The post-Christian society and the Czech Churches

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Czech Republic is often considered one of the most secular or even atheist societies of the world. When coupled with the simplified secularization thesis that the modern world is becoming progressively more secular, the Czech situation is then understood as futuristic model for other countries (and churches) on the road to similar secularity.[1] In this paper, I will show that both of these assumptions are flawed. First, I will show that while the position of Christianity in the Czechia has declined, the Czech society is today better described as post-Christian than secular or atheist. And second, in the process I will also show that the position and roles of Christianity in the Czech society result from a specific and peculiar developments, implying that the Czech case is unlikely to be a future model for any purposes.

1 Beyond atheism and Christianity

Until some two hundred years ago, the Czech society could have been called a Christian society, especially because Christianity was a self-evident foundation of both public and individual lives.[2] Today, however, this is obviously not the case anymore, both in public and individual lives. A couple of examples, starting with the first sphere: first, the state is constitutionally separated from Christian churches, and second, Czechs are more distrustful of the churches than of any other public institutions. As for the individuals, the most obvious indicator is the very low number of self-declared Christians: according to almost all sociological surveys this number hovers around 30 percent, with the number of regular churchgoers around 5 percent.[3] In other words, Christianity is in a minority in the Czech society.

Many authors argue that if Christianity constitutes a minority, then the Czech society must

[1] Petr FIALA, Laboratoř sekularizace: Náboženství a politika v nenáboženské společnosti - český případ, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury: Brno 2007.
[2] Petr PABIAN, Christianity in conflict over Modernity: Czech and Dutch Christians in the Nineteenth Century, PhD thesis, Charles University, Protestant Theological Faculty, Prague, 2005.
[3] Dana HAMPLOVÁ, Náboženství v české společnosti na prahu 3. tísiciletí, Karolinum: Praha, 2013.

be atheist. And indeed, many writings assert that atheists significantly outnumber Christians, constituting around half of the Czech population, and claim this is the greatest percentage worldwide.[4] This is because these publications employ very simplistic definitions of "atheism", typically including all those who in the census don't pick any particular church membership, ignoring even the fact that answering this particular question in the census is voluntary.[5] However, when one looks carefully at survey data, a very different pattern emerges. When we include in the "atheist" category only those who answer negatively to all survey questions relating to religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices, the final count is around five percent.[6] In other words, while Christians constitute a minority in Czech society, atheists constitute even smaller minority.

If Christianity and atheism are both minorities, what about the rest? Some authors suggest that they are being replaced by new/alternative spiritualities. One recent book even concludes that the Czechs are one of the "most superstitious" peoples in the world. This is based on a recent survey in which around 40 percent of respondents expressed belief in God, while approximately the same number of believed in the power of good luck charms, of astrology and of fortune-tellers. But again, upon a closer look the importance of these "new spiritualities" fades away. I will use the example of astrology: in a variety of surveys some 80 percent respondents admit to reading horoscopes, but only around 40 percent agree that star constellations can influence human lives (and only eight percent are sure of it), and just two percent of people make their life decisions on the basis of horoscopes.[7] An in-depth qualitative study confirms this picture of marginality: researchers mapping a spiritual scene in two Czech cities found very little of it, both numerically (tens rather than hundreds of participants) and in terms of commitments (e.g. consumers of bookshops and tee shops).[8] Based on these findings, I would conclude that these new spiritualities also constitute a minority in the Czech society, just like Christianity and atheism.

In order to complete the picture of the religious scene, I should also note that other religious traditions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.) amount to nothing more than a tiny minority. Even if one combines their adherents from the last census, the amount would not reach a single percent.

In other words, after examining all the usual suspects (Christianity, atheism, new spiritualities and other religious traditions), I have found four (small) minorities while the

[4] Michael RUSE, Atheism: what everyone needs to know, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015.
[5] Zdeněk R. NEŠPOR, Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society, in: Sociologický časopis 40 (2004/3), pp. 277–295.
[6] HAMPLOVÁ, Náboženství, p. 67.
[7] HAMPLOVÁ, Náboženství, p. 259.
[8] Dušan LUŽNÝ, Zdeněk R. NEŠPOR et al., Náboženství v menšině: Religiozita a spiritualita v současné české společnosti, Malvern: Praha, 2008.

majority of the people in Czechia stand outside these four groupings. Therefore, the key to understanding the position of Christianity in the contemporary Czech society lies precisely in understanding this majority, neither Christian nor atheist nor spiritual.

I found such a key in the concept of religious indifference: I came to conclusion that most Czechs simply don't care much about religious questions – they are indifferent to either Christianity, or atheism, or spiritualities. These issues do not play a significant role in their lives. This is obvious in surveys that give a list of topics (up to twenty) and ask respondents to arrange them by importance to them. Irrespective of the number and range of topics, religion always comes last or, at best, second to last.

Furthermore, the important position of religious indifference is not unique to the Czech society. We find the same pattern (with various differences, of course) in other west European countries. We will return to this issue again in the last section.

2 Secularization with Hussite roots: a misguided narrative

Those who consider the contemporary religious situation in Czechia to be unique also claim that the modern religious history of Czechia is unique. They start with the "obvious" secularization narrative: that the "decline of religion" is an obvious process that once it starts becomes irresistible. This assumption means historians only have to find the starting point (when the decline started) and the rest is obvious. The narratives of Czech uniqueness therefore locate the starting point either to the Hussite period itself or the later influences of the Hussite tradition:

- in the Hussite period itself;
- in ending the Czech reformation during the re-Catholicization;
- in the "return" to the Hussite traditions in the national movement of the 19th century.

In the following paragraphs I will summarize these narratives and explain why I find all of them unconvincing.

The first starting point proposed in the literature lies directly in the events of the Hussite wars, specifically in the anti-clericalism apparent throughout the Hussite wars. This anticlericalism, the argument goes, has ever since remained a part of the Czech national tradition and manifested itself most prominently in most prominently in the turn away from Catholicism in the 19th and 20th centuries.[9] However, I see two unsurmountable problems with this narrative. First, I think that this interpretation confuses pre-modern peasant anticlericalism with modern anti-religious attitudes. Peasant anticlericalism was quite

[9] René RÉMOND, Religion and Society in Modern Europe, Blackwell: Oxford, 1999.

common, apparent in many peasant uprisings, perhaps the best known among them the "German peasants' war" of the 1520s. Simply said, peasant anticlericalism is part of the conflict between peasants and the elite, reinforced by the difference between the elite interpretation of Christianity (keep the peasants in subjection) and those of the peasants (no one should live in luxury while others starve). This anticlericalism was therefore profoundly Christian, as was the Hussite movement. There is also another reason I find this narrative unacceptable: it begs but cannot answer a question of international comparison: if this anticlericalism was not specific to the Czech lands, how come it did not lead to the same subsequent religious history elsewhere?

Other authors locate the starting point in the re-catholicization of the Czech lands during and after the Thirty Years War. This narrative asserts that during re-catholicization the Czechs were forced to denounce their reformation confessions and forcefully adopt Catholicism. But the use of force broke the Czechs spiritually so they could not commit to the enforced Catholicism. Ever since then, the argument goes, the Czech Catholicism has remained shallow and formal, for display only, and neither could these spiritually broken people commit to Protestantism once it was allowed again. Within this narrative, the starting point is de facto also the endpoint: ever since the counter-reformation, the religious lives of the Czech people have remained formal, even if people discarded it officially only much later.[10] However, I will point out two fundamental problems also with this narrative. First, the Czech lands were not the only area that underwent re-catholicisation: this happened to around quarter of the people in Central Europe from Germany to Poland. However, the vast differences between their religious histories from the 17th century to the present definitely cannot be explained by this narrative of specific Czech secularization. [11] Second and even more fundamentally: re-catholicization was not the only example of enforcing a confession because essentially all early modern confessions were enforced – with few exceptions, both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe were effected from above. The processes of Confessionalization were an elite project to mould the subjects according to the adopted confession.[12] So this narrative also fails to answer the comparative question: if practically all the post-Reformation confessions were enforced by political elites, why should be subsequent religious history in Czechia different from all other areas?

Finally, the currently most popular narrative locates the starting point in the Czech national movement of the 19th century, because they assume that Czech national identity was based on the recovery of the Hussite traditions. This "Hussite" national identity allegedly introduced an

[10] Zdeněk V. DAVID, The White Mountain, 1620: An Annihilation or Apotheosis of Utraquism? in: Communio Viatorum 45 (2003/1), p. 23-66.
[11] Howard LOUTHAN, Obracení Čech na víru, aneb, Rekatolizace po dobrém a po zlém. Rybka: Praha, 2011.
[12] Petr PABIAN, Alternativní příběh české sekularity, Sociální studia 10 (2013/3), p. 85-105.

inherent conflict with Catholicism and presented Catholics church with a dilemma: either discard Catholicism or to retreat into the "Catholic ghetto" outside the national society. This led one part of the people to exodus from the Catholic Church and the other part to purely formal Catholicism.[13] As before, though, I will again highlight two fundamental problems with this narrative. First, anti-Catholic national identities existed during the last two centuries in all European countries with significant Catholic populations – and in all of them clashed with Catholic national identities. Perhaps the best know has been the conflict of the two sides called *Les Deux Frances*: *la France noire et la France rouge* – one side rooting its legitimacy in the "throne and altar", the other in "the Enlightenment".[14] Another example comes from the Netherlands where the Calvinists in the 19th century promoted national identity of the "Protestant nation" only to catholic the Catholic minority fight back with their own version of national identity, leading to eventual rethinking of national identity as inherently composed of Protestants, Catholics and Humanists.[15] Therefore, if the existence an anti-Catholic national identity itself has not led everywhere to everyone (nearly) giving up Catholicism, this narrative cannot even the religious developments in Czechia. And second, this narrative completely overlooks that a Catholic national identity developed also among the Czechs, centred on the "national" saints Cyril, Methodius and Wenceslaus. Czech Catholic national identity entailed a vision of national history culminating in the "glorious reign" of the emperor Charles IV. The heritage of Catholic identity remains alive into the present, with the saints Wenceslaus, Cyril and Methodius still keeping their place among the Czech "state holidays", and Charles IV being consistently named as the greatest figure of Czech history.[16]

All in all, these narratives of uniquely Czech secularisation rooted in Hussite period and tradition are ultimately unconvincing. For me, the most important is their inability to hold in international comparison: they provide "explanations" that barely hold when we look only at the Czech case but crumble when we try to include other European territories. For that reason, in the next sections I will place the modern developments of Czech Christianity firmly into the context of modern European Christianity.

3 Late Christendom instead of early secularity

All the narratives summarised above assume that the Czech society was for all intents and purposes secularised already in the 19th century. In contrast, most recent historical and social

[13] Zdeněk R. NEŠPOR, Religious Processes, p. 282-285.
[14] Christopher CLARK and Wolfram KAISER (eds.), Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003.
[15] Peter van ROODEN, Contesting the Protestant Nation: Calvinists and Catholics in the Netherlands, in: Etnofoor 8 (1995), p. 15-30.

scientific writings find much evidence of the strength of Christianity well into the 20th century. This is encapsulated by Hugh McLeod's concept of "Late Christendom", according to which Christianity even after losing its exclusive position remained a dominant force in the European societies: "Confessional parties enjoyed exceptional electoral success and laws regulating morality were widely accepted. The great majority of children and adolescents were receiving a Christian socialization, and whether or not they gained an understanding of Christian doctrine and ethics, they internalized a sense of confessional identity. Christendom appeared to be intact and even enjoying a revival."[17]

Much the same was apparent in Czechia not only throughout the 19th century but also later into the 1950s. Public and political life was permeated with Christian symbols and influences. In one of the obvious examples, the independent Czechoslovak stat law declared "state holidays" dedicated to the most important figures of both Protestant and Catholic traditions (Jan Hus and saints Wenceslaus, Cyril and Methodius) and also declared 10 more Christian holidays (e.g. Easter, Christmas, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday etc.) as "recognized by the state", i.e. legally recognizing the role of these feasts in the lives of the Christian churches and people in Czechoslovakia. Another example is the universal presence of confessional education in schools, which was also in a 1946 survey supported by almost three quarters of respondents. Further example coming from these after-war surveys is the strong position of both Catholic and "Hussite" national identities: when asked to name the greatest figure of Czech history, 35 percent named Jan Hus, 20 percent named Charles IV and 17 percent named Saint Wenceslaus. [18]

Christianity was also present in the lives of the large majority of inhabitants of Czechia. After the Second World War, around 90 percent of the people belonged to and were raised in one of the Christian confessions. Simultaneously, more than three quarters of respondents in a 1946 survey thought it was essential to raise children religiously. Moreover, for the vast majority the ties to Christianity went beyond than a membership and religious socialization. About three quarters of respondents in a reported church attendance (at least on the big holidays), prayer, and support for confessional education in schools. An international comparison of church attendance around the middle of the 20th century, Czechia with regular church attendance just above 40 percent was located exactly at the midpoint among European countries and above e.g. France and Austria. This indicates that the Czech lands were definitely not unusually highly secularised at the time.[19]

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[16] Jiří ŠUBRT and Štěpánka PFEIFEROVÁ, Veřejné mínění o problematice českých dějin, in: Naše společnost 7 (2009/2), p. 16–23.
[17] Hugh McLEOD, The Religious Crisis of the 1960s, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007.
[18] PABIAN, Alternativní příběh, p. 92.
[19] PABIAN, Alternativní příběh, p. 90.

4 The end of Late Christendom under the communist regime

When we acknowledge the existence of Late Christendom in Czechia until the 1940s, the religious policy of the Communist regime takes on a new significance: it ended the Christendom in the Czech Lands. After about a millennium, Christianity ceased to be an obvious part of everyday lives, of public life and of the shared culture. Somewhat paradoxically, the end of the Late Christendom at about this time is also shared with other European countries, both inside and outside the Communist bloc. Callum Brown wrote eloquently about Great Britain of the 1960s: "It took several centuries… to convert Britain to Christianity, but it has taken less than forty years for the country to forsake it. For a thousand years, Christianity penetrated deeply into the lives of the people… Then really quite suddenly…, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organised Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance."[20]

The change in Czechia came about (at least partly) by different avenues than in Britain, but it was similarly abrupt. Within the first decade the new regime's policies dismantled the fundamental features of the Late Christendom. First, Christianity was driven out of public life. To start with a little known example, the Communist state ceased to "recognize" Christian holidays and instead declared official holidays – implying that churches and believers were no longer a partner recognized by the state. Accordingly, new legislation subjugated the churches to the state and further "direct actions" fundamentally disrupted church organization, particularly of the Catholic Church.

During the same time also declined all available indicators of Christian religiosity. Most fundamental was probably the decline of those raised in a Christian confession from around 90 percent in the 1940s to about 25 percent in the 1980s. As for regular church attendance, it declined from more than 40 percent among those born till 1940s to less than 15 percent among those born in the 1970s. At the same time, the number of those never attending church services more than doubled.

Czechia was not alone. Both the public roles of Christianity and individual Christian religiosity declined during the second half of the 20th century not only in the Communist countries but also in "western" Europe. In other words, European Christendom has come to an end. The question about the roles of Christianity in contemporary Czech society can therefore be re-formulated: "What are the roles of Christianity after the end of both the Late Christendom and the Communist regime?"

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[20] Callum G. BROWN, The death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation 1800–2000, Routledge: London 2001, p. 1.

5 Christianity in a religiously fragmented Czech society

There was no return to "Late Christendom" in Czechia after the fall of the Communist regime, unlike efforts in several other post-Communist countries.[21] Using the language of the day, one might say that that Czech Christianity "returned to Europe". In Communist autocracies, Late Christendom was destroyed by intentional policies during 1960s; in the rest of Europe, it became the unintended victim to the profound economic, social, political and religious changes during the 1960s. It was followed in the "western Europe" by the "age of religious fragmentation"[22], which also arrived typical also for the Czech religious situation since 1989. Therefore, the positions and roles of Christianity in the contemporary Czech society share the fundamental characteristics with most others European countries.

First, for religiously fragmented European countries is typical a greatly decreased number of people belonging to a church and believing and practicing accordingly. In the Czech case, those active Christians amount to only a small minority of the population – the exact size of this minority depends on the criteria one chooses from the data available in sociological surveys. In contemporary Czechia, above 30 percent belong to one of the Christian churches; of the present parenting generation about 10 percent consider religious upbringing of children to be important; and about 5 percent of people regularly both attend church and pray.[23]

Second, the boundaries of Christianity have become quite fuzzy.[24] On the one hand, as should already be obvious from the data presented above, some people say they belong to one of the churches but they don't share in many (or any) traditional Christian practices and/or beliefs. In scholarly literature on religion in modern Europe, this situation has been conceptualized as "belonging without believing". In Czechia we can assign to this category, according to various definitions, between two thirds and five sixths of those claiming to belong to the Christian churches. On the other hand, there are those who define themselves as believers but don't belong to any of the churches ("believing without belonging"). In Czechia, about one fifth of believers deny church membership, and among the youngest generation it is as high as one third. Nevertheless, from the opposite perspective this means that most of the believers are still Christians, and while diminuted, Christianity is still the largest religious tradition in

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[21] Sabrina P. RAMET, (ed.), Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989, Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, 2014.

[22] Hugh McLEOD, Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789–1989, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1997.

[23] HAMPLOVÁ, Náboženství, p. 45. Marie LAUDÁTOVÁ and Roman VIDO, Současná česká religiozita v generační perspektivě, in: *Sociální studia* 7 (2010/4), p. 37–62.; Jan VÁNĚ and Martina ŠTÍPKOVÁ, National Religious Environment and the Orthodoxy of Christian Beliefs: A Comparison of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in: Sociologický časopis 49 (2013/3), p. 403–425.

[24] Ingrid STORM, Halfway to Heaven: Four Types of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe, in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 48 (2009/4), pp. 702–718.

contemporary Europe.

Third, not only has Christianity kept its primary position in the European religious and spiritual field, but also are Christian churches expected to play important public roles. In other words, even those who don't consider themselves Christian expect churches to do something on their behalf – situation conceptualised elsewhere in Europe as "vicarious religion".[25] One of such areas is care for the elderly and poor: of all respondents in the Czech Republic, only 13 and 16 percent, respectively, find churches of no use in these areas.[26] In other words, churches that find themselves located increasingly on the margins are still expected to care for other marginalised people. Alternatively, specifically the Catholic Church is sometimes expected to step in the very centre of national politics: it has come to play a role during presidential inauguration (including the new president stopping at the tomb of Saint Wenceslaus), even as there are no rules prescribing this. And the state funeral for the first Czech president Václav Havel took the form of Requiem Mass in the metropolitan cathedral at the Prague Castle celebrated by the primate of Bohemia. But perhaps most the most important public manifestation of Christianity is the pervasive symbolic presence of Christian tradition in Czech culture: from Christmas and Easter as public holidays to church buildings dominating both urban and rural landscapes.

6 Conclusions: Contemporary Christianity in a post-Christian Czech society

Taking everything said so far into account, Czech society has ceased to be a Christian society quite some time ago but that does not mean that the Czech society has become atheistic. While Christianity is now in a minority, atheism constitutes an even smaller minority. Instead, I have demonstrated that the dominant attitude in the Czech society is religious indifference. Despite religious indifference, Christian churches are not excluded from social life; quite the opposite, they are expected to play important public roles. Christianity as the traditional religion of the country also has an inerasable presence in Czech culture. On the other hand, other religious traditions as well as new spiritualities face suspicion from large segments the general public.

I therefore believe that Czech society can be best characterised as *post-Christian*. Yes, Late Christendom in the country collapsed many decades ago and religious indifference is the dominant attitude among the people. Yet, Christianity remains by far the largest religious and spiritual tradition in the country, plays important roles in the individual and communal lives

[25] Grace DAVIE, Vicarious Religion: A Response, in: Journal of Contemporary Religion 25 (2010/2), p. 261-266.
[26] Martin Ďurďovič, Názor veřejnosti na roli církví ve společnosti a na navrácení církevního majetku, Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (2012) (cit. May 25, 2015). URL: http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c1/a6901/f3/pi121023.pdf

of the people, and retains pervasive presence in Czech culture.