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New Religious Movements and Their Perception as Conflict Religious Groups

The Case of the Czech Republic

At first sight, both the role and the position of religion in the Czech Republic may appear to confirm the secularization thesis. The results of sociological surveys and census statistics show a clear decline in religious faith and practice. According to last national census of 2001 more than 59 per cent of Czech people declared themselves to be 'non-believers', while only 32 per cent of Czechs declared themselves to be 'believers'.¹ And if we look at the statistics that concern the intensity of religious life, we can see a more 'secularized picture' of Czech society. For example, only 5 per cent of the Czech population attends religious services regularly, and only 20 per cent of population is willing to contribute 1,50 euro a month to a religious group or church.² But do these data present a true picture of secularization

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- 1 There were more than six million (59 % of population) people who declared themselves to be 'non-believers' according to the census statistics of 2001, compared with only 39,8 per cent in 1991. This means that in ten years, the group of 'non-believers' has increased by more than 15 per cent. This fact confirms a trend that is possible to observe since 1918, when the independent Czech (or Czechoslovak) state was established. The shifting of rate of religious affiliation, which appeared at the beginning of the 1990s, was probably caused by social, political and cultural changes started by the Velvet Revolution in 1989. It was a result of changes provoked by the need to gain a new identity. An important component of this new identity was, for a part of society, religion and affiliation to some religious tradition as well. This explains why so many people declared themselves to be affiliated to some religious group or tradition – the relationship with the religious group or religious tradition was an important confirmation of a newly gained identity. But it was also an expression of freedom, because under the Communist regime, religion and its manifestations were understood as a sign of ideological and political hostility.
 - 2 Also of interest are indicators relating to doctrine. Although more than 98 per cent of believers (31 % of the population) declare that they are Christians, only 23 per cent of them believe in God, 25 per cent of believers accept the existence of heaven, but 44 per cent of the population believe in life after death.

in Czech society? What exactly is the attitude of Czech society towards religion? I would like to answer these and other questions in my article.

The Character of Czech Secularization

The secularization of Czech society is said to be a consequence of forty years of Communist rule. This thesis, which is very popular, is rather inaccurate and is essentially mistaken.

The causes of this situation are much deeper and go back to the nineteenth century when the modern Czech nation was established. In this period, referred to the National Renaissance (*Národní obrození*), the 'Free Thinkers' movement emerged in Bohemia and, given a choice between Catholicism and Protestantism, its followers chose non-belief instead of either, doubtless because of their experiences of the Catholic Hapsburg monarchy (Greely 2003: 131).

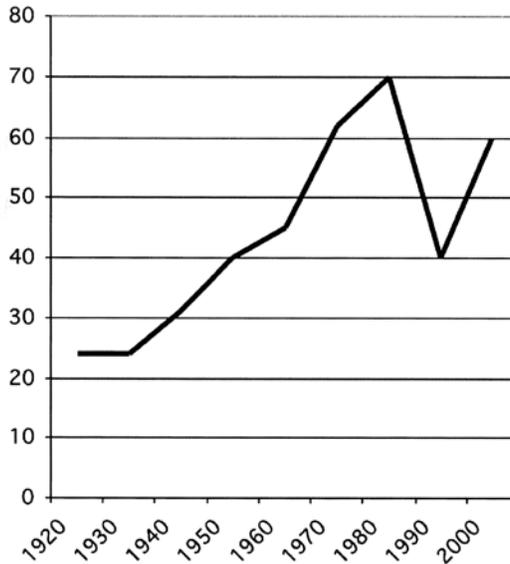
The emergence of an independent Czech (Czechoslovak) state strengthened these attitudes. Catholicism was viewed as an embodiment of the 'old regime', and for this reason was regarded as problematic and hostile. During this period many left the Catholic Church and joined the newly established 'national' Czechoslovak Hussite Church³ or became 'non-believers'.

We can assume that this was the true beginning of the contemporary situation. The Communist regime only intensified this tendency. The ground had already been prepared for atheistic propaganda in schools and in the media, and it is, therefore, an over-simplification to argue that the high level of secularization in contemporary Czech society is due mainly to Communist repression (Štampach 1999: 57).

However, it is necessary to realize that secularism or anti-religious attitudes in Czech society were not constitutive elements of modern Czech

3 The Hussite (now the Czechoslovak Hussite) Church arose from modernists within the Catholic Church. The founders of the Hussite Church wanted to bring together Catholicism (especially some modernist ideas) and nationalism. In 1920 a group of Catholic priests led by Karel Fárský established the new Church, which was viewed as truly national and progressive. This Church tried to combine different spiritual traditions from Czech history, primarily Catholic and Hussite, with the idea of a modern nation. The Hussite Church was very popular during the so-called First Republic (1918–38), reaching its zenith shortly after World War II when it had almost one million members.

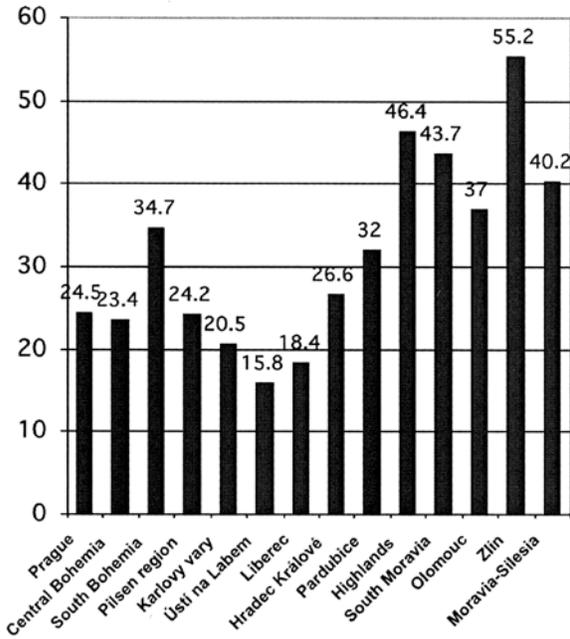
Figure no. 1: No Religious Affiliation in the Czech Republic (in %)



national and political identity. On the contrary, one of the most important conflicts of interests of the modern Czech nation was based on of the so-called 'disagreement about the meaning of Czech history'. This meaning was perceived as having a clear religious connotation by the main sides involved. One side of this conflict emphasized Roman Catholic christianization of the Czech lands and their integration into Western Europe. The other side instead stressed the reform movement connected with Jan Hus, which is viewed as fundamental to modern Czech national and political identity. Yet the first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who is considered to be the main ideologist of modern Czech statehood, understood citizenship in the context of religion, primarily in the context of Christian morality.⁴ We can say briefly that Czech secularism is not ideo-

4 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was the first president of the independent Czechoslovak Republic. Originally he was a professor of philosophy and sociology at Charles University. He engaged in the analysis of modern society, its transformation and the impact of this transformation on humanity. He is the author of many important books (e.g., *Suicide* [1904]; *Russia and Europe* [1921]; *Questions of Humanity* [1901]). The influence of Masaryk's ideas is still very strong in Czech society, for example, Václav Havel considers himself to be Masaryk's disciple.

Figure no. 2: Rate of Believers in regions of the Czech Republic (in %)



logical in its essence. Its origin is, rather, institutional, and it arose from the mistrust felt towards religious institutions which were very often connected to a 'political opponent', for example, the Hapsburg monarchy or an oppressive social order.

This character of Czech secularization offers a clear explanation for why a general separation between the state and churches did not take place in Czech society. At this point, Czech society took over an older paradigm as well. According to this paradigm, it is very useful in order to gain the state to create mechanisms for effective control over religious life. We can say that Czech society has inherited more from Josephinian absolutism than from the French or the English Enlightenment in this respect. This absolutism can be seen in the context of religious legislation, as we will see later.

Another important attribute of Czech secularism is the large differences in religious affiliation in various regions of the Czech Republic. Relatively high rates of believers live in Moravia (the South Moravia, Zlín, and Olomouc regions) and in less industrial regions (the South Bohemia region, the Highlands, and the Pardubice region). The ratio of identification with a region and its tradition, regardless of the level of industrialization, is another

very important factor which influences the number of believers. The most atheistic regions are those of former Sudetenland (Sudety) – the Liberec region in Northern Bohemia, the Ústí nad Labem region in Northwestern Bohemia and the Karlovy Vary region in Western Bohemia. Before World War II, these were German regions with a specific culture and tradition. But the native German inhabitants were transferred to Germany⁵ after World War II and people from different parts of Czechoslovakia settled in Sudetenland. The new inhabitants did not identify with new environment. They were very often people from lower social strata in search of a new way of life and new opportunities. They were at the same time people with left-wing political opinions. The presence of Communist ideology (including aggressive atheism) was relatively strong among these people.⁶ It is significant that many new religious movements are particularly active in these parts of the Czech Republic, and also, that individual religiosity is rather widespread here.

We can also mention other attributes such as the discrepancy between young and old people,⁷ or the impact of education, but these are not important for our purposes.

5 Before World War II more than three million Germans lived in Czechoslovakia.

6 These regions were mostly stigmatized by social, political and economical changes after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. They have the highest rate of unemployment, a high ratio of social frustration, a high frequency of social-pathological phenomena, and also there is a high-level of tension between ethnic and national groups in these regions. These circumstances simply intensified radical attitudes of people towards religion, and especially towards traditional religious institutions (churches).

7 Among young people (10–30 years) only about 20 per cent of believers identify themselves with traditional (Christian) churches. The large gap between the youngest age groups and people who are older than 60 is explained by the influence of Communist regime and also by the situation in the 1990s. We can also say that the younger generation is more sceptical towards traditional religious institutions such as the established churches. And conversely, young people are more open to other religious and spiritual traditions without any connection with religious institutions. It is possible to say that typically the religious life of the younger generation of Czechs is unambiguously a non-institutional and individual spirituality, which combines different sorts of religious traditions and trends.

Religion as a Source of Conflict: the Traditional Czech Stereotype

Mistrust felt towards religious institutions, such as churches or religious movements, is typical in Czech society.

Nearly 60 per cent of Czechs have no confidence in the churches, and 68 per cent believe that the churches should not interfere in government (see Greely 2003: 55–7). Churches are often perceived as problematic organizations with economic and political interests that do not correspond with the message of love, compassion and humility. There is also a large group of people who apply this 'picture' of the churches to religion in a general sense. This negative 'picture' of churches is, for these people, confirmation of their conception of religion as inhumane and false.

This attitude, although strengthened by forty years of Communism as the dominant ideology, has deeper roots like Czech secularization. Its beginning lies in the Czech Reformation of the fifteenth century, which stressed the improvement of the Catholic Church as an institution more than the subsequent Reformation of Luther and Calvin. In a simplified form, this opinion was reflected in the idea of the institution of the Church being the cause of evil. The subsequent close relation between the Hapsburg monarchy and the Catholic Church reinforced this opinion. Religious oppression connected with political and national oppression is one of the most widespread interpretations of Czech history.

This mistrust involved the Catholic Church and it originated amongst the intellectual elites who shaped the new identity of the modern Czech nation in the nineteenth century. This unflattering image of the Catholic Church was extended to other religious groups and denominations by Communist propaganda. Religion is identified in contemporary Czech society with a repressive power institution or as a pragmatic tool used for the enforcement of political, economic and cultural influence.

This deep-rooted idea of religion as a power institution seeking to enforce its influence and as a cause of many conflicts, emerged in the middle of the 1990s again. In this period the so-called restitution controversy reached its culmination. The majority of the Czech population did not view the restitution of property to religious groups as a form of redress for Communist injustice. It was considered rather as confirmation of the political and conflictual character of religious groups.

The genesis of this situation is similar to the development of *laïcité* in France where religious belief is regarded as intrinsically incompatible with reason and individual autonomy. French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger remarks that this attitude of *laïcité active* is different from Anglo-American

secular humanism. For example, it is regarded as politically correct in France to pay at least lip service to *laïcité*, even if one does not agree with it entirely. In general elections in France, almost all candidates tend to reaffirm their commitment to *laïcité*, and it would be exceptional to hear them making any kind of religious statements or appeals to God or Christianity, which are typical of many politicians in the United States. This attitude has a philosophical justification in the distinction made between 'freedom of belief' and 'freedom of religion'. Freedom of belief is construed as the freedom to reach autonomous individual conclusions about religion (or even atheism) devoid of any external constraints. Freedom of religion (religious liberty) is collective liberty for churches and movements. But according to the secretary of the French governmental Mission to Fight Cults, Denis Barthélemy, religious liberty in France may be limited for the sake of 'freedom of belief'. It means that France will protect its citizens against any constraints on the formation of their individual belief. (Introigne 2004: 212.) From this point of view, *laïcité* is not only part of the French national ethos, but it also became embodied in the French legal system.

The negative campaign focusing on new religious movements that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s shared this negative view of religious groups. New religious movements were portrayed in this campaign from the perspective of anti-cult movements as they were in other European countries (Lužný 1996: 17–19). The Society for the Study of Sects and New Religious Movements, which was established in 1991, is the most important exponent of the Czech anti-cult movement. Prominent representatives of this society are chiefly members of traditional Christian denominations (the Catholic Church, the Czech Brethren, etc.). This fact shaped reservations about new religious movements that were formed by a mixture of theological and psychological 'arguments'. A good example of this attitude is the typology of new religious movements advanced by Prokop Remeš who is one of the main representatives of the Society for the Study of Sects and New Religious Movements.

According to Remeš (1992: 15), it is possible to divide new religious movements into four main groups:

- (1) Sects arising from occultism and magic;
- (2) Sects arising from Eastern religious systems;
- (3) Sects arising from psychotherapeutic conceptions;
- (4) Sects arising from Christianity.

Remeš divides the last group into the following three sub-groups:

- (a) Sects having a Christian background (Mormons, the Unification Church);
- (b) Sects which are non-Christian but biblical (Jehovah's Witnesses);
- (c) Sects which are Christian (Maranatha, Charismatic and Pentecostal groups).

It is immediately apparent that this classification is not objective. It points to the heterodoxy of individual groups and thus claims that they are unacceptable. The selection of main perspectives and categories is very emotional, theologically tinged and poorly reasoned. Besides theological arguments, attacks based on exaggerating the psychological, malign and socially deviant behaviour of new religious movements are also very widespread. This image of new religious groups known from the context of other anti-cult movements, has a different impact in the Czech milieu. It supports the image of religious groups as institutions of conflict and sinister aims. As we have seen, this image is a consequence of Czech anti-clericalism.

This image of new religious movements is also supported by some books, which focus on the phenomenon of new religious groups. Some of these books fuse new religious movements with such social phenomena as skinheads or anarchist movements. A very good example of this is the book called *Had leze z vóry* (The Snake Creeps from a Hole, 1995) which was positively welcomed by representatives of the Ministry of the Interior and of the Ministry of Education. Another example of ideological polemic defined by the fusion of new religious movements with other religious phenomena is the book *Přicházejí* (They are Coming, 1994), which is used by some teachers in Czech high schools. Its author depicts some new religious movements (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Moonies, Scientology) as very dangerous groups which cause many serious social conflicts. It is ironic that Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are financially supported by the state because these groups are so called 'Churches accredited by the State'.

The author, in an effort to show new religious movements as dangerous groups bringing conflict into the peaceful environment of Czech society, goes as far as to include Islam among dangerous new religions. Needless to add, such an unusual notion acquired a new meaning after the events of the 11th September 2001.

However, the activity of such anti-cult movements is not limited only to theological or psychological circles. It has influential supporters among journalists, members of the police and politicians. Anti-cult activists can shape public opinion and lobby for restrictive laws. The 2002 law on Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations (No. 3/2002) is a good example.

Religions, Laws and State in the Czech Society

The main features of this law follow older laws and acts, many of them originating at end of the eighteenth century when the first laws concerning religious freedom were passed. The main intention of these laws was to strengthen the role of the state in the activities of churches and religious groups. Religious tolerance was often only illusory because the laws favoured traditional churches, frequently discriminating against alternative and new religious groups. For example, according to the law of 1991 (No. 308/1991), a religious group was recognized by state only if it had at least 10,000 members or had been recognized earlier by the Communist regime. So-called registration was refused to the Unification Church, because the registration petition was signed only by 9,967 people (see Lužný 2004: 95–103).

The new law (No. 3/2002) is more accommodating to new religious movements but it still includes the requirement that they ought to avoid 'the activities of dangerous sects'. The problem is that the Czech legal system does not recognize the term 'sect'. It is clear that this requirement was inserted in the law due to pressure from the media and thanks to the lobbying of anti-cult movements. These movements systematically call attention to the 'pseudo-religious ideology', 'offensive propagation' and 'sectarian fanaticism' of new religious movements.

This legislative situation may be seen as an example of 'Type I' documents on cults according to James Richardson and Massimo Introvigne (Richardson and Introvigne 2001). 'Type I' documents adopt a four-stage interpretative model, described as follows:

(1) Cults or sects are not religions; (2) Since religion is usually defined as an exercise of free will, it is argued that non-religion (cult or sect) can be joined only under some sort of coercion, which is quite often couched in brainwashing-like terms; (3) This coercive character of sects and cults is confirmed by 'victims', former members who have become active opponents of the group they left, and who develop 'accounts' of their in-

volvement that cast their former group in a negative light; (4) Anti-cult organizations are more reliable than academics because the former, unlike the latter, have 'practical' experience of actually working with the 'victims' (Introvigne 2004: 209).

This 'anti-sectarian' principle had already been used in several cases, and some religious groups were not registered because of their 'potentially sectarian characteristics', or their registration was questioned. Beside controversial groups, such as Scientology or the Unification Church (they have not been registered yet), the application for the registration of the Center of Muslim Communities was challenged. In this case also, anti-sectarian arguments based on the 'necessity to protect health, morality, the law and freedom or to protect public safety and order'.

Another peculiarity of this law is that it divides religious groups in the Czech Republic into two categories. In the first group, there are churches or movements which are traditional to the Czech Republic, or which have 10,000 members (at least 0,1 % of the population).⁸ These groups have a special position. They are financially supported by the state, they are entitled to minister in prisons, their priests can teach religion in state schools and their wedding ceremonies are recognized by the state. It is very difficult to get into this privileged group. For example, only six groups fulfil the requirement for 10,000 members; the rest are registered in this group on the basis of their traditional position in Czech society. The state funds such groups as the Unitarian Church (it has 800 members) but the claim of Czech Muslims is challenged.

The second group includes mainly small and alternative religious groups and movements. Four religious groups have been registered since 2002: the Church of Christian Societies, the Community of Christians in the Czech Republic, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Czech Hindu Society. Two groups were not registered: the Ecumenical

8 Twenty-one religious groups were registered in this group in 2003: the Apostolic Church, the Unity of the Brethren Baptists, the Church of the Seventh-day Adventists, the Brethren Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Greek Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession, the Methodist Evangelical Church, the Federation of Jewish Communities, the Unitas Fratrum, the Christian Charges, the Lutheran Evangelical Church, the Unitarians, the New Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Old Catholic Church. But only the Roman Catholic Church, the Czech Brethren, the Evangelical Church, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Silesian Evangelical Church have more than 10,000 members.

Church of St John of Jerusalem and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. Two groups are still waiting for registration: the Center of Muslim Communities and the Jewish Center Chai. These religious groups have no special privileges, but unlike under the former law, they are recognized as religious groups, rather than as only non-governmental organizations.

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