principles of rights applicable to all” (1978b: ix). Though he argues that religious dissent (and, implicitly, religion itself) was fundamentally altered by

this association, it seems more plausible to put this forward as yet another example of the consolidation of dissent. Indeed, the *Chronicle* itself seems to have bridged this gap: by acting as an “uncensored national voice for articulating a secular civil rights philosophy as well as national interests” (Vardys 1990: 159), it encompassed religious, national, and civil rights dissent.

The cooperation on the part of people concerned with various aspects of Soviet policy was symbiotic. Not only did the broader civil rights movement aid religious dissent by expanding the audience concerned with repressive policies, but the Catholic struggle in Lithuania also “constitute[d] a considerable part of the general Soviet civil rights movement” (Vardys 1978b: ix). This symbiosis played out through the *Chronicle* and parish churches which functioned as “potential centers for articulate opposition to...Soviet policies, primarily in the fields of civil rights, education and communication” (Vardys 1990: 152). Bourdeaux argues that “[t]he Catholic Church has become the focus of the human rights movement in Lithuania because of her central position in the life of ordinary Lithuanians....restrictions and harassment [over religious matters]...are daily reminders of the insults to freedom of speech and conscience in Soviet legislation and government instructions on religion” (Bourdeaux 1979: 300).

The establishment of a “united religious base for human rights in Lithuania” (Bourdeaux 1979: 300) strengthened not only human rights advocacy but also religious dissent by, for example, attracting a wider audience for religious rights concerns. Lithuanian religious dissent was apparently unique in the degree of cooperation with “the



liberal and religious dissidents of Russia...[becoming] a part of the general civil rights movement in the Soviet Union” (Vardys 1990: 158).

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Bourdeaux sums it up nicely when he writes: “in Lithuania religion was – and still is – intertwined with so many other strands of life, both public and private, that it is impossible to keep it in a separate compartment” (Bourdeaux 1979: 294). This historical multifaceted connection between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity is evident, for example, in the Catholic themes, writers, and disseminators of national literature; in clerical and lay participation in nationalist activism; and in Catholic national publications. This relationship continued and developed in the Soviet era and is particularly evident in the web of relationships brought together in the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania*. The amalgamated dissent exemplified in this publication, and the symbiosis and hybridity of Catholicism with other facets of Lithuanian life, is clearly articulated in response to the perceived threat of Sovietization; as one activist publication wrote in 1975: “A danger to the existence of the Lithuanian nation has again arisen. Spiritual values are particularly at risk: religion, morals, language, literature and the whole of Lithuanian culture...” (“First Rays of Dawn,” qtd. in Bourdeaux 1979: 307).

## CHAPTER TWO

Just as the symbiosis between religion and national identity in Lithuania is evident in the examples described in the previous chapter, so too is it manifest at the Hill of Crosses. In many ways a reflection of the religio-national hybridity discussed previously, the Hill of Crosses is narrated as a locus for dissent and resistance that is often simultaneously religious and nationalist or political.

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The dominant narrative about the Hill of Crosses, as it is presented in most texts about the site, is one of nationalist resistance, from pre-Christian times through the Tsarist and Soviet occupations of what is now Lithuania. As such, the dominant narrative both reflects and contributes to the connections between religion and nation at the Hill of Crosses. It is difficult to discern the identities of the authors, or groups of authors, of this narrative and to trace its development. It is fairly clear that most sources are of Lithuanian authorship or origin, and that this narrative has been constructed in a particular Lithuanian post-Soviet context. This context reveals a concern to reestablish Lithuanian sovereignty and to reinforce Lithuanian national identity; it also reveals an awareness of what Michael Herzfeld terms the global hierarchy of value. He defines this global hierarchy of value as an “increasingly homogeneous language of culture and ethics....[that] is everywhere present but nowhere clearly definable” (Herzfeld 2004: 2-3).

This hierarchy is largely dictated by the West, and is particularly visible in Lithuanian discourse as the attempt to properly situate their Soviet legacy within the hierarchy, which tends to devalue and criticize the political and cultural hangovers of the Soviet Union's era of dominance. Lithuania has been particularly concerned to build strong relationships with Western states, by emphasizing its historical ties with Western Europe, by sending diplomatic envoys to Western states shortly after declaring independence, and by turning to the West for guidance. There was also considerable Western aid to the Baltic states in the 1990s; Sweden, for example, provided significant environmental aid.<sup>4</sup>

Lithuania's Western orientation and concern with the global hierarchy of value are clearly evident in the dominant narrative, which paints a very particular image of what life was like under Soviet rule in Lithuania. Certain post-Soviet realities (such as higher rates of alcoholism, depression, and suicide and a lower standard of living) are relegated to the realm of the unspoken. Once produced, this narrative is exported to tourists, many of whom come from the West, via brochures (published in several languages) and advertisements of tour companies, who tend to adopt its language in their advertisements.

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Literature about the Hill of Crosses – brochures and booklets offered, sometimes for a fee – is available to visitors both in the parking lot at the Hill itself and at the Tourist

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Swedish environmental aid to the Baltic, see Hassler, Björn (2002) Foreign Assistance as a Policy Instrument: Swedish Environmental Support to the Baltic States, 1991-96. In *Cooperation and Conflict* 37.1. Pp. 25-45.

Information Centre in Šiauliai, the city nearest the site, which is about twelve kilometers away. Most of this literature informs readers that the Hill itself was built by ancient Lithuanians, upon which they constructed a wooden castle like the many that dotted the area from approximately the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. The site is also of archeological interest to many scholars, and apparently archeological work in the early 1990s produced evidence “which could date the mound from the first millenium [*sic*] A.D. i.e. 14<sup>th</sup> century” (Anon n.d. b.). Based on this evidence, it has been surmised “that during the fights of Lithuanians and Swardbearers [Teutonic Knights seeking to convert the area’s inhabitants to Christianity] the wooden castle standing there helped ancient Lithuanians to defend the north-eastern border of the land of Šiauliai” (Anon n.d. b.).

The establishment of an historical connection between the Hill of Crosses and Lithuanians of the past in so much of the literature parallels the connections forged by nationalists who seek to legitimize their claims to national autonomy by demonstrating what is ancient, historical, and essential about their nation. That these Lithuanians of the past were engaged in a struggle to defend their land further connects them with their presumed successors in the Soviet era, though the former were primarily engaged in a physical struggle and the latter an ideological one. It is a bit ironic that the ancient foes of Lithuanians were Christians and Christianity later became such a central part of Lithuanian identity and anti-Soviet discourse, but Lithuanians tend not to see any discordance between their pagan and Catholic heritages. Lithuanian Catholicism is in

fact highly syncretic, incorporating numerous elements from the area's pre-Christian religion.<sup>5</sup>

Much of the recent and current scholarship on the Hill of Crosses focuses on the archeological site situated underneath the crosses themselves and on the site's earliest known history. In an article about this "Cultural Monument", Lithuanian historian Dangiras Mačiulis clearly demonstrates the contemporary scholarly focus on the site's archeological significance. Much of his information is drawn from archeological materials. He writes:

It is well known that the Hill of Crosses is Jurgaičių, Domantų mound...where from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries stood a wooden castle, which defended the land of Šiauliai's north east border. This hill's inhabitants first had to defend from attacks by Livonian warriors....

We do not know if the burned castle was rebuilt, [but for several reasons we can surmise] that this castle, burned in 1348, was not rebuilt. The castle was generally used for the purpose of defense...

(Mačiulis 1999, trans. Olson)

His writing, however, also has other purposes, and seeks to aid in the preservation of the surroundings of this cultural monument, thereby fulfilling the aims of the Venice charter (1964) and the UNESCO General Conference's regulations on the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (1972):

Since "the connections between monuments and their surroundings... have especial significance"...[this report has been prepared based on] historical investigations and research, exposing this territory's developmental stages and peculiarity. In searching in the territory one finds the Hill of Crosses – an

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Lithuanians celebrate Christmas Eve by feasting on traditional foods and engaging in games meant to predict the future. This fortune-telling has no roots in Catholicism but is incorporated into the celebration of a Catholic holiday. Lithuanian wedding celebrations offer further examples of this syncretism; most weddings ceremonies are performed in a Catholic church and are followed by celebrations incorporating folk games and traditions, including one in which the groom carries the bride across nine bridges.

object of diverse cultural value and social meaning, whose cultural value and social significance over the course of the last century was not static – it constantly changed and experienced, suffered, and survived various stages, which in turn influenced the landscape. Therefore, this historical development survey has been subdivided into two parts: the Hill of Crosses' historical development and the historical development of the Hill of Crosses' surroundings.

(Mačiulis 1999, trans. Olson)

It is important to note that, for post-independence Lithuanian scholars of the Hill of Crosses, the archeological significance of the site is inextricable from its contemporary relevance. During my visit to the Šiauliai public library, Dr. Mačiulis was kind enough to accompany me. When one of the librarians brought out a booklet called simply “Kryžių kalnas: The Mount of Crosses”, he immediately dismissed it as “popular” and therefore of no use to an academic such as myself. (I, of course, waited politely until he left before going over to the shelf to examine the offending volume, which turned out to contain a lengthy version of the standard narrative about the site and several dozen photographs.) Mačiulis' research on the Hill of Crosses addresses the relevance of the Hill's more distant history to its present condition, and explicitly examines the site's ancient history in relation to its surroundings and status as a “cultural monument”.

The privileging of historical rather than contemporary evidence seems to be a reflection of societal values and disciplinary interests. The incident in the library also reflects what is considered to constitute “real scholarship”. The article by Mačiulis mentioned above, for example, was written in response to a UNESCO initiative and may well have been influenced by the pervasive Lithuanian drive to adapt to Western cultural norms and values. It may also indicate the unarticulated attempt to render Lithuania's Soviet era meaningful by fitting it into a particular narrative of history. In “Trauma

Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” Susan Brison asserts the importance of “trauma narratives...in remaking the self” (2002: 39). The articulation of a narrative gives power to the self rather than to the outside force that caused the trauma (Brison 2002: 39).

While Brison’s concern is with individuals who have had traumatic experiences, her theoretical framework is equally applicable to the self-identity of a group such as the Lithuanian nation-state that has a longstanding history of a sense of being persecuted.

Thus, in contemporary Lithuanian scholarship, the religious facets of the Hill of Crosses are not denied, but they remain overshadowed by other concerns. That the site is open to so many avenues of interpretation is further evidence of the hybridity and historical symbiosis of religious and national concerns in Lithuania. The multiple avenues differ in how they render the site meaningful, and in the meanings they make, but generally talk about the site within a set range of meanings and in the same idiom, which assumes the hybridity of religious and national phenomena. The dominant narrative, for example, presents the site as one of continual relevance and contemporary interest, whereas scholars often focus on its contributions to knowledge of the region’s historical development. Both consider the Hill of Crosses to be a site of continual historical significance, though they highlight different features within the religio-national matrix.

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Most descriptions of the site follow their accounts of distant history with an attempt to explain the impetus for the initial appearance of crosses on the Hill, situating that appearance within a context of resistance against the Tsarist occupation. They

recount, for example, that “the crosses were first mentioned in written chronicles in 1850, though most often their appearance is related with the suppression of the rebellion [*sic*] of 1831 and repressions” (Smilgys 2000: 9). Another source states that the appearance of the crosses “is related to the suppression of the 1863 rebellion and the repressions” (Anon n.d. c.). In this way, the dominant narrative about the site relates its development and even existence to nationalist dissent. Thus, the site is a vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment, in this case against the Russian Orthodox Tsarist rule.

Furthermore, there is an implicit connection between early Lithuanian nationalists, rebelling against Tsarist rule, and later Lithuanian nationalists, resisting Soviet rule. One source makes an even more explicit connection between the Hill of Crosses and nationalist dissent: “After the uprisings of 1831 and 1863 the rebels were secretly buried [*sic*] there and they began erecting crosses both for the perished and the lost” (Anon n.d. b.). In this version, the Hill of Crosses itself contains the physical remains of nationalists, making it forever a testament and monument to Lithuanian nationalism.

An interesting, if not entirely common, account states that there were already hundreds of crosses at the Hill in the early nineteenth century, but the largest number were put up during World War II. Caught between the Soviet and German armies, Lithuania’s situation during this war was particularly tenuous, and the country was occupied three times over the course of the war, once by Germany and twice by the Soviet Union. According to this narrative, people put up crosses at the Hill in the hope that they would guide the many missing people home, and as a sign to represent the missing. The return of some of these people led to the belief that the Hill of Crosses was



miraculous, and so people subsequently went there because they believed that if they did, then what they asked for would come true (Juratė).

This narrative, like most other descriptions of the site, highlights the innocence of Lithuanian victims in a period of hostile occupation and describes how Lithuanians made meaning of the loss of their compatriots through a physical expression of their sentiments. Again, there is a strong connection between the religious (in the form of the cross and the hope for miracles) and the national (Lithuanians missing as a result of occupation by outside forces). Though the connection between the threat to individuals and the threat to the nation is implicit rather than explicit in this narrative, the connection between the threatened nation and the symbolism of the Catholic cross at the Hill of Crosses is deeply entrenched.

Almost every account focuses on the Soviet era, and the numerous and persistent Soviet attempts to destroy the Hill. Each account subsequently describes the persistence of the Lithuanian people in reviving the Hill after each destruction. Each publication devotes significant space to the Hill of Crosses in the Soviet era. “The Hill of Crosses: a Short History” gives a rather detailed version that is in keeping with the dominant narrative:

In 1961, the destruction of the Hill of Crosses began: all of the crosses standing on the hill were destroyed, burned, removed, buried. The “bulldozer atheism” epoch that began this way continued for about two decades. The crosses were destroyed more than once, and plans were made to flood the territory around the Hill of Crosses and turn it into an island. However, after every destruction the Hill of Crosses was always restored to life. It became more than a place for the expression of the belief and faith of individuals. Paying no heed to persecution and prohibitions, religious processions were organized. This made the Hill of Crosses famous far from Lithuania’s boundaries...

(Šiukščenė n.d.: 3, trans. Olson)

Other accounts mention KGB guards in the area and even Soviet-fabricated rumors of epidemics in the area to prevent people from visiting the site. Each mention of Soviet aggression is followed by accounts of people secretly erecting crosses on the Hill. These accounts often state that crosses would appear overnight, baffling the frustrated Soviets come morning. As one tour book summarizes: “Leveled repeatedly by the Soviets, crosses placed by peasants atop the hill came to symbolize a people’s resistance to Soviet occupation” (Anon 2008). In general, Soviet policy towards the Hill of Crosses seems to have been consistent with broader Soviet policy towards religion.

Soviet-era sources also point to the Hill of Crosses as a site of resistance. Writing in 1979 from accounts published in the *Chronicle*, Bourdeaux describes the site:

...remarkable among places of popular devotion is the Hill of Crosses near Šiauliai. In its original state it was a remarkable site – a hummock rising from a flat cornfield, the top of which bristled with a burgeoning of crosses in their thousands, wedged thicker than the trees of a forest. Perhaps no events better symbolize the endurance of the faith in Lithuania under persecution than the destruction of the Hill of Crosses on 5 April 1961 under the Khrushchev persecution, then its gradual “replanting”, followed by a further total devastation in April 1973, and then a most solemn nocturnal procession culminating in the erection of a new cross during the night of 20 May 1973.... With the constant raids by the authorities and the determination of the faithful to resist them, the number of crosses on the hill obviously fluctuates.... (198-9)

Thus, the Hill of Crosses emerges in discourse, both from the Soviet era and particularly from post-Soviet sources, as a locus for resistance. This narrative is constructed by establishing the Hill as first a site of ancient nationalist resistance to invading crusading armies seeking to spread Christianity. Layered upon the establishment of the site as ancient and nationally significant is the narrative of

simultaneous religious and nationalist dissent, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing during both the Tsarist and Soviet occupations.

Moreover, the dominant narrative shows how nationalism has often been expressed in religious terms, ideas, and actions. In both the Tsarist and Soviet eras, religion presented itself as an opportune vehicle of dissent, distinguishing Catholic Lithuanians from the Russian Orthodox Tsarists and the atheist Soviets. This relationship contributed to the already established association between Catholicism and Lithuanian-ness, and thus national and political ideas came to be expressed in a religious idiom, somewhat, it seems, by default. In other words, it is largely these historical connections that lead to the expression of national and political ideas in a more or less religious idiom. This pattern became self-perpetuating, and is even evident in post-Soviet political discourse.<sup>6</sup> Particularly as Soviet authorities contributed to the compression of various forms of dissent into the amalgamated dissent evident in the *Chronicle*, the common vocabulary and media shared by religious, nationalist, and political dissidents greatly facilitated the expression of nationalist and political ideas in a religious idiom.

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The establishment of the Hill of Crosses as a site of resistance is perhaps the most significant aspect of the dominant narrative, and to some extent contemporary Lithuanian scholarship. In its early history, the Hill was a place to resist invading armies of

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the debate over what constitutes a family for state welfare purposes was framed by some political figures in terms of Lithuania's "traditionally Catholic" values; in the end, a very conservative definition was accepted, largely on this basis (Donskis 2008). The actors in this political debate seem to have largely taken for granted the "traditional" Catholicism of Lithuania, and the place of religious values in political decisions.

crusaders; in the nineteenth century, it became a monument to, and locus of, resistance to Tsarist rule; and in the twentieth century, it became a site of resistance to Soviet rule. Moreover, though the object of resistance changes, a religious component is always at least implicitly present: the crusaders were seeking to convert the Lithuanian forebears (whose descendants now proudly declare Lithuania to have been the last pagan nation in Europe) to Christianity; the Tsarist occupiers were Russian Orthodox who feared papal influence and other Catholic threats and were therefore anti-Catholic; and the Soviets were aggressively atheist, again threatening Lithuania's Catholicism.

The Hill of Crosses also emerges as a physical and tangible place of resistance. The early fortifications on the site were physical fortifications designed to provide protection from obvious physical violence against natives of the area, though the violence was at least somewhat ideologically motivated. Once the site became a place of pilgrimage, however, it was transformed into a monument representing physical and ideological violence and resistance to it. Thus, the Hill emerges as a site of physical but also ideological resistance to those who threatened the Lithuanian people, both physically and ideologically. In the dominant narrative, the Hill of Crosses is presented as consistently anti-outsider, creating a continuous line of justifiable resistance to hostile forces that is reminiscent of romantic nationalism. This continuous line of resistance, established in the dominant narrative and always simultaneously nationalistic and religious, is similar to the continuous line of history that romantic nationalists sought to establish for their fledgling nations in the nineteenth century. In other words, the narrative which establishes the Hill of Crosses as a long-standing site of historical

resistance enhances the site's legitimacy in a way which parallels the process by which the creation of historical consciousness lent legitimacy to the establishment of the modern Lithuanian nation-state.<sup>7</sup> This use of history further highlights the connections between the Hill of Crosses (and, thereby, Catholicism) and Lithuanian nationalism.

The demonstration of a continuous historical line of Lithuanian resistance at the site also makes the Hill of Crosses about more than the expression of religious sentiment, and more than the actions of individuals. As one source claims: "It became more than a place for the expression of the belief and faith of individuals" (Šiukščienė n.d.: 3, trans. Olson). In this narrative, the Hill of Crosses becomes a site that is historically and undeniably collective, where the actions of anonymous individuals contribute to the defense of a larger group of Lithuanians. This group resistance on behalf of the nation in a religious idiom demonstrates the inextricability of religion from group identity in this context. As we shall see later, however, this overarching narrative of collective religious-nationalist resistance obscures and does not always make space for the nuances and multivalence of individual expression at the Hill of Crosses.

In the modern era, this resistance is simultaneously religious and national, but also specifically nonviolent insofar as the Lithuanians are portrayed as victims rather than aggressors. Their response to foreign aggression is, on the whole, to resist symbolically

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<sup>7</sup> See Krapauskas 2002, especially pages 7-10. As Krapauskas argues, "the development of a national historiography seems to be central to a national awakening. To assert the existence of Lithuania, the activists of the Lithuanian national rebirth had to create a past" (2002: 10). He continues: "A specifically Lithuanian history provided the Lithuanian intelligentsia with an emotional and ideological tool for separating and differentiating themselves from the Poles....They used history to create a historical consciousness which in turn promoted the development of a national identity leading eventually to the establishment of the modern Lithuanian nation, which deffered from the olf Grand Duchy of Lithuania" (Krapauskas 2002: 7).

rather than by force, and the sense of victimization is closely tied to the way in which Lithuanians are rendered nonviolent. In this narrative, the people who have produced and sustained the Hill of Crosses are depicted as peaceful and presumably innocent Lithuanians going about their lives. The violence of Lithuanians in the Tsarist-era rebellions remains unmentioned and therefore sublimated into the narrative of justifiable resistance to foreign occupation that is depicted as aggressive, violent, and brutally repressive. Thus, though the Hill of Crosses becomes associated with nationalist rebellions against Tsarist rule, the Lithuanians are portrayed as victims of the overwhelming and lethal occupation. The site therefore remains a memorial to violence and its victims rather than a place directly associated with violence. Narratives about resistance in the Soviet era are often explicitly nonviolent, and the reader is assumed to be familiar with the lack of violent resistance during most of Lithuania's time as a Soviet Republic.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Anatol Lieven, a British journalist and policy analyst of Baltic extraction, characterizes the Baltic movement as undertaken "[i]n the classic style of successful movements of passive resistance" (Lieven 1993: 254).

Indeed, Lithuanian resistance to Soviet rule after 1952 closely fits Gene Sharp's definition of nonviolent action: "those methods of protest, non-cooperation and

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<sup>8</sup> Armed organized resistance to the Soviets lasted from 1944 until 1952; its primary objective was to restore Lithuanian independence (Vardys 1965: 85, 97). Very little military resistance activity took place after this time, if any, and the movement which eventually led to the restoration of independence throughout the Baltic is often termed the "Singing Revolution," emphasizing its nonviolent nature. This movement included what is referred to as the "Baltic Way" or the "Baltic Chain", in which millions of people joined hands to form a human chain across the Baltic states to commemorate the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and draw international attention to the occupation and resistance in the Baltic. Accounts of Soviet aggression against the Hill of Crosses are concerned with the 1960s and later, by which time the lack of armed resistance was well-established.

intervention in which the actionists, without employing physical violence, refuse to do certain things which they are expected, or required, to do; or *do certain things which they are not expected, or forbidden, to do*" (Sharp 1969: 109; emphasis added). Nonviolent action in this case is a "substitute for war in the defense of freedom" (Sharp 1969: 107), "applied in [a struggle] against opponents relying on violent sanctions" (Sharp 1969: 109). Sharp notes the ability of nonviolent protest, which he calls "symbolic in [its] effect," to "produce an awareness of the existence of dissent" and to have a significant impact "under tyrannical regimes...where opposition is stifled" (1969: 110). The Lithuanian case is an excellent example of the effectiveness of nonviolent action against a tyrannical regime, and is indeed advertised as such in narratives about the Soviet era.

In some ways, this resistance is similar to that described by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak*: the use of "*everyday* forms of peasant resistance – the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to" exploit them (1985: xvi). This struggle, he continues, "is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled" (Scott 1985: xvii). At the Hill of Crosses, the relatively unremarkable act of placing a cross atop a hill became a powerful symbolic gesture in defiance of oppressors, a constant and undramatic struggle on the part of the relatively powerless Lithuanian populace. In significant ways, however, this act differs from what Scott describes, not least because he was concerned with local patterns while visitors to the Hill of Crosses have typically been engaged in resistance to a more distant enemy. Ancillary to this difference in scale is the lack of shared values between the powerless and the powerful that Scott argues undergird these

“ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups” (1985: xvi); in the Lithuanian case, it was precisely the *lack* of shared values – or, perhaps, the production of unshared values – that undergirded resistance to Tsarist and Soviet rule.

In contrast to the Lithuanians, the occupying Tsarists and Soviets are portrayed as unequivocally aggressive, taking lives and destroying that which is meaningful to the Lithuanian people. Thus an identifiable hostile and threatening other against which to rally is articulated, facilitating the production of and bolstering the vulnerable Lithuanian identity. In the Soviet era, this markedly nonviolent resistance became the hallmark of the human rights movement, and is characteristic of resistance throughout the Baltic region. Here, the process of regaining independence is often referred to as the Singing Revolution, a moniker that highlights the total lack of bloodshed at the hands of the “revolutionaries”.<sup>9</sup> Again, this revolution was characterized by the amalgamation of dissent evident in the *Chronicle*, as religious, nationalist, human rights, and other dissident concerns were expressed simultaneously against a common enemy in a shared idiom.

It is interesting to note the connection between the Hill as a Catholic site and the Hill as a site of Lithuanian nonviolence. In descriptions of the pre-Christian era, the Hill is described as a military fortification; once it is connected with Catholicism, any associations with violence are minimal. In accounts of the Tsarist era, the implicit

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<sup>9</sup> The most well-known violence in Lithuania’s drive for independence took place in January of 1991, when Soviet troops wounded hundreds and killed fourteen (mostly unarmed) Lithuanian civilians who had gathered to protect the television tower in Vilnius, Lithuania’s capital. Minor skirmishes continued throughout the Baltic until August of that year, but in almost all cases the Soviet troops seem to have been those instigating the violence. For a more detailed account, see Lieven 1993: 244-255.



violence on the part of Lithuanian rebels is never mentioned, and, significantly, those associated with the Hill of Crosses are portrayed as victims of the Tsarist repression and suppression of the rebellion. Furthermore, by using both of these terms (repression and suppression, in re.g. Smilgys 2000:9 and Anon n.d. c.), the narrative further underscores the aggression of Tsarist rule in contrast to the Lithuanians, who are depicted as merely defending themselves. In the narrative about the Soviet era, there is not even any implicit violence associated with the Lithuanians. Thus, the plot line of the overarching historical narrative about the Hill of Crosses establishes a progressive connection between religiosity and nonviolence, sharpening the distinction between the pious victim and the atheist (or Russian Orthodox) aggressor.

Though the development of nonviolence in association with Catholicism is not explicitly described in any of the texts, this theme is nonetheless pervasive. We can therefore surmise that Catholicism is a significant factor not only in the transformation of the Hill into a pilgrimage site but also in the development of a particular kind of dissent. Though this kind of dissent is neither exclusively religious nor exclusively nationalist or political, it is definitively nonviolent. This strong link between Catholicism and nonviolence, forged in tandem with the development of the nation itself, perhaps suggests that nonviolence evolved into yet another bond between religion and nation.

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What, then, are we to make of this overarching historical narrative? Its trustworthiness is not a particularly fruitful line of inquiry – what *is* significant is how the site is envisaged today, and how it is and has been made meaningful. The meanings

suggested in this narrative can shed considerable light on why it is constructed in this particular way and, perhaps more importantly, on why the Hill of Crosses is significant itself. According to the dominant narrative, the Hill is significant as an historically Lithuanian site of national importance – an assertion further strengthened by the site’s ties to the earliest era of what Lithuanian romantic nationalists deemed the nation’s history. Considerable space is devoted to situating the Hill of Crosses in the context of the history and culture of (nationalist) resistance and dissent – this alone reveals the significance and importance of history. As Lithuanian historian Virgil Krapauskas argues, it was precisely to history that early Lithuanian nationalists turned to bolster the legitimacy of their fledgling nation; he attributes considerable weight to “the role played by the amateur historians of the Lithuanian national rebirth in developing a national identity separate from the Poles” (2002: 3).

Moreover, this connection further emphasizes the Lithuanian-ness of the site, making it meaningful on national grounds as much as on religious ones, and further emphasizes the connection between Catholicism and the Lithuanian nation, as already discussed.

We can also surmise several things from the historical context and ideas that are implied in the dominant narrative. First, as Catholicism becomes established over the course of history as a “traditional” component of Lithuanian national identity, religion and nation become mutually reinforcing concepts. Particularly in the discourse of the Soviet era, in which so many forms of dissent were amalgamated into one common idiom and vocabulary, the concepts of religion and nation were so closely linked as to make

distinguishing a line between them nearly impossible, with “tradition” (along with nonviolence) often serving as an indefinite and non-delineated link between the two. The atheist propaganda of this era further reinforced these links.

Second, it would appear that the Hill of Crosses was a significant locus for both the Soviet authorities and Lithuanian dissidents as an ostensibly religious site that also encompassed and produced meanings that were nationally as well as religiously and ideologically significant. The site’s physicality and tangibility throws this process into particularly high relief, for actors both in the Soviet era and in the post-Soviet era.

One final point of note is the connection between the narrative of persecution and Lithuanian national identity. This sense of victimization has been observed by Donskis, who notes the “defensive nationalist culture” and long tradition of “self-centredness, self-righteousness, and self-victimisation” in contemporary Lithuanian national identity (2002: 8). Persecution of the Lithuanian nation plays a significant part in the dominant narrative about the Hill of Crosses – the Hill, a symbol of the Catholic Lithuanian nation, itself became a victim of persecution. Thus, the Hill both represents and reinforces specific components of Lithuanian national identity.

The Hill of Crosses is discursively rendered meaningful by being situated in a complex web of connections. In both the discourse of resistance and the discourse of the Hill of Crosses, the connection between religious and national phenomena is strong. Not only does religion coexist with, and strengthen, the nation and national identity; religion emerges as a “traditional” and inextricable component of identity on both national and personal levels, just as a religious pilgrimage site is conceived of as a site of historically

and undeniably national significance. The dominant narrative connects, implicitly and explicitly, the national and religious aspects of the site with physicality, history, persecution, and tradition. These connections are also evident in the wider discourse of Lithuanian nationalism and history. One possible center of these diverse elements is the Hill of Crosses itself, both as a physical place and as an expression of a concept. At this locus, there is the possibility, especially in the post-Soviet era, for the expression of a variety of sentiments and narratives, some of which align with the dominant narrative and others of which challenge its hegemony. The multivalence of meanings in the dominant narrative at the Hill of Crosses is further expanded in the individual narratives of the site's visitors.

### CHAPTER THREE

The complex web of connections and meanings evident in the dominant narrative is further complicated at the level of individual visitors to the Hill of Crosses. The following chapter explores the multivalent and multifaceted hybridity between religion and nation that is evident and manifest at the Hill of Crosses. The site is an excellent place to examine the multivalence of these interrelationships among religion and nation, at a micro level, as suggested by Berdahl (2000) and others. Bourdeaux's broad account, for example, glosses over some of the complexity of people's attitudes toward the site. Focusing almost exclusively on the religious aspects of the Hill of Crosses, Bourdeaux relies heavily on accounts put forth in the *Chronicle*, a Catholic publication. As we have already seen, however, the *Chronicle* encompassed and represented many forms of dissent, not merely religious concerns. Though a pilgrimage site covered in (primarily Catholic) crosses seems an obviously "religious" thing, the reality was and remains far more complex. Nor is it a site of primarily national or historical significance, as current Lithuanian scholarship tends to suggest by over-emphasizing its role as an ancient and therefore historically and nationally meaningful site. In addition to providing a tangible example of the inextricability of the religious and the national, the Hill of Crosses also provides insight into the nuances and individual expressions of this relationship. Evidence suggests that it is precisely the close association of these two categories that renders the Hill of Crosses meaningful in such a multitude of ways. In other words, the Hill of Crosses is meaningful as a religious site and as a national site precisely because of

the links between religion and nation in Lithuania – were religion not meaningful, the site could not be used to such a degree of national effect, and, to a lesser extent, vice versa. However, these relationships manifest in several different ways at the individual level.

Exploring what the Hill of Crosses means for and to individuals can help complete the micro-level picture of how the relationship between religion and nation works for individuals. For some people, one supercedes the other in all situations; for other people, the context determines which takes precedence. For most visitors, though, the two are always in relation to one another, or at the very least associated with one another. The Hill of Crosses thus complicates the picture with respect to multiple and amalgamated dissent and perhaps affords us the opportunity to get a better picture of the relationship between dissent and its religious, national, and other components. That Catholicism is personal and individual as well as “Lithuanian” (i.e. national), becomes evident, as does the nuanced hybridity that individuals experience and construct at the Hill of Crosses.

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One of my informants, for example, had in fact visited the Hill of Crosses as a teenager in the late 1970s or early 1980s. As Rūta put it, “Oh, of course I went there, when I was much younger – but we did not go for religious reasons, we went to rebel against the Soviets. We were young and it was fun to be defiant like that, because we knew that we were not supposed to go there”. For Rūta, youthful defiance on behalf of the nation superceded religion; she participated in a act of political defiance that, to her, was explicitly non-religious. Here, then, it is crucial to note that Soviet-era dissent which

appeared “religious” in nature may or may not have been so in the minds of the dissenters themselves. By extension, we can posit that some of the site’s other visitors may not have been religiously motivated, or at least not primarily so; we can also infer that this may still be the case in the post-Soviet era. Certainly many of the site’s visitors during the Soviet era were likely there for reasons of personal faith or were otherwise religiously motivated, but many also went for nationalist reasons, to defy the Soviets, or even as a lark. We must also remember that each individual can experience multiple motives and meanings simultaneously. The site’s multiple meanings are revealed in stories like Rūta’s, emphasizing that the dominant narrative does not necessarily encompass all of these meanings.

At the same time, it is nonsensical to deny the religious implications of the expression of nationalistic dissent at a site of Catholic pilgrimage and devotion. If Catholicism were not significantly linked with Lithuanian national identity, a Catholic site would not be an effective vehicle for the expression of nationalism. This Catholic pilgrimage site became meaningful as a site of politico-nationalist resistance in many ways precisely because of the significance of Catholicism in the formation and development of Lithuanian national identity. Its religious significance is arguably largely responsible for its significance as a site of nationalist meaning, and for the persecution of the site under aggressively atheist Soviet policies. Moreover, the Hill of Crosses was rendered more meaningful in part by the actions and ideology of the Soviet authorities who sought to simultaneously undermine Lithuanian national identity, Catholicism, and

physical manifestations thereof such as the Hill of Crosses. People often rally in defense of what they perceive to be unjustly under attack.

In other words, the Hill of Crosses is not just a place of nationalist dissent and defiance of authority, but an undeniably religious place; it must, therefore, have been worth defending this religious site against aggressors who were also attacking other Lithuanian values and institutions. Catholicism and religion, even where unmentioned, downplayed, or ignored, are implied in the Lithuanian national context, because of the historical connection between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity but also because of the way that Soviet authorities attacked both together, thereby reinforcing the connection.

Moreover, the concerted effort of the Soviets to undermine almost everything Lithuanian and the systematic attack against various aspects and institutions of the Lithuanian nation was in many ways the obverse of the amalgamated dissent evident in, for example, the *Chronicle*. In attempting to establish control over all aspects of life, Soviet policy was directed against religious, political, national, and other institutions and ideologies; from the perspective of many new Soviet subjects, it also threatened the environment and human rights. Though Soviet policies changed over time, there was a consistently multipronged attack against non-Soviet ideas and institutions, which in some ways contributed to the amalgamated dissent of the opposition. The processes (Soviet and anti-Soviet) were mutually reinforcing. It is important to remember that each aspect was meaningful in its own way (both on its own and, especially as time went on, in relation to others) or it would not have been addressed. In some ways the perception of a



Soviet attack against any given value or establishment may even have generated or strengthened an equal and opposite dissident thrust. When the Soviets attempted to undermine nearly everything in Lithuanian society, nearly everything in Lithuanian society became a potential opportunity for opposition and dissent. In other words, the very presence of religion and nationalism, particularly in tandem, shows them both to be meaningful on their own and especially meaningful in relation to one another.

What Rūta's story reveals, then, is that Soviet persecution is a considerable part of what rendered (and still renders) the Hill of Crosses significant and meaningful. In fact, according to the dominant narrative, the site would not exist at all if not for oppression from outsiders: the mound itself was built to defend against invading crusaders, and Lithuanians subsequently planted it with crosses as a direct result of war, invasion, and Tsarist and Soviet persecutions.

The Hill of Crosses, then, is meaningful to Rūta for several reasons. Though visiting the place was an act of explicitly non-religious defiance, it is clear that this act of defiance was meaningful in this particular way as a result of the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing Soviet repression of the gamut of non-Soviet ideologies, on the one hand, and the Lithuanian resistance and opposition to these policies which evolved into an amalgamated bundle of dissent, on the other.

Rūta, who, like most Lithuanians, considers herself a Catholic but rarely attends mass or otherwise engages in Catholic practices, views Catholicism as something that is "traditional" and "traditionally Lithuanian". She also values other "traditional" things such as family, but only incorporates "Catholic traditions" into her life at holiday

celebrations. She remembers placing crosses on the Hill with her compatriots as an act of youthful rebellion against the unscrupulous Soviet authorities. A religious symbol (the cross) thereby becomes, for Rūta, a symbol of youthful nationalist defiance. This interchangeability of symbolism further reinforces the link between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity, and also demonstrates that national and political ideas are often expressed in a religious idiom.

The Hill of Crosses, as a Catholic place, is almost automatically a place of nationalist resistance, in part because of the traditional association between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity. The site's own history as a place of nationalist resistance further strengthens its significance to Lithuanian nationalism. The Soviet authorities' attempts to repress Catholicism along with other Lithuanian values and institutions further strengthen the impetus to associate Catholicism with Lithuanian-ness by clearly defining an atheist other against whom to rally. Finally, Soviet actions against the Hill of Crosses itself makes the site meaningful and significant for Rūta and others like her, and contribute to the national and political meanings that came to be associated with and attributed to a site of Catholic pilgrimage.

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For another of my informants, on the other hand, the religious aspects of the site are far more significant than any national or political implications. In part, this different perception of the Hill of Crosses' meaning stems from the considerable age gap between Rūta and Asta, an Evangelical Christian in her early 20s. The difference in perception is also further evidence of the plurality of meanings at the Hill of Crosses.

I met Asta at the Hill of Crosses in July of 2008 on the morning of the site's annual festival, a huge outdoor mass that draws large crowds and is presided over by about three dozen priests. In 2008, as is common, scores of people walked the approximately twelve kilometers from Šiauliai to the site. They were led by a Lithuanian flag and a man carrying a microphone and speaker, singing "Glory, glory hallelujah!" Many more people arrived by car or busses that ran specifically for the festival. Loudspeakers blared a chorus with copious "alelujah"s, port-a-potties lined the far side of a field, and police cars presided over the bustling parking lot. Television cameras staked out their spots in the crowd, kept back from the temporary stage by metal barricades set up for the day. People milled about in the festive atmosphere, some of them in t-shirts emblazoned with their home parish logos, and water vendors in bright yellow shirts moved throughout the crowd. A few people, overcome with heat, leaned or sat on some of the larger crosses. Several army trucks were parked near the Hill, and over a hundred soldiers followed a band to stand at attention in front of the stage throughout the service.

Asta had come to the festival, she told me, to spend time with her friends and to talk to people about God. She approached me and almost immediately began to ask questions about my religious practices. Though not an unreasonable topic of conversation at a religious festival, her choice of topic is telling: for Asta, the Hill of Crosses is primarily of religious relevance. The context under which she visited the Hill of Crosses is remarkably different from Rūta's visit: in the post-Soviet era, there has been no repression of the Lithuanian nation, mass is openly celebrated at the Hill, and Evangelical Christianity is making inroads in the region. Asta therefore prioritizes

religious meaning and has the ability to engage with and criticize Catholicism in a relatively new way, in part because the nation is no longer under threat. In other words, with the removal of the pressure of Soviet attempts to control all aspects of life, the Soviet era areas of dissent (most notably religion and the nation) have been somewhat separated, though the two are still noticeably defined in relation to one another in many contexts. This environment allows for much more pluralism in matters of religion, as evidenced by the growth, for example, of the Evangelical movement.

At the Hill of Crosses, as in her life, Asta focuses on religion, prioritizing Jesus, the Bible, talking about God, and fellowship with like-minded individuals. She is critical of (Lithuanian) Catholicism, particularly its associations with tradition (viewed as empty and meaningless) and materiality. As the late July sun shone down on us, Asta leaned against a nearby cross with one hand, her face contorted in a squint. The cross was about five feet tall, with a small figure of the crucified Christ sheltered by two pieces of wood that formed something approximating a roof (a common feature of Lithuanian folk crosses). It bore a simple inscription marking the life of Olga Vilkienė, 1945-2007.

“It is not this,” she said, gripping the roof of the cross and giving it a bit of a shake for emphasis. “Knowing Jesus, reading the Bible,” she continued, “that is what is important.” She gestured around at the crosses: “these are just meaningless symbols...”

She continued to tell me about the flaws and fallacies of her native religion, still practiced by the rest of her family: the hypocrisy of professing to be a Christian but failing to make God a part of everyday life, the emptiness of tradition, the way most people are not interested in talking about God. Throughout the conversation, she shook

poor Olga's cross for emphasis, extolling the virtues of the Bible over "all of these pieces of wood". Did I read the Bible, she wanted to know, and admonished me: "You must read it all the time, every day."

The Catholicism Asta described was very clearly informed by specifically Lithuanian practices such as planting crosses (not only at the Hill but also throughout the countryside, where periodic crosses and small shrines dot the landscape) and incorporating certain folk practices in holiday celebrations (such as fortune-telling at Christmas). "Do you pray to Mary and the saints?" she asked. When I answered in the negative, her immediate (and somewhat relieved) response was, "Oh, then you are not Catholic." To be Catholic, then, is associated with very specific practices and traditions, many of which are uniquely Lithuanian practices; again, the relationship between Catholicism and that which is thought of as traditionally Lithuanian is evident. The way in which Asta discussed Catholicism suggested to me that she did not agree with the common societal expectation that to be Lithuanian requires one to be Catholic. Her attempts to convince others of this point of view, however, reveal a tacit acknowledgement of the link between the two that is so essential to many of her co-nationals. Thus, even in seeking to sever the bonds between religion and nation, between Catholicism and Lithuania, an attempt which is only possible in the more open post-Soviet era, Asta acknowledges (and perhaps even reinforces) the connections between the two.

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Another of my interviewees, Kazimiera, also a Lithuanian-born Evangelical Christian, was more explicit: to be Lithuanian, she told me, is to be Catholic. Checking the “Catholic” box on surveys is an expression of national identity; people do this, she told me, because that is what it means to be Lithuanian. She wondered aloud what Lithuanian national identity would be if Christianity had not been imposed by the crusades.

In her opinion, professing to be Catholic is largely a political decision, an act of showing respect to the established hierarchy. It is also politically expedient: Evangelicals are not welcome, for example, in universities, while it is “safe” to be Catholic. Many people still respect the authority of the Catholic Church, and many Lithuanians who convert to Evangelical Christianity, according to Kazimiera, convert back to Catholicism eventually.

When Kazimiera converted to Evangelical Christianity at university, her family was confused and upset. She and her sister still differ dramatically on this matter; her sister practices what Kazimiera described as an essentially empty and meaningless Catholicism heavily peppered with “pagan” and Lithuanian folkloric influences. Kazimiera framed this folk-Catholic syncretism as an opposition between faith and culture. For her, the pagan and folkloric influences on Lithuanian Catholic practices, particularly in the celebration of holidays like Easter and Christmas, have nothing to do with faith; they are simply the “Lithuanian” thing to do. Such practices, and being Catholic “on Sundays only”, contrast sharply with the Christianity she came to embrace at the university she decided to attend because of its strong English-language program.

As a Christian, she said, these pagan practices embedded in Lithuanian Catholicism are contradictory. If, however, all is superficial, if there is no deep thought or knowledge, if all is tradition, then there is no problem. In other words, if one looks deeper than the surface, what Evangelicals in Lithuania consider to be the pagan practices of Lithuanian Catholics contradict with Christianity's teachings; if, on the other hand, one has only a superficial relationship with both the pagan and Christian elements of Lithuanian Catholic practice and belief, the contradiction largely disappears. It is this lack of depth, this association with "tradition" rather than faith, that so many Evangelicals in Lithuania find particularly disturbing about Lithuanian Catholicism.

Kazimiera and I also discussed the place of Catholicism in Lithuanian politics. It is "quite present", she said, referring to national prayer breakfasts and the influence of Catholic figures and politicians. Talking about the transition from the Soviet era, Kazimiera notes that, in the past, the state did everything: Soviet authorities organized alternative events to counter the influence of churches and attempted to shape public morals with cartoons and education. Soviet rituals were meant to take the place of religious and other rituals, in an attempt to delegitimize Lithuanian ideas and institutions while bolstering Soviet ones (see Kertzer 1988). On the other hand, according to Kazimiera, now the state is less active and people do not realize that they themselves must be agents of change. Many Evangelicals (and others) believe that this kind of state is better, that it is better to have the freedom to have faith than to have a Christian nation where religion is state-imposed or an officially atheistic regime which imposes its own ideology and secular rituals.

Kertzer's (1988) thesis that ritual serves a symbolic link between the individual and larger forces is clearly evident at the Hill of Crosses and in Lithuania more broadly, where religious and political rituals often overlap and share symbolism. The Hill of Crosses is one locus of many where "[p]olitics is expressed through symbolism" (Kertzer 1988: 2). That Lithuanians expect public ritual to encompass the religious and the national simultaneously – especially since, according to Kertzer, ritual is an essential part of political life – further highlights the connections between religion and nation for most Lithuanians.

Goeckel notes that Soviet rule left churches in the Baltic considerably weakened as institutions precisely because of the state's suppression of church activities. In response to the rise of Evangelical Christianity, some Catholic actors have tried to reform Lithuanian Catholicism by focusing less on liturgy and tradition and more on individual spiritual development. This movement has been spearheaded in large part by the Franciscans,<sup>10</sup> who run the monastery adjacent to the Hill of Crosses. Kazimiera notes that many Lithuanian Catholics see this form of Catholicism as strange, again suggesting a very particular definition of "Catholic" that is tied up with tradition and Lithuanian national identity. That so many Lithuanian Catholics are uncomfortable with the shift in rituals of this Catholic reform also indicates the power of ritual in determining meaning.

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<sup>10</sup> These Lithuanian Franciscans (OFM) belong to the English-speaking conference of Franciscans; see their website at [www.ofm.lt](http://www.ofm.lt), and the related site [www.bernardinai.lt](http://www.bernardinai.lt). Franciscans are often involved in pilgrimage sites, and the presence of Franciscans at the Hill of Crosses was initiated by Pope John Paul II, who set up a partnership with a Tuscan Franciscan monastery for the friars at the Hill.



For both Rūta and Asta, who are extreme cases, there are significant connections between religion and nation, and for both women each of the two pieces is significant as well. For Rūta, the significance of the Hill of Crosses is primarily national and political; for Asta, it is primarily religious. Though Rūta considered her actions to have been explicitly politically rebellious, a religious element remains. As a participant in the culture of amalgamated resistance, which was itself multifaceted and largely concerned with opposition to atheist ideology, Rūta and her actions were at least associated with religious dissent. We must not, however, overstate the connection – clearly, in her mind, the religious implications of her actions were minimal or non-existent. The multivalent potentiality of the Hill of Crosses allows for a wide variety of meanings for individuals; it was and remains the amalgamation of the actions of many individuals that renders the site meaningful in its particular complex and multifaceted way.

For Asta, too, this multitude of meanings gives her the opportunity to choose and to minimize or ignore the implicit connection with that which she may not consider personally significant. The set of established meanings at the Hill of Crosses defines and determines the range of individual interpretations to a certain extent, but individuals engage with this range based on context and personal convictions.

The differences in Rūta and Asta's stories are attributable in large part to the vastly different contexts of their visits – the Soviet era, in which expression was severely constricted, and the post-Soviet era, in which the ideological space for a more plural narrative flourishes to some extent. Their accounts also highlight that there were and are as many meanings as there are visitors at the Hill of Crosses, some of which fall within

the bounds the dominant narrative seeks to establish and some of which do not. For both of these informants, however, as for most of the site's visitors, the connection between religion and nation, between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity, is unavoidable.

Despite these commonalities, however, a comparison of Rūta and Asta shows that the meanings made at the Hill of Crosses are multifaceted, multivalent, and produced at multiple levels, ranging from the public to the very personal. Moreover, religion must be itself meaningful and significant in some way to have become this vehicle, as it is in different ways for both Rūta and Asta: for Rūta, nation supercedes religion but religion must be at least implicitly meaningful, while for Asta religion supercedes nation but Catholicism is implicitly connected to the idea of what it is to be Lithuanian.

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For many of the site's other Lithuanian visitors, the Hill of Crosses and its significance are far less explicitly religious and/or nationalistic. In many cases, people go to the Hill of Crosses because to do so is traditionally associated with certain rites of passage, especially weddings, baptisms, and first communions (each of which, notably, generally takes place in a Catholic church). For many of these visitors, planting a cross at the Hill to commemorate such events is simply "what is done". This action is comparable in some ways to what many newlyweds in Vilnius do when they put a lock engraved with their names on one of the bridges to the Užupis district; throwing the key to this lock into the river is said to symbolize the permanence of the marriage (see photo, Appendix 1). Indeed, the same information is often found on the wedding inscriptions in

both places: the couple's names and the date are written or engraved on both the Užupis locks and the placards on the crosses at the Hill of Crosses. Most of the inscriptions at the Hill of Crosses, however, also ask for blessings for the couple – some simply ask for protection of the new family, while others set out laundry lists of requests. A few invoke God explicitly; most use the imperative of the verbs “to guard” and “to protect”. One, for example, asks for “peace, good fortune, children, love, health”; another concludes a similar list by asking for “all that is best” (see photos, Appendix 1).

These inscriptional requests call to mind the narratives which associate the Hill with the granting of requests and miracles following World War II; for many, clearly, crosses can serve as an instrument to request and receive divine favor. There are even inscriptions requesting and expressing gratitude for healing. These requests also suggest a certain amount of religiosity or religious faith, even if it is somewhat rote. Rūta's sister Audra, for example, asserts that these couples must believe and have religious motivations; why else would they bother going so far on their wedding day, she asks. She has a point: given the sheer number of wedding parties at the site on any given summer day, traveling to the Hill of Crosses cannot be limited to those who are particularly proximate to the Hill of Crosses, which is in a rather remote part of the country. Moreover, the act of planting a cross and saying a prayer (an act usually but not always accompanying the planting) is undeniably religious at some level, even if only insofar as those engaging in it are using religious symbols and language.

The argument for the religious significance of wedding parties visiting the Hill is somewhat corroborated by the actions of other wedding party members, who frequently

put smaller crosses on the couple's larger one. These smaller crosses often ask for additional blessings for the couple, and suggest at the very least a desire on the part of wedding party members to be seen as asking God for favor on behalf of the couple.

Within wedding parties, as one might expect, there is considerable variation in behavior at the site. One party, for example, trekked past the shrine of Mary on the way to erect their cross; several of the groomsmen and bridesmaids did not even look up, but one or two of them crossed themselves and paused briefly. It is difficult to discern whether this behavior was a reflex or something with a deeper religious motivation; it is, however, important to note that a variety of behaviors and potential meanings are evident not only between different wedding parties, but also among the members of any given wedding party.

As at most other venues associated with weddings, there are photographers and often videographers present at the Hill of Crosses; typically wedding parties stopped for several minutes in the front of the Hill for a group shot. Similar actions were undertaken by people visiting the Hill to mark baptisms and first communions. One couple brought their young son back on the anniversary of his christening; after a certain amount of searching, they photographed their son with the cross they had erected for him a year earlier, wandered back to their car, and drove away. The Hill of Crosses, then, is also a place to mark the passage of time, which suggests that tradition accounts for a certain amount of the ritual activity that takes place at the site. This behavior is perhaps an example of anthropologist Edmund Leach's notion that rituals order and mark the passage of time (2000: 182-4). It is difficult to determine the extent to which rites at the

Hill of Crosses (or, rather, the marking at the Hill of Crosses of rites performed elsewhere) mark and order time for Lithuanians who visit the site. The site does, however, provide a physical locus for yearly commemorations of, for example, christenings and deaths for at least some Lithuanians.

Moreover, almost all visitors celebrating rites of passage at the Hill are Lithuanian, despite Latvia's very close proximity (the Hill lies two kilometers off the main highway from Šiauliai to Riga near the Latvian border). Though Catholics are a minority in Latvia, the exclusively Lithuanian composition of visitors marking religious events suggests that visiting the Hill is a particularly Lithuanian tradition. In this particular post-Soviet context, the national element of these traditions is largely assumed rather than articulated. When tradition blends into both religion and national identity, as it does here, they become so intertwined that drawing lines of division is nearly impossible. As "traditional" actions, the rituals performed by Lithuanian visitors are simultaneously religious and national as well as simply "what is done".

A similar variability in conduct can be observed among other Lithuanian-speaking visitors, who are not celebrating rites of passage at the Hill. Older people visit early in the day to stroll and catch up with friends, families come to place crosses asking for blessings or commemorating dead loved ones, the occasional beggar prays the rosary on the side of a path. Personal devotions to Mary are common at the Hill, and range from the "traditional" to "what is done" to highly personal devotions that beseech or express gratitude for miracles. I watched one family with a young son whose mother dictated that their cross be placed in front of Mary; when the boy asked why, his mother answered

“that is what is done”. On the far end of the spectrum, I witnessed an older gentleman lovingly tending to the shrine of Mary on the Hill, putting fresh water in the flower vases and clearing the dozen or so small crosses in front of her statue. This tending was his act of devotion, in gratitude for unspecified blessings from the Virgin Mary during his life.

Notions of traditional actions and “what is done” such as those discussed above are perhaps also evidence of Paul Connerton’s (1989) notion that bodily social memory often serves to bolster and legitimate a particular social order. He suggests that the memory of groups is “conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (Connerton 1989: 40). In other words, performances (particularly habitual performances) are important in conveying collective memory, which, in turn, is important in legitimating a given social order. The case of the Hill of Crosses suggests the potential importance of performance in resisting a social order as well, as actions at the site served as resistance to Tsarist and Soviet rule during periods of occupation. In the post-Soviet context, however, the performance of bodily rituals at the Hill of Crosses seems to bolster the social order of independent statehood as Connerton suggests. This social order is one in which to be Lithuanian is to be Catholic – thus, actions like Asta’s at the Hill can also be said to resist the social order. That the performance of rituals with undeniably religious elements legitimates (and challenges) this social order is further evidence of the connection between religion and nation in Lithuania.

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In summary, we can say with confidence that the Hill of Crosses is rendered meaningful in an astonishing variety of ways. The dominant narrative seeks to frame the

site as one of primarily religio-nationalist resistance to foreign occupation; this linkage of meanings is possible because of the longstanding historical connection between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity. This narrative, and those of individual visitors, also suggests that the religious must be significant in order to be useful as a vehicle of nationalist expression and resistance. One of the many things which spans the interstices of religion and nation in Lithuania is the notion of tradition, of “what is done”. The emphasis on tradition appears not only in the dominant narrative but also in the behaviors and comments of Lithuanian visitors at the Hill of Crosses. The symbolism of the cross also comes to have both religious and nationalistic meaning, as a result of historical and other factors; this cross-symbolism is enacted and expressed at the Hill. The self-perpetuating connection between religion and nation is expressed in a variety of iterations, with one often being subsumed into the other. The multiplicity and multivalence of meanings is glaringly evident at the Hill of Crosses. As we shall see in the next chapter, this variety of meanings and interpretations is even broader for those of the site’s visitors who do not have close associations with the Lithuanian nation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The following chapter examines an even wider scope of behaviors and potential meanings at the Hill of Crosses, including information on non-Lithuanian visitors to the site. The question of how religion and nation interact largely fades, though our analysis begins with the final element of the dominant narrative, which seeks to set the bounds for meaning-making and to control the image of the Hill of Crosses (and, by extension, the relationship between Catholicism and the Lithuanian nation). This narrative is shared with the world outside of Lithuania through tour company brochures, visitors who return home with their own stories which incorporate parts of this narrative, and other mechanisms. The wide range of meanings for visitors at the Hill of Crosses is influenced by this narrative, signage at the site, other visitors, and their own backgrounds; most people relate to what they perceive as a religious place, but the Hill is becoming a tourist destination as well.

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Turning their attention to the Hill of Crosses in its present state, most sources emphasize the impressive numbers of crosses and visitors, and the many reasons for their visits. As one brochure puts it: “Today, over 100,000 crosses from almost every country of the world commemorate the people’s sufferings, hopes, and gratitude” (Anon n.d. c.). Another describes how “every year thousands of people visit the Hill of Crosses. We come here in the moment of suffering and joy. We come full of hope, love and faith” (Anon n.d. b.). In a slightly more poetic rendering, Smilgys writes: “The Hill of Crosses



is never lonely. People of all faiths and nationalities visit the hill to find peace, concentrate and be heard by God” (2000: 9).

What emerges as most significant from these accounts is that there are huge numbers of crosses and visitors to prove that the site is still relevant and important, not just as an historical artifact but as a place that is still active. Furthermore, the emphasis on the diversity of visitors (“from almost every country of the world”; “people of all faiths and nationalities”) suggests a desire to attract a high volume and variety of future visitors, as does the new information center.<sup>11</sup> There is also an emphasis on the new, international aspect of the Hill of Crosses: “[The] Lithuanian Sanctuary of Crosses became the property of the whole world” (Anon n.d. b.). Nevertheless, the Hill of Crosses remains somehow uniquely Lithuanian as well: “The Hill of Crosses is a symbol of suffering, hope and undefeated faith of the Lithuanian people” (Anon n.d. b.).

In short, the dominant narrative seeks to frame the experiences of the site’s visitors. The nationalistic implications of the narrative are minimal in this last section – the site’s “Lithuanian-ness” has already been set up earlier in the narrative; instead the focus shifts to the Hill as a uniquely Lithuanian but undeniably international site. The Hill’s international visitors, moreover, are described in terms of devotion, hope, suffering, and faith. The site is thus portrayed as one of primarily religious significance. A subtext links the suffering of Soviet-era Lithuania with the suffering of some of the site’s visitors, perhaps in an attempt to bridge the gap between the site’s Lithuanian and international aspects. The internationalization described in the dominant narrative is

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<sup>11</sup> This information center, to be discussed later in this chapter, is a joint project financed by The Republic of Lithuania and the European Union, according to posted signs.

closely controlled and well within the bounds of the meanings established in the story of the Hill before Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union. The dominant narrative also sets distinct bounds for meaning-making by using words and phrases like "hope", "faith", and "to be heard by God". The variety of meanings for individuals, then, are set up and contained, according to this narrative, within certain bounds that could be termed more or less religious.

There are, however, many other meanings that visitors make and perceive at this site, both within and beyond the bounds that the dominant narrative describes. Presenting the Hill of Crosses as an international symbol of hope, faith, and suffering, this narrative frames the experiences of its visitors in the post-Soviet era in primarily religious terms. For many of its visitors, this is no doubt the case. However, it does not make much space for the plethora of other motivations with which people visit the site. Particularly when looking at non-Lithuanian visitors to the Hill, new kinds of meanings emerge, many of which are still centered on the traditional Catholic-Lithuanian axis set up earlier in the narrative, but many of which fall well beyond the pale of this range of meanings. For tourists in particular, many of whom visit the Hill of Crosses as part of an organized tour, the Hill may be a site of devotion but it may just as easily be a cultural oddity, a place of devotion for others but not for themselves, a monument to Catholicism and its flaws, or a site of spiritual beauty unconnected with the site's largely Catholic origins.

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Many of the visitors at the Hill of Crosses act in accordance with what they think is appropriate; in particular, many seem to come with the motivations of hope and faith

described in the dominant narrative and perform their devotion for others to witness.

This kind of behavior is clearly in line with the dominant narrative's description of the site. One of the site's Polish visitors, for example, made repeated visits to the Hill over the course of several days. She also attended Sunday mass at the monastery behind the site, which was as a rule packed.<sup>12</sup> This particular visitor had arrived early and taken a seat in the front pew with her husband, with whom she periodically whispered loudly during the service. He seemed primarily interested in tending to her needs and in documenting their visit, taking photographs of the young musicians at the mass and of one of the friars. His actions stood in marked contrast to hers.

Her actions were characterized by exaggerated devotion, at the mass as well as on the Hill itself and at a Eucharistic Adoration several days later in the chapel. Both in the chapel and at the Hill (in front of the large statue of Jesus that greets visitors at the front of the Hill and at Mary's shrine, for example), she made repeated, slow, and exaggerated movements. She often knelt with hands folded in a posture of prayer and frequently knelt, either on one knee or both, to make a large and slow sign of the cross. Once, I saw her kneel briefly in front of Mary's shrine, stand up and kiss the feet of the statue before walking down the steps behind the shrine. In the front of the Hill at a different time, her husband engaged a passer-by in photographing the two of them in front of the large Jesus statue, after which she again very deliberately made the sign of the cross and appeared to

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<sup>12</sup> The chapel seats about 75; on the Sundays that I attended, the friars put out extra folding chairs and there were still 50 people or more standing, spilling into the narthex. In total, I would estimate that there were between 150 and 175 people in attendance. Given that church attendance declined significantly following Lithuanian independence from Soviet rule, the overcrowded chapel at the Hill of Crosses is notable.

pray for several minutes. He seemed unconcerned with her devotions, talking loudly with other visitors, though in the chapel he often stroked her hair while she knelt, presumably in prayer. Occasionally she would gaze up at him forlornly.

Unfortunately, our communication was limited, and so I got few details about why this woman in her 50s was spending so much time at the Hill of Crosses with her husband. Her actions and movements were very slow and almost unnatural, and to the casual observer she was the very image of pleading, and perhaps even excessive, devotion. This extreme expression of physical devotional acts is not common at the Hill (or in Lithuania more generally) and very much marked this woman apart from most other visitors. Even the friars seemed to regard her actions as beyond the pale, particularly when she repeatedly crossed herself before kissing the foot of the St. Francis statue that hung in the narthex outside of the chapel.

This woman's performance of rapt devotion may very well have been underpinned by internal piety and religious fervor; even if this was not the case, her way of showing reverence was a communication to those who witnessed her actions. Making the sign of the cross; kneeling with hands clasped as in prayer; and gazing reverently at statues of Jesus, Mary, and St. Francis are all actions recognized by most people at the site as religious. To the passer by, her internal state was unknowable; her external actions, however, advertised her piety and devotional intentions. Her performance of rapture and devotion, though an extreme case, is also notably in keeping with the part of the dominant narrative that expects visitors to come to the Hill of Crosses because of their faith and desire to communicate with God. In performing devotion in this particular

and exaggerated way, with common actions and symbols, this woman's actions comported with the expectations framed by the dominant narrative. In other words, her behavior at the site, and the motivations one might assume lay behind them, was very much in keeping with the presentation of the site and its visitors in the dominant narrative.

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A group of Italian pilgrims also seemed to be international visitors coming to the Hill to "be heard by God" (Smilgys 2000: 9). Arriving in slow procession from the back of the Hill, they were led in call-and-response prayer and singing by a priest, who followed a teenage boy carrying a large cross. Most of the participants were in their forties or older, and many carried rosaries, which they placed on the cross after it was planted near Mary's shrine at the top of the Hill. The cross bore an inscription with the date as well as the name of the pilgrimage group (which it explicitly specified as such). Upon planting the cross, the priest led the pilgrims, some of whom were strewn down the Hill's steps, in a communal prayer before they dispersed to take in the Hill on their own. Once the cross was planted, they engaged in many of the same behaviors as other visitors, such as photography and commentary on the crosses.

Their behavior until the cross was planted, however, was markedly different from other visitors in their exhibition of devotion. By engaging in prayer, hymn-singing, and in some cases praying the rosary, they effectively advertised their status as religious pilgrims. The behavior of the site's other visitors in relation to this group reflected their advertised status; most people made a point of getting out of their way, with the

exception of two young Lithuanian women who took little notice of them. That other visitors to the site were deferential to members of this procession suggests that people recognized them as having the right of way because of their performance of overtly religious motivations for visiting the Hill. This deference was of a quality that I did not witness except when visitors encountered people processing behind a large cross to erect on the Hill; in general, people were polite enough to stay out of one another's way, but in this case the group did not have to break ranks at all, and seemed focused on their songs and prayers, paying little heed to their surroundings. Once the cross was planted, however, it was as if the pilgrims reverted into regular visitors, breaking off into small groups to explore the rest of the Hill and interacting with other visitors as if there was nothing distinguishing about them (which, when they ceased to behave differently from other visitors, seems to have been the case).

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Both this Italian pilgrimage group and the performatively devout woman discussed above were doing essentially the same thing in performing reverence and devotion in a public space. The large group of self-proclaimed pilgrims, following a religious leader, was publicly recognized as having a special status by most other visitors to the site. The woman, on the other hand, was largely ignored by her fellow visitors, who neither sought to interrupt her devotions nor bear witness to them. It is difficult to explain this difference, though perhaps the group was more noticeable due to its size and audibility. It may also have seemed more "official" because of the priest who led the pilgrims. These visitors, and others like them, were marked by their performativity, their

use of what most people at the site understood as overtly religious actions and symbols. Their actions were thus identifiable as religious to most of the site's other visitors and clearly fell within the bounds of the motivations described in the dominant narrative.

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There were also many groups, large and small, whose behavior did not seem in keeping with the dominant narrative's description of "thousands of people visit[ing] the Hill of Crosses....in the moment of suffering and joy....full of hope, love and faith" (Anon n.d. b.). Many groups of younger visitors in particular had an air of boredom, as if they had gotten off their tour busses because they might as well but didn't really find the site particularly moving or meaningful. One North American teenager commented sarcastically: "Wow, I've seen it, it's so amazing". Behavior like this reveals that many of the site's visitors do not have the same level of reverence, the same motivations of hope and faith, as the dominant narrative describes.

Some visitors even criticize the Hill of Crosses. Asta, who visited the Hill to talk to other visitors about the flaws of Catholicism and the site, for example, was critical. So was one North American visitor, a woman in her mid-forties, who commented to a friend: "Well, you can see why the Reformation happened, can't you". This implicit criticism of Catholicism, made on the basis of people's actions at a "Catholic" pilgrimage site hundreds of years after the Reformation, reflects the tendency of many visitors to try to fit what they take in at the Hill with what they already know and believe. Much of this knowledge is based on the dominant narrative, but it is also heavily influenced by the visitors' prior knowledges and experiences over which the dominant narrative has little or

no control. Moreover, many of the site's visitors who proclaim themselves to be unmoved or even critical, who are explicitly *not* devout, are in many ways reacting precisely to the perceived expectations of devotion at the site. In other words, their performance of boredom or disgust with religion or devotion is a response to the same kinds of constructions that motivate people to behave as if they are devout or reverent.

In a sense, their behavior is no different from that of the Polish woman or the Italian pilgrims discussed above, insofar as their actions are all dictated to a certain extent by the bounds of meaning imposed by the dominant narrative, the site itself, and other visitors, albeit to opposite effect. That devotion and opposition to it are both performed at the same site suggests that meaning-making at the Hill of Crosses is primarily framed in terms of, and bounded by, the established set of broadly construed "religious" meanings associated with the site. This set of meanings is constructed through the dominant narrative, the behavior of people at the site, the information posted at the Hill itself, and the associations people make with the symbolism at the Hill. This symbolism is primarily tangible, in the form of crosses and other objects left at the site, but also encompasses the actions of people at the site. In other words, the expression of piety and irreverence – and reactions against piety and devotion – in the same space suggests that people are acting within a particular range of meanings.

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One South African visitor with whom I spoke seemed, at first, to fall towards the latter, less devout end of the spectrum. Brought to the Hill by the Estonian friends he was visiting on their way to Klaipeda, Sam said he knew only what he read about the site



on the bulletin board signs when he arrived. He seemed to have been told a bit by his friends as well, having bought a cross in the parking lot to place on the Hill because that was what one was “supposed to do”. He seemed quite interested in learning more, asking me many questions about the Hill. How old, he wanted to know, was the oldest cross I had seen? Which one was the biggest? Sam was incredulous when I told him that the earliest date I had seen on a cross was 1989. This revelation prompted him to comment that someone should come out and shellac the crosses to preserve them. He also suggested that there might be profit to be had in taking some of the crosses and selling them as “powerful and authentic relics”. The crosses were, to him, simultaneously something to be revered and preserved and something to be used. This ambiguity of attitude toward the crosses on the Hill can probably be explained by the tension between a perception of the need to respect religious objects and the knowledge that the crosses were placed on the Hill by people like himself.

Sam was also interested in learning about his fellow visitors and in sharing about himself. As we wandered up the main steps to the top of the Hill, I learned that Sam was getting a degree in international law but spent more time studying Tibetan Buddhism. He had purchased a small wooden cross in the parking lot, though he did ask me why he was supposed to put up a cross. He seemed content with my noncommittal answer and, on reaching the shrine of Jesus at the top of the Hill, looked around and said, “I want to be different”. He decided to hang his cross on the outstretched hand of the statue of Jesus, and proceeded to engage my help in accomplishing this feat. There had been two crosses hanging there when I visited the site several years earlier, which I did not mention to

Sam. He had earlier expressed dismay that I had not put up my own cross, and told me that helping him place his would count for me as well. This statement suggests that for some pilgrims at least, the act of placing the cross on the Hill is significant and important in and of itself. Indeed, the presence of crosses that would clearly not last – one, for example, was made of small candies placed on the ground in a cross shape, and several were made of paper, yarn, straws, or other materials that were likely to disintegrate rapidly – reinforces the importance of the *act* of placing a cross at the site. Many of the crosses were also moved after being placed, including the cross that Sam and I hung on Jesus' outstretched hand, which was gone the next morning, lost amidst the anonymity of thousands of others like it.

To my surprise, Sam behaved radically differently just after hanging the cross, dropping his jovial and irreverent chatter to clasp his hands and mouth what I can only assume was a prayer. Moments later he was casual again, and we headed across the top of the Hill towards Mary's shrine. The shift in his demeanor showed the reverent and respectful aspects of this particular visitor in stark contrast to his more casual interactions with the site. Sam's behavioral shift indicates the possibility – perhaps the likelihood – of any given individual experiencing and making a multitude of meanings at the site. He took photographs of some of the larger crosses and the panoramas atop the Hill. Once we reached the back of the Hill, Sam turned around and returned to the parking lot the way he had come. He seemed content with having seen the main pathway atop the Hill, uninterested in seeing or exploring the dozens of other areas and small paths. He paused once to muse that the top of the Hill would be a good place to reach enlightenment.

Thus, Sam made the Hill of Crosses meaningful according to his own religious paradigm, making the mostly Catholic pilgrimage site relevant to his own set of beliefs.

One of the first things we talked about when Sam first approached me was religion. A student of Tibetan Buddhism who had spent time studying in India in his search for peace, he seemed unenamored of Christianity. Interestingly, he almost immediately jumped from a general discussion of religion to a critique of the Soviet approach to religion and life more generally. They should have been more like Buddhists, he suggested. In Buddhism, he explained, you can work for your freedom; under Soviet rule, you had to work to eat.

These topics of conversation, especially in this progression, suggest that he made connections between religion (particularly Christianity), the region's Soviet legacy, and his own beliefs, with the Hill of Crosses as a place where these things came together. His experience of and at the site was framed and bounded by, first, the site itself – its Soviet history, its Christianity, its peacefulness – and, second, his own previous knowledge, both of the Hill and of his Buddhist studies. Thus, for Sam and likely others, the meanings at the Hill of Crosses result from the confluence and coming together of the site itself, what they know and learn about the site (from, among other sources, the dominant narrative, posted signs, and word of mouth) and their own backgrounds. The mixture of respect and irreverence displayed by this visitor, and the blurring of the line between piety and tourism, suggests that most visitors probably fall, like Sam, somewhere between the extremes described above.

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Most of the site's visitors do not act in the extreme manners discussed early in this chapter. Rather, most exhibit a mixture of devotion and irreverence much like Sam, and most seem to perform the same actions when they arrive at the site. Generally, groups of visitors, particularly large tour groups, walk slowly from the parking lot towards the site's main pathway, which takes them to a U-shaped gravel area with the cross donated by Pope John Paul II in the center (see map, Appendix 2). They then walk up the wooden steps in the center of the gravel area, towards the shrines of Jesus and Mary that sit atop the two peaks of the saddle-shaped mound. Large groups tend to splinter once they pass the first peak at the shrine of Jesus, and people wander in groups of two or three around the Hill, pointing out interesting things to one another and taking photographs.

Some people also venture off on their own to take photographs or plant their own crosses, rejoining their companions later. One young man from Norway bought a two-and-a-half foot cross and went off to plant it on his own along one of the smaller pathways on the top of the Hill. When he caught up with his father later, he recited a poem that he had composed to remember its location. Many of the Hill's other visitors photograph their cross or try to remember its location in other ways; some of these visitors later return, looking for their cross years later. People often get their companions (or passers-by) to photograph themselves with their cross, or photograph their cross on its own. In this way, many of the site's visitors document their visit just as they might document their visit to any other tourist destination. There is also an interesting sense of anticipated return for a few of the site's visitors.

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That such a wide variety of visitors expressing or performing such a span of meanings move through the space in such similar ways suggests several things. First, it suggests that people have similar expectations of the site and appropriate ways to act there. Similarly, it also suggests that there is a set range of meanings and experiences, bounded by the dictates of both the site itself and what people think and know about it. Nobody, for example, seems to visit the site thinking that they are visiting the place where the Buddha reached enlightenment, and the site decidedly has a religious and/or spiritual element for most visitors. The latter set of constraints – what people think and know about the Hill – is largely influenced by the dominant narrative, but is not completely or exclusively defined by it. Moreover, people are told many different things about the site; one friend told me that, when he first visited the Hill, his teachers told him that that if you talked on the Hill you went to Hell. The dominant narrative, it is important to note, is neither monolithic nor all-powerful, and people also learn about the Hill of Crosses from teachers, friends, tour guides, the internet, and other sources. Yet, even the idea that one goes to Hell for talking on the Hill falls within a particular range or type of meanings, insofar as there are what most people would consider religious repercussions for one's actions there.

As the behavior of most of the site's visitors show, the Hill of Crosses is "religious". It is, moreover, a site that visitors (largely influenced by the information they get about the site) associate with Catholicism and/or Christianity and with the Lithuanian Soviet history and legacy. Lines of conversation generally seem to center on

the site and on religion more broadly. Signs posted on a bulletin board near the entrance to the site likely influence this behavior, advertising the site's bid to be placed on the World Heritage List and displaying a text about the site and its history.

This text, in English and Lithuanian, is largely similar to the dominant narrative, though it commences with a legend relating the placing of crosses on the Hill with a miraculous recovery. It particularly delineates the site's Soviet-era history and articulates the narrative of resistance to Soviet rule: "Each new cross on the hill was a sign of silent resistance against [the] Soviet regime....The Hill of Crosses became the site where people expressed their rights and resistance [to] Soviet atheistic propaganda" (Anon n.d. e.). Perhaps the most interesting difference between the signs at the site and the dominant narrative is that the sign arguing for the Hill of Crosses to be placed on the World Heritage List argues that "[r]ecently the religious space of the site has become the object of international tourism and is threatened by its commercial, infrastructural and urbanisational development" (Bučas n.d.). This latter text was written by Dr. Jurgis Bučas, a professor in the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the Kaunas University of Technology in Kaunas, Lithuania.

The behavior of visitors and placement of these signs also suggest that the physical space of the Hill of Crosses influences people and their actions. The way that people move through the space and interact with the space and others in the space influences how they perceive the site. The young man from Norway, for example, sought to render space into his memory so that he could retrace his steps and find his cross if he ever returned. The bulletin board is placed in such a way that it must be passed and seen

as visitors enter the site; space and text interact, as do space and meaning. Moreover, the different areas of the Hill sometimes contain different kinds of crosses; small wooden ones, for example, are generally placed along the main pathway atop the Hill or heaped in piles nearby. Wedding parties, on the other hand, tend to place their crosses around the base of the Hill.

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Thus, space influences the way people perceive and act at the site. It is important to note that the way people, especially large groups (like tour groups) enter the site has recently changed drastically. As of August 1, 2008, a sign on the bulletin board directs all tour groups to the new parking lot across the road at the new information center. Approaching the Hill from this direction makes for a very different experience of the site; coming straight up on the main path on pavestones is very different from snaking around past numerous vendors and crosses to the same path through a dirt parking lot.

This information center, partially a response to the perceived threat of legions of visitors to the Hill, was designed in some ways to control the way that people visit and perceive the site. Its presence suggests a certain desire to consolidate authority and institutionalize the site, but may perhaps also be a bid to attract even more visitors, which can now be controlled to a greater degree, to the site. The construction project no doubt also brought economic benefits to the area, as will its continuing maintenance. This partnership with the European Union is indicative of the rather common Lithuanian tendency to seek integration with Western Europe.

This institutionalization will significantly impact the vendors who sell their wares in the small gravel and dirt parking lot that abuts the site. There appear to be shaded stalls that could be used by vendors adjacent to the new, paved parking lot across the road, but it was unclear to me how the logistical details might work or who would dictate how the stalls would be used or by whom. The vendors play a key role at the site, selling the majority of the crosses that are placed on the Hill. These crosses range from small and simple wooden ones to crucifixes that are several feet tall. Though some people bring their own crosses, the majority purchase them from the vendors onsite, including many Lithuanian wedding parties. There are different levels of planning on the part of visitors; some crosses have clearly been brought from afar, while others are purchased onsite. One woman commented to her companion, bemoaning the unoriginality of their cross that resulted from their lack of planning. That the vendors sell the very things of which the Hill of Crosses is composed hints at how integral they are to the site.

The vendors also sell any number of other items, many of which are far from mundane. Rosaries, prayer books, small figures of the crucified Christ to hang on crosses already at the Hill, and icons are among these items; many of the icons verge on the tacky, including those that are holographic or have small amber stones glued on. I discovered one crucifix that had a glow-in-the-dark Jesus. Booklets and postcards about the Hill of Crosses in several languages are also available. Souvenirs that might be sold anywhere else in Lithuania are also common, such as wooden carvings, amber jewelry, and souvenir spoons. Most vendors also sell toys for children, like wooden snakes and small figures of birds that chirp or cats that meow when they move. The noise from these



toys, and from the wind chimes that some vendors sell, carries to the far side of the Hill on windy but otherwise quiet days.

The vendors in the parking lot, then, are a crucial part of the experience of the Hill of Crosses; in the summer of 2008, one could not get to the Hill without passing their carts. Their presence suggests that in some ways, the Hill of Crosses is like any other “tourist” destination, prompting souvenir-buying. My South African informant Sam bought several gifts and souvenirs for himself and friends after climbing the Hill. Even this act of purchasing he imbued with his own meaning, telling me about the Dalai Lama’s ideas about material goods before making his purchases.

Another friend, on the other hand, seemed somewhat dismayed – though quite amused – at some of the items for sale. He encouraged a mutual friend to buy a switchblade before commenting on the inappropriateness of what was available. Our friend, visiting the site on her father’s advice shortly before leaving the country, instead purchased other souvenirs for people back home: a holographic icon of Jesus, some wooden carved wall-hangings, amber jewelry. Her response to the vendors, and to the site itself, was pretty matter-of-fact. When I asked what she thought of the Hill, she nodded: “That was for, yeah, I’ve been here”. People’s responses to the vendors and their wares are almost as varied as people’s responses to the site itself, but generally people react to both with preconceived notions of what is and is not appropriate at the site. The idea, for example, that selling switchblades and bullet casings next to a pilgrimage site is inappropriate is a response to the expectation of a certain degree of reverence for the site. In other words, many people expect their whole experience at the

Hill of Crosses to be within what they perceive to be the established range of meanings at the site.

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The vendors and the new information center suggest a certain degree of commodification of the site, in the sense that there is profit to be had from people who visit the Hill of Crosses. There is a certain economic value of the site, in the form of money for the vendors (who sell, among other things, the very objects of which the Hill is comprised), construction and maintenance money from the information center for the local economy, and the benefits of including the site on the World Heritage List. The dominant narrative itself also plays a role in the marketing of the site; not only does it set bounds for meaning-making, it seeks to attract visitors to the Hill. It particularly becomes a marketing tool when regurgitated by tour companies in their advertisements; huge numbers of organized tours stop at the site, at times filling the parking lot to overflowing with busses. Not unlike famous cathedrals, the Hill of Crosses is in many ways a tourist destination, but is somewhat set apart from other such attractions by its religious narrative and symbolism.

In concluding, then, we can say that meaning-making at the Hill of Crosses is constrained by the dominant narrative, the information people get from other sources such as the bulletin board and other people, their expectations of the site, the actions of visitors to the site, and peoples' backgrounds. There is a wide range of meanings, from the very devout to the explicitly non-devout; these meanings do not always fall within the

limits of the dominant narrative, but are almost always somewhat related to religion, broadly construed. Finally, the Hill of Crosses is, in addition to being a site of Catholic pilgrimage, a tourist destination, as evidenced by the presence of tour groups, advertising, photographing, and souvenir purchasing.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, we can conclude the following about how religious and national identities and forces interact and overlap in recent Lithuanian history. To begin with, it is difficult to overstate the extent to which Catholicism is connected with Lithuanian national identity. Catholicism has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the imagination and construction of the Lithuanian nation, and there is a multivalent and multifaceted hybridity between religion and nation throughout Lithuanian history. The symbiosis between the two is largely rooted in the Church, arguably Lithuania's oldest national institution. This symbiosis has manifested in several ways over the course of history, including the use of religious symbols in nationalist dissent.

In the Soviet era, these deep connections between religion and nation revealed themselves in – and contributed to – the amalgamation of dissent, which is evident in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, Lithuania's main dissident publication. The obverse of this amalgamation, Soviet repression, fostered connections between religious, nationalist, civil rights, and other forms of dissent. The attempts to impose Soviet ideology on all aspects of life – religious, political, national, and other institutions and ideologies – had the unintended consequence of strengthening dissent and encouraging collaboration among dissidents. Soviet and anti-Soviet processes were mutually reinforcing, and the connection between religion and nation was asserted repeatedly in this struggle. The ties between Catholicism and Lithuanian nationalism

carried over from the Soviet era into the period of early independence, and continue to influence constructions of the Lithuanian nation.

In discourse, nationalist sentiment and political ideas are often expressed in a religious idiom; this shared idiom is clearly present in many of the articles published in the *Chronicle* and is particularly evident at the Hill of Crosses. The shared idiom also includes the sharing and interchangeability of symbols like the cross and the Lithuanian flag. The symbiosis and connections between religion and nation in Lithuania are manifest in a multitude of ways at the Hill of Crosses, which is narrated as a locus for simultaneously religious and politico-national dissent and resistance against occupation by the crusaders, Orthodox Tsarist Russia, and finally the atheist Soviet regime. Thus, the site's import comes, according to the dominant narrative, from its simultaneously religious and national significance. The Hill of Crosses is also rendered discursively and performatively meaningful within a complex web of connections that both adhere to and challenge the dominant narrative; one of the key strands in this web is the connection between religion and nation, Catholicism and Lithuania.

The physicality and tangibility of the Hill of Crosses also make it particularly salient, and have contributed to its significance as a locus of attack for Soviet authorities and of resistance for Lithuanians. Soviet persecution of the site, and of religion more generally, seems to have contributed to rather than diminished its significance for Lithuanians. Pelkmans' suggestions about how the Soviet legacy influences the present help illuminate the processes by which narratives about the Hill of Crosses incorporate selected elements of Lithuania's Soviet history. In particular, it is clear that Soviet

actions against the site enhanced its significance, both for actors in the Soviet era who chose to defy Soviet edicts, and for those who seek to frame the Hill of Crosses in relation to this past. In other words, narration of the site's Soviet history is a significant component of how meaning-making is framed at the Hill of Crosses as of 2008.

For visitors to the site, both Lithuanian and non, it seems that the post-Soviet era has opened the way for more plurality in meaning-making. There is some evidence, of course, of a certain variety of meaning-making at the Hill of Crosses in the Soviet era as well; Bourdeaux notes that, as of 1979, Orthodox crosses also appeared at the site (1979: 294), suggesting that it was not of exclusively Catholic (i.e. Lithuanian) significance. The post-Soviet environment, however, is less restrictive in terms of religious freedoms and freedom of expression, and the Hill of Crosses in the post-Soviet era seems to encompass a wider range of meanings than it did in the period preceeding independence. Moreover, there seems to have been a gradual and incomplete loosening of the bonds between religion and nation as a more plural environment developed after the Soviet era, though religion and nation remain inextricably linked for most Lithuanians. Still, for visitors then and particularly now, the multifaceted, multivalent meaning-making that takes place at the Hill of Crosses is constrained by the dominant narrative of the site, which to some extent sets up a range of possible meanings; the behavior of other visitors; other narratives and sources of information about the site (given that the dominant narrative is neither static, monolithic, nor completely authoritative); and people's own experiences and beliefs.

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The ephemeral nature of the crosses and the growing number of visitors to the Hill of Crosses mean that the site itself is constantly (re)constructed and (re)produced. Crosses made of nearly every conceivable medium are planted and exposed to Lithuania's scorching sun, pouring rain, and harsh blizzards. Wooden crosses turn grey within a few months, and the smaller of these often get heaped into a pile with thousands of others, their carefully written inscriptions faded and subsumed into the anonymity of the masses. So too are the individual narratives of each visitor subsumed, to some extent, into the dominant narrative, which changes over time with each addition. And yet, there are things that cannot be accommodated, crosses and behaviors that remain inassimilable, the occasional small toy hung by a child on the arm of a cross. These behaviors remain, however, expressed in an idiom, and through a symbolism, that is largely dictated by the parameters set by the amalgamation of the dominant narrative and the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the site.

The relationship between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity is likewise continually renegotiated. Though played out on a very local scale, this renegotiation is also situated within the broader context of Lithuania's geopolitical situation, and is duly influenced by the global hierarchy of value and the general Lithuanian desire to (re)integrate with Western Europe for political, economic, and other reasons. At stake in the renegotiation, which takes place at every level from the global to the local, is among other things space for a more plural religious narrative and environment (making room for Evangelicalism, e.g., which is still considered beyond the pale by many Lithuanians). Evangelical Christianity, largely imported to Lithuania from Western Europe and North

America, is an excellent example of how this contestation is framed by global, national, and local constraints: it comes to Lithuania via new avenues of global influence, is a challenge to Lithuania's "traditional" Catholicism, and effects how individuals interact with local actors including employers and family members. Evangelicalism is also profoundly personal for many of its Lithuanian adherents. Thus, the renegotiation of the relationship between religion and Lithuanian national identity is situated within a complex web of contexts, from the very personal to the global.

Much is at stake at the Hill of Crosses, and in the broader Lithuanian context: economic success, aid and tourist money from Western Europe and elsewhere, and, perhaps most importantly, the ability of any given individual to make their voice heard. It was this last point that seems to have concerned most of the site's Soviet-era visitors as they fought for their right to express ideas that were suppressed by the Soviet authorities, be they religious, nationalistic, or other. Each individual narrative or performance at the Hill of Crosses interacts with the web of meanings already established by the dominant narrative and previous visitors, and adds to, sometimes even challenges, the parameters of meaning-making.

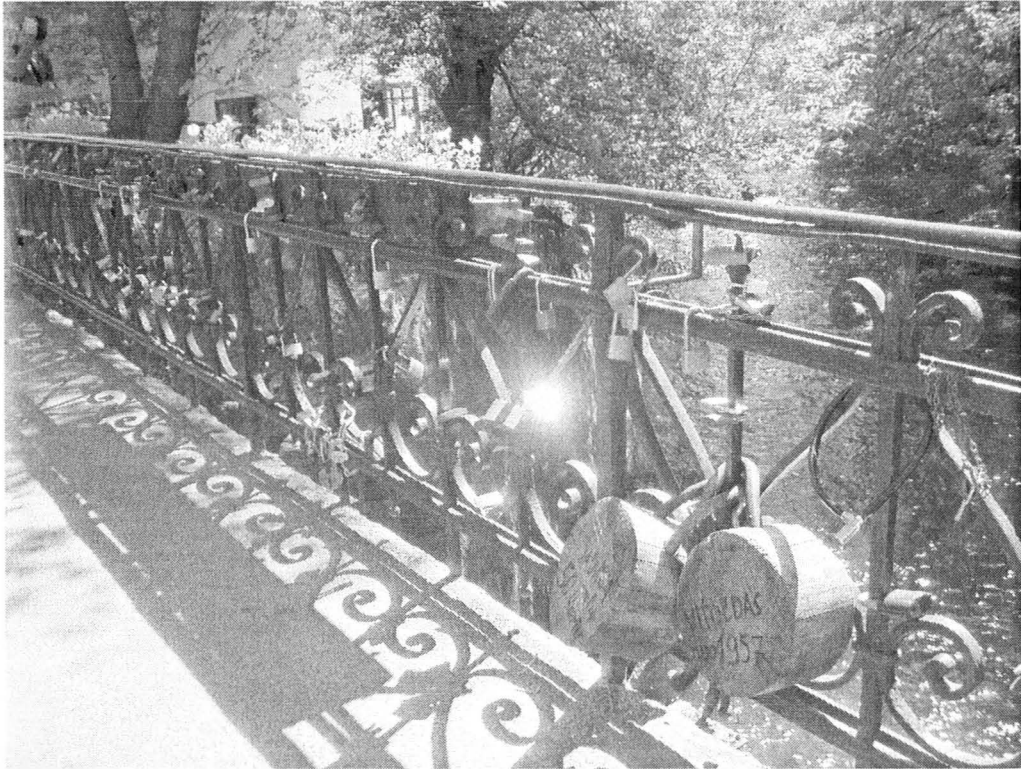
The commodification (and appropriation) of history and the "politics of knowledge production" (Lampland 2000: 217) are also at stake. There seems to be an attempt to balance preservation of the site with drawing an increasing number of tourists (and, through them, international recognition and money). The dominant narrative and certain other aspects of the site, including its commodification, also seek to regulate the image of the site and of Lithuania that visitors take home with them, though this control



is imperfect at best. Though parameters for meaning-making can be controlled, individual responses to these parameters cannot. Thus, the dominant narrative, which elides individual nuances, reveals only a fraction of what the site means for its visitors.

A more complete picture of the Hill of Crosses, and of the Lithuanian post-Soviet transition, only emerges from analysis of all levels of discourse – global, national, local, and individual. When a Lithuanian woman places a cross at the Hill asking God to heal her, she is not engaging in an act that is isolated or only personally meaningful. At an individual level, her actions are most likely motivated by her hope that God will grant her a miracle. Certainly, this is how other visitors to the site are likely to perceive her actions, which in turn influences their experiences of the site. Because of the dominant narrative and the historical connections between Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity, her actions may be imbued with national as well as religious significance (just as the dominant narrative imbues the actions of Soviet-era visitors with simultaneously religious and nationalist import). Finally, as international visitors take their experiences of the Hill of Crosses home, her individual act becomes part of a complex web of global knowledge. It is in examining this constant renegotiation, reconstruction, and reproduction, both within and between different levels of knowledge production and meaning-making, that an understanding emerges of how Catholicism and Lithuanian national identity relate to one another in changing contexts, and how this relationship is manifest at the Hill of Crosses.

## APPENDIX ONE



Wedding locks on the Užupis bridge, Vilnius, Lithuania. August 2008.

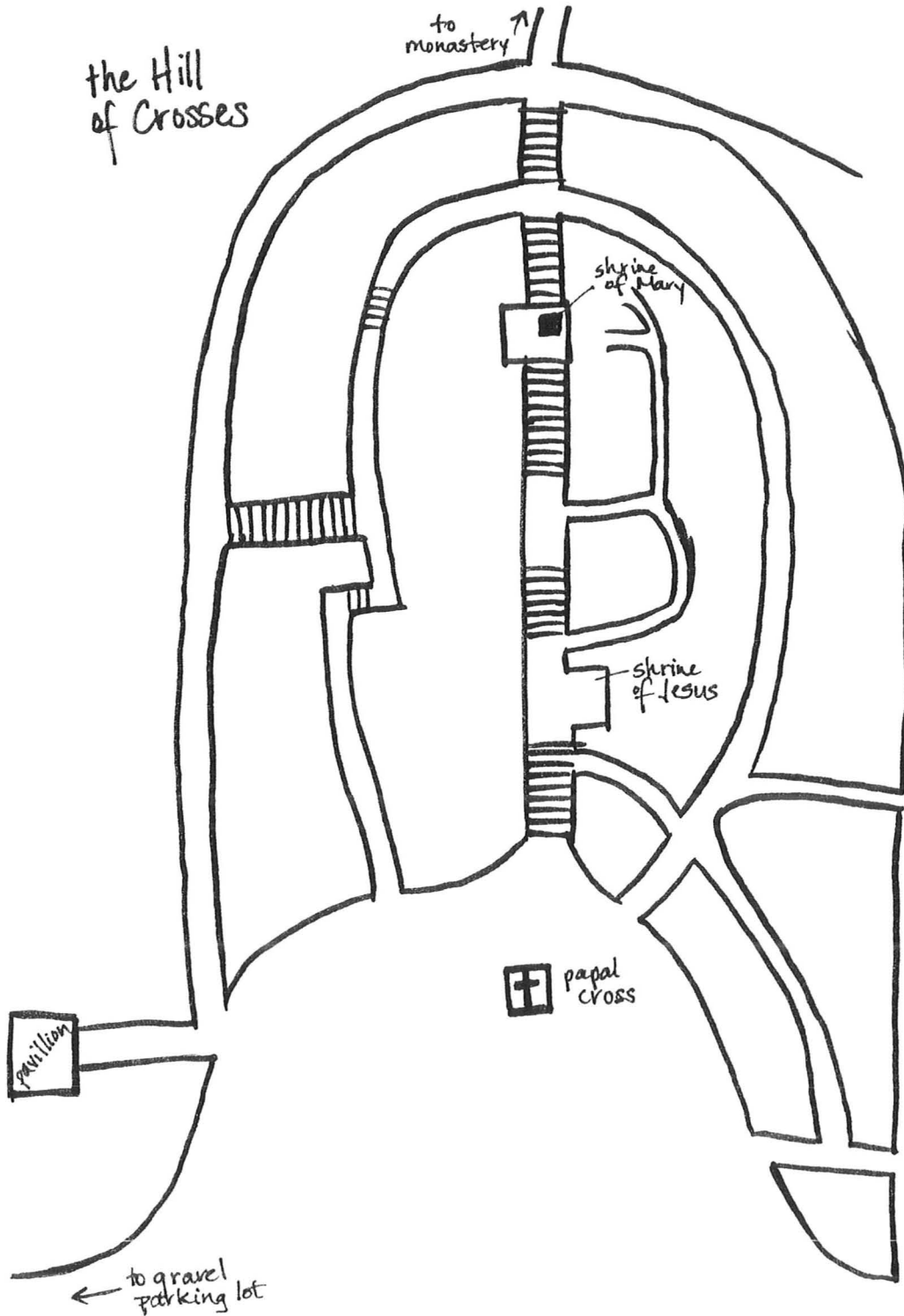


Peace, happiness, children, love, health

To understand one another, love, harmony,  
peace, luck, success and all that is best

Wedding inscriptions on crosses at the Hill of Crosses, Lithuania. July 2008.

APPENDIX TWO



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n.d. b. Kryžių Kalnas. G. Čeiltukos. I.I. Brochure sold at Šiauliai Tourism Information Centre, July 2008.

n.d. c. Šiauliuose – su dviračiu. Brochure handed out at Šiauliai Tourism Information Centre, July 2008.

n.d. d. Pilgrimų Kelias (Pilgrimage). Brochure handed out at Šiauliai Tourism Information Centre, July 2008.

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