In her essay on the Salazar v. Buono case, published on the Immanent Frame, Winni Sullivan pondered why crosses present such a difficulty for the modern secular nation-state, and questioned the degree to which religious myths and symbols have been supplanted by those of nationalism.\(^1\) Has secularization failed, she asked? Sullivan posited that religious symbols’ ability to connect the universal and the particular is at the root of their success. Yet the ambiguity of the Mojave cross and the commentaries made by various judges evaluating the case point to the layered religious and secular meanings of the symbol at that site and in U.S. society more generally. Perhaps a more expansive definition of civil religion can trace how the same symbol moves across “religious” and “secular” contexts, depending on the site, event or time in which it is deployed. In Poland, for example, the cross “is” and “is not” religious, although it is always –or almost always–sacred. This ambiguity, the ability to pivot in different directions, may help account for the cross’s social force.

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Like the United States, Poland is a religious society, with 96 percent of the adult population declaring belief in God, and 70 percent attending religious services at least once a month. Unlike the United States, Poland is ethnically and denominationally homogenous—it is 96 percent ethnically Polish and 95 percent Catholic. This lack of religious pluralism has not diminished debate about the place of religion in the public sphere, an issue that has been hotly debated since the fall of communism and the construction of a legitimate national state. Should Poland be “united under the sign of the cross,” as many on the Right have argued, or should the state embrace confessional neutrality? Should there be an invocatio Dei in the new Constitution? Should crosses be present in classrooms, state institutions, or other broadly conceived “public spaces”?

These questions became especially salient in the debates surrounding the controversial erection of hundreds of crosses just outside Auschwitz in 1998-99. Ultra-nationalist Poles chose the cross to mark Auschwitz as the place of Polish martyrdom—as opposed to the place of the Jewish Shoah—and as a strategy to defend an explicitly Catholic vision of Polishness that had slowly but surely been eroding since 1989. The action garnered significant support from the four corners of Poland and beyond, but it ultimately backfired since most Poles no longer saw the cross as a sign of freedom and dissent from an atheist party-state and its totalitarian regime. For Liberal intellectuals from the Left and Center, the cross now stood for the rejection of the principles of the Rechtsstaat, where particular allegiances are relegated to the private sphere. For liberal Catholics, the cross had become a sign of intolerance toward “Others,” used as a provocation contrary to the Christian meaning of the symbol. For many members of the clergy and Episcopate the crosses at Auschwitz were a shameful expression of Polish nationalism and anti-Semitism.
It took several weeks for the Catholic Church’s hierarchy to try to contain the situation—at first it stood by the sidelines, arguing it did not have the monopoly over the symbol of the cross, which belongs to the entire community of Christians, but once the schismatic Brotherhood of St. Pius X took over the site and started celebrating masses claiming to represent True Catholicism and to defend the true face of Polishness, the Episcopate finally intervened, on two fronts: 1. it issued a pastoral letter forbidding Catholics to erect more crosses at Auschwitz, asking those who had brought one to retrieve it, and secondly it attempted to restrict the semantic orbit of the cross by emphatically promoting a “correct theology of the cross” in various venues, in the hope to regain discursive and ritual control of the symbol. Although some Catholics did continue to bring crosses at the site throughout the Fall and Winter despite these explicit demands, the war of the crosses was basically ended once the Church took a firm stance.

That very summer, however, the Łódź court rendered a judgment on a related civil case filed a year before. A self-proclaimed atheist had sued the city for displaying a cross at city hall, arguing that it infringed on his private wellbeing. The suit was grounded on Article 25 of Law 2 of the 1997 Constitution of the Polish Republic, which concerns the religious and philosophical neutrality of public organs. Yet the lawsuit was rejected because the court ruled that the cross, as a traditional symbol in Polish culture, had been objectified to the extent that it did not constitute a threat to any individual (Rzeczpospolita, June 30, 1998). The Court of Appeals maintained the regional court’s decision, arguing that in the Polish patriotic tradition, the cross expressed a specific set of moral and historical values:

Personal wellbeing cannot be understood (…) without reference to the tradition, culture and historical experiences of the collectivity in which physical persons live and function. In addition to its religious meaning (…), the symbol of the cross has been inscribed in the experiences and the social consciousness of the Polish Nation—as a symbol of death,
pain, sacrifice, and as a way of honoring all those who fought for freedom and independence in the struggle for national liberation during the Partitions and during the war against invaders. The symbol of the cross has for centuries designated the graves of ancestors and the places of national memory. In non-religious collective behavior, (the) meaning of the cross as an expression of respect for, and unity with, the liberators of the Fatherland even has precedence (my emphasis) because other universal means to express respect have not been developed. (…) (Orzecznictwo sądów polskich, 1999:488).

Moreover, according to the Court, the cross was expressly related to secular, state institutions:

In addition to its religious meaning, the symbol of the cross in Polish society expresses moral order, on which the idea of the state and society is based. Throughout history (…) the cross has been, in the Polish tradition, linked with the legislative and judiciary powers. This fact does not in itself prevent dialogue among people representing different worldviews (Ibid.:488).

The symbol’s religious semantics were overshadowed, in both courts’ decisions, by its secular, “merely” cultural and civic connotations. Its secularity made it no less “sacred.”

Does this case suggest a diminution of the public centrality of religion, with the cross deemed tolerable because it had been sufficiently secularized—and thus not evocative of religious sentiments? Conversely, did it present a hypertrophy of religion, with the cross so omnivorous and all-encompassing as to devour the Rechtsstaat entirely? Perhaps the cross’s religious meaning--however occluded as “merely cultural”--is the champion left standing not only at Auschwitz, but over the nation as a whole?

12 years later, in the summer of 2010, Warsaw became the site of yet another war of the cross, when self-proclaimed Defenders of the Cross prevented the relocation a wooden cross standing in front of the presidential palace. The cross, erected at the site in the days following the tragic
death of President Kaczynski, killed in a tragic plane crash in April, was supposed to be moved from the presidential palace square, via a religious procession, to a nearby church. But “Defenders of the Cross” aggressively prevented the church-led ceremonial relocation, which they understood as the profanation of the symbol and of the nation. For several weeks the site of this new “war of the cross” became a playground for proponents of the cross, but also the stage for protest against the religio-nationalist and anti-semitic Poland that the cross has come to signify since the fall of communism—a signification acquired, partly, through previous controversies such as the war of the crosses at Auschwitz.

In addition to “serious” endeavors like the signing of petitions against the presence of the cross at that specific site and for a stricter separation of the religious and political spheres in Poland, parody and mockery of the Defenders of the Cross and their crusade against the secular state have been quite effective. “They wanted a circus? We’ll give them a circus!”—announced a Facebook group coordinating a counter-protest. Within hours, more than 7,000 Facebook users confirmed their participation in the “happening”; Radio Maryja, a right-wing, conservative radio-station that many consider a sectarian movement, countered the initiative by appealing to its listeners, especially its male listeners, to counter-demonstrate against the counter-demonstrators… The streets of the city were flooded with people—some who prayed and protested, others who picnicked and partied or just happily “peeped.”

It took again several weeks for the authorities to finally relocate the cross. Barricades had to be installed to prevent Defenders of the Cross to monopolize the site and invite chaotic responses. In the end, once order was restored, several weeks after the planned relocation, the cross finally found its permanent home in a local church nearby. Its meaning, however, has been altered. Over the last two decades and controversial actions like the two wars of the crosses, the
The cross is no longer a symbol of unity between Polishness and Catholicism but instead a symbol of the very tensions, in Polish society, about the meaning and place of Catholicism in Poland. The cross is left standing as a symbol of conflict.

So what broader lessons can we learn from the Polish case and these two specific?

Winni Sullivan asked if the failure of national symbols to replace religious ones suggests the failure of civil religion and secularization. “Civil religion,” following the Durkheimian tradition, refers to the social sacralization of a given group’s symbols. In the modern era, according to this view, civic, or state symbols like the flag acquire religious significance and are worshiped by citizens as totems. The Polish case points to a different and somewhat overlooked process. Because of Poland’s peculiar political history, it was not political ideals, institutions and symbols that were sacralized and became the object of religious-like devotion (following the paradigmatic French revolutionary model), but religious symbols that were first secularized, and then resacralized as national. The cross in Poland is therefore what I call (Zubrzycki 2006) a sacred secular symbol. It is sacred not only because of its Christian semantics (or even in spite of them), but because since the 19th century it has traditionally represented Poland. In the place of religion yielding to nationalism or nationalism becoming a religion, here religion becomes nationalism.\(^2\)

In cases where national identity is experienced and expressed through religious channels, the estimation of religious decline or ascent in relation to nationalism is a quixotic mission. When the religious is secularized and then resacralized in national form, the relationship between national symbols and religious symbols is particularly difficult to tease apart, as much for social

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scientists as for judges. This ambiguity, this ability to pivot in different directions, may be precisely the cross’s (and other analogous symbols) source of “civil religious” power.

The national sacralization of religious symbols, however, is meaningful and garners consensual support only in specific contexts. It has been fiercely contested even in overwhelmingly Catholic Poland since the fall of communism and the building of an independent state. Such symbols could certainly be “secularized” again. “Secularization” in the sense I am using the term here would mean, however, returning to a more distinctly (or theologically orthodox) religious interpretation of Catholicism in Poland. The de-politicization of religion has indeed been the objective of many Catholic groups in the last two decades. This agenda would restore the “truly” sacred status of what has become, in their view, merely a national religion. After Catholicism’s long public career, many Polish Catholics now lobby for its privatization.