

Religious Socialization, Intergenerational Memory, and Their Role in the Process of “Atheization” of the Czech Society: Preliminary Conclusions from the First Phase of Qualitative Research.

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1. Initial hypotheses and research design

Recently, a number of papers and monographs were published analyzing the attitudes of the Czech public toward religion (see, for example, Václavík, Nešpor, Hamplová). They relatively sharply challenged the wide-spread thesis according to which the Czech society is the most atheistic society in Europe today (see, for example, Greeley 2003). The substance of this criticism represents the argument that the thesis on the high degree of atheization of the Czech society is based on an inadequate understanding of the nature of contemporary Czech religiosity. Its key feature is a significant tendency to privatization and individualization of religiosity, related to a high extent of distrust of traditional religious institutions and organizations. This argument finds support both in historical-anthropological analyses and select surveys (ISSP, DIN, EHV, PCE) which, according to the cited authors, clearly show the unsubstantiated and further untenable confusion of “Czech atheism” for “Czech individualized and privatized spirituality.”

At the same time, however, several studies have recently been published on such attitudes among a certain segment of the Czech society that cannot unambiguously be identified as expressions of individualized and deinstitutionalized forms of religiosity. Rather, they reflect dismissive or skeptical attitudes toward religion. As such, they could indeed be more adequately identified as atheistic. From among those key studies, one can explicitly mention especially “Freethinkers and Atheists in the Czech Lands in the 20th Century” (Bubík and Václavík 2020) and “Czech Republic: The Promised Land for Atheists?” (Vido, Václavík and Paleček 2016). Both of them seek to theoretically and methodologically grasp the phenomenon of “Czech atheism” in the context of current debates on the theme of non-religion. While the former pursues an in-depth analysis of institutionalized forms of “explicit”

or “analytical” atheism,¹ the latter focuses on additional forms and expressions of contemporary Czech non-religion that are often interpreted as expressions of Czech atheism. Nevertheless, both papers agree that the actual impact of explicit/analytical atheism on the attitudes of Czech people toward religion are largely overestimated. There are many reasons for this. In addition to historical reasons (a gradually diminishing degree of trust in Marxist-Leninist ideology especially after 1968 that, in turn, also led to distrust in officially declared forms of so-called scientific atheism) (Václavík 2010), these especially include socio-psychological reasons. This type of atheism is connected with a specific intellectual position whose actual effect on society and its activities are often overestimated because it calls for constant rational-critical reflection and correction related therewith. The latter cannot be generally expected and will always be limited to a relatively narrow circle of intellectual or political elites. These might well have sufficiently effective power to enforce their own positions as official but their actual long-term impact will remain relatively minor due to the complexity of the mechanism for transmitting and maintaining these beliefs and attitudes.

A question comes to mind, whether contemporary Czech “atheism,” rather than being a result of political-ideological influences, might be a product of the advancing modernization of the Czech society. In this process, an important role was played by the paternalistic state with a quite extensive and relatively functional social system, augmented by some other factors, including, notably, the demographic changes after 1945 that led to the ethnic and cultural homogenization of the Czech society. The conclusions from the papers cited above (Václavík, Vido and Paleček 2016), as well as some conclusions from the white paper on Czech religiosity, elaborated as part of the research project on the *Future of Religions* (see

¹ In our understanding, the term explicit or analytical atheism refers to the explicit or implicit rejection of religious concepts based on a rational and analytical approach that blocks or even rewrites the intuitive support for religious images and, conversely, buttresses religious skepticism. One expression of this type of atheism represents New Atheism related with the authors, such as R. Dawkins, Ch. Hitchens, S. Harris or D. Dennett. In the Czech context it is much more often connected with and expressed by such ideological systems as Enlightenment-scientistic atheism propagated, for example, by the Volná myšlenka (Free Thought) movement or Marxist atheism. Both schools of thought had a number of common denominators. First, they were rooted in the Enlightenment view that religion poses an obstacle to knowledge on account of its presumed irrationality. Second, it was their strict anti-clericalism. The other interpretations of “their” atheism differed though. The former linked atheism especially with the positivistic concept of the development of the human mind in three stages, interpreting religion as a speculative, thus empirically unfounded way to explain the world that cannot be verified and must thence be rejected. Religion is, therefore, conceived of as an anthesis (not a competitor) to science that has no place as a way of interpreting the world in the modern society anymore. As a result, it needs to be fully replaced by an “exact, unambiguous, and verifiable” interpretation. In contrast, Marxist ideological atheism was based on the Marxist interpretation of religion as a product of false, alienated consciousness whose true essence was completely disclosed by Marxism as a “scientific worldview.”

<http://www.budoucnostnabozenstvi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/WHITE->

PAPER_CZ_FINAL.pdf), thus lead us to argue that the so-called “Czech atheism” should, in fact, be construed as a result of religious apatheism that finds an expression in a high degree of indifference to religious issues rather than conscious refusal of religious faith. At the same time, however, the role of religious socialization seems to be of major importance, especially in the context of parents-children relations. If we perceive religiosity as a cultural or symbolic system integrating certain values, norms, meanings, and patterns of behavior, it will then become clear that its content must be appropriated by an individual during his or her life.

First timid attempts to verify the validity of this hypothesis for the Czech context have recently begun to emerge. Alongside the cited paper “Czech Republic: The Promised Land for Atheists?” that focuses primarily on the level of theoretical conceptualization and considers its application to Czech settings, one can also mention some conclusions published in *Continuity and Discontinuities in Religious Memories* (Váně et al. 2018). Nonetheless, this theme has not been systematically treated much yet.

Therefore, the research project “Faith and Beliefs of ‘Unbelievers’” provided a framework for designing a pilot project to explore the role of religious socialization and religious memory in the process of forming “(ir)religious” identities of the Czech population today. The core of this pilot project lies in gathering interviews/statements that will provide data for qualitative analyses aimed at the above-discussed phenomena of religious socialization, the role of religious memory (especially with respect to its discontinuity in the last ca. 80 years), and, last but not least, further related phenomena (e.g., the role and function of religious literacy). The interviews are designed according to the method of semi-structured interviews; they will be analyzed based on discursive and contextual analysis. In 2020, eight interviews were made to identify initial hypotheses and a basic structure of the landscape.

In addition to the research goals specified above, the project has yet another significant dimension, namely, the involvement of early-career researchers that facilitates the placing of the research theme on the radar of younger generations. For this reason, students at the Faculty of Science, Humanities and Education of Technical University of Liberec were involved in the pilot data collection. In total, it was eight students who underwent theoretical training in March through June 2020. The training included research ethics, the basic principles of qualitative research, and data collection management. The training also included designing

and discussing a “questionnaire” draft. Like the select themes of semi-structured questionnaires, the selection of interviewees sought to consider intergenerational communication vis-à-vis religion, the role of religion especially for the primary socialization of the interviewees, and the significance and impact of “family memory” on shaping the relationship of the individual interviewees to religion. Due to the covid-19 pandemic situation, unfortunately, all interviews had to take place via online platforms only, the process that inhibited data collection. The original intention was to return to the collected data in the fall semester of 2020 by way of seminars and workshops with students and invited specialists in order to analyze them. Such analysis would then help formulate preliminary findings and, if necessary, modify the hypotheses for further research. However, this intention could not be followed because the epidemiological situation substantially worsened in the fall. The planned workshops thus could not be organized.

2. Description of the situation

Although the collected set of interviews is still too small to enable any deeper analysis, even this sample already shows that the initial hypotheses are highly relevant. The general socio-cultural background of the individual interviewees and, especially, the direct influence of immediate family play a crucial role in establishing relationships and attitudes toward religion, both positively and negatively. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that in case of most respondents, whose age was between 40 and 70 years, religion had not been a major topic in their immediate families. When responding to the question about the attitude their immediate family had toward religion, most of them responded: “We did not speak about it.” If some of the interviewees who had not been raised in religious families recalled any memories related to religion, it would then mostly concern the fact that someone in their wider family was religious and people knew that s/he “went to church.”

In this respect it is interesting that most of the material collected so far confirms the fact that religiosity is, in the opinion of most interviewees, connected with religious institutions, on the one hand, and rituals (prayers, participation in the liturgy, etc.), on the other. On the contrary, religion is rarely explicitly connected with value orientation (or, the latter is, unlike the other two characteristics, usually not directly mentioned as a “feature” of religiosity of the individual in question) or some other specific hermeneutic framework that

might well be postulated (“I think that Grandma probably believed in God because she sometimes prayed”) but religiosity itself is still perceived, first and foremost, through the lens of religiously interpreted behavior.

If it seems that religion is not (or, has not been for a significant part of one’s life) a major theme for most interviewees, the question then is what it means in particular. Is it a consequence of systematic indoctrination that also took place, in addition to official institutions (school, media, etc.), in families before 1989? Or is it a result of the incompatibility between “religious behavior” and “modern life-style?” Or is it an expression of something else altogether? It seems that neither systemic atheization nor intentional “secularization” play any major role in the clearly visible process of decreasing the significance of religion in the respondents’ individual lives. If their influence is to be identified at all, it is indirect and somewhat episodic (i.e., “I have never been interested in things like that but I remember how we were told in school that religion makes people dumb.”). It seems, therefore, that the “irrelevance” of religion in the personal life of many interviewees is by and large a product of certain unintelligibility as well as the absence of the meaning and role of religion in the process of their socialization. In other words, the fact that religion did not play any important role in the life of the interviewees is generally not a result of them or their family identifying themselves over against religion consciously. Rather, the reason is that they do not see it as important and beneficial and do not understand it. This finding corresponds with the fact that religion and views related therewith are not explicitly condemned, small exceptions notwithstanding. If “condemnations” appear at all, then they concern certain aspects, and not religion as such. Instead, religion is viewed as “something personal” that the interviewee actually does not understand much. **In sum, the attitude of most interviewees toward religion is apatheistic, rather than atheistic.**

Another important finding is that this attitude was in case of most interviewees formed as early as their childhood and adolescence, “merely” copying the patterns adopted from their immediate family. Therefore, it might perhaps be appropriate to speak of a kind of **socialization apatheism** that was affected, in addition to relatively clearly identifiable factors, such as the insignificance of religion for “legitimization” of some key aspects of the socialization process (e.g., value system, symbolic framework, etc.), by certain unintelligibility of religion, as documented by statements of especially younger interviewees.

However, the factors mentioned above cannot be understood as if the “religious apatheism” of the majority of the Czech interviewees (and the majority of the Czech population in general, as many experts assert) were invariable. In their responses, many interviewees indicate that they are sensitive to and open to being addressed by some religious or, more precisely, spiritual aspects in certain situations. However, they do not by and large see them as something “religious” (the term “religion” has traditionally had rather negative connotations in the Czech context) but rather as something “spiritual.” Many people admit that “there is something beyond us,” that “there is some higher purpose.” Many research projects focused on Czech religiosity have proven this thesis in the last thirty years.² It could therefore be maintained that this Czech apatheism is at the same time connected with a certain degree of irrationality and the tendency toward individualized and privatized forms of religiosity which are not, to be sure, linked by their agents to religion. Rather, these forms are understood as alternative expressions of “irreligious systems,” such as science, philosophy or general “human wisdom.”

3. Conclusions and future prospects

As stated above, the collected data sample is too small and too specific to allow for drawing any clear conclusions. Despite these limitations we believe that it can represent a useful tool to identify other surveys and analyses in the future and to formulate certain implementation measures.

As for further analyses, we believe that it will be useful to focus on the process of “(ir)religious socialization” in detail with the aim of precisely analyzing its structure, aspects, and presuppositions. In this respect, it will be appropriate to particularly focus on phenomena, such as the continuity and discontinuity of cultural and social memory, precisely identifying the “external” factors that reinforce the tendency toward apatheization vis-à-vis religion in the socialization process (e.g., the role of value orientations, public structures, etc.). At the

² Of a relatively minor significance are traditional religious views connected with institutionalized religiosity, such as the belief in heaven, hell or resurrection. In the surveys that have been considered (DIN 2006, AUFBRUCH 2007, ISSP 2009), less than 30% of the respondents identified with them. Conversely, such beliefs as the healing power of amulets, fortune-telling or horoscopes are acceptable to more than 40% of the respondents, while in some instances (the possibility of foreseeing the future) the proportion of affirmative responses exceed 50%. Here, too, it can be asserted that those beliefs are increasingly foregrounded that better correspond to the subjective spirituality of the late modern consumer. For more detail, see Václavík, Hamplová and Nešpor 2018.

same time, it seems useful to explore the processes of “transmitting” the social and cultural skills that are directly connected with various types of (ir)religious orientation.

In this respect, the most appropriate implementation measures seem to be those that strengthen possible communication among respective generations, thus opening a space for the articulation and identification of certain problems related with the perception of religion in the life of concrete individuals. Somewhat figuratively speaking, the primary task is to “break the silence” about the themes related to religiosity in its various forms. It is also for this reason that we would in the future like to continue with the collection of data/statements, performed by young people. We thereby hope not only to create a relatively broad database of interviews but also to establish a discussion platform that would allow especially young people to share their experience with how the phenomenon of religion has been communicated with their family and friends.

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