

D I S K U S

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (www.basr.ac.uk)
ISSN: 0967-8948

Diskus 16.2 (2014), 22-30

Deepening Secularization? How to Read Official Statistics. A Case of the Czech Republic

David Václavík
Masaryk University, Czech Republic (vaclav@phil.muni.cz)

ABSTRACT

The Czech Republic is often regarded as one of the most secularized countries in the world. It seems that such a statement is supported by the majority of statistical data, for example, the results of the last census, which was held in 2011. According to this census only 12 % of the Czech population identifies explicitly with a religious institution or tradition. It also shows a radical decline of traditional religious institutions such as the Catholic Church or the main protestant denominations, which have lost more than 50 % of their members over the last ten years. What do these facts mean? Are they, as some scholars and the majority of journalist and politicians argue, clear proof of the deepening secularization or even "atheisation" of contemporary Czech society? Or is it necessary to read this data more carefully and in the context of other relevant surveys? I will argue in this paper that the above mentioned and similar facts cannot be interpreted in the „traditional way“ as evidence of deepening secularization but instead should be read as an indicator of a change in the interpretation of religion in connection to a new social and cultural concept of this phenomenon.

* * *

I.

Czech society is traditionally regarded as the most secularized and most atheistic in Europe (see for example Fiala 2007). This point of view has not changed after 1989, when the Czech society underwent major turbulences in, not only the political system and economy, but also in the relationship towards religion. The relatively well-marked decrease of membership of traditional religious groups came after the initial post-socialistic identification with mainstream Christian denominations such as the Catholic Church during the first years of 1990s (see for example Nešpor 2010). This decrease went hand in hand with a general increase of mistrust in religious institutions in and with an intensifying of a the pluralisation and privatization of religious life, which has often been interpreted as a continuation of secularization in Czech society (see for example Tuček 2003, p. 61).

This point of view would be acceptable if we depart from the classical model and accept secularization as a process of a transformation towards privatization, de-institutionalization and de-traditionalization. We can

demonstrate this problem by using the approach of Miklós Tomka, an outstanding Hungarian sociologist of religion (Tomka & Zuhlerer 1999). He connects the modernization process in Central and Eastern Europe with the mass industrialization caused by the political changes after 1945. In this context he divides the history of this region in the 19th and 20th century as follows: the period until 1945 is referred to as the pre-modern age and the end of traditional society, the period between 1945 and 1989 is the age of modernization, and finally the period after 1989 is referred to as late modern (or postmodern) age.

However, this historical division can only be applied to certain parts of Central and Eastern Europe, namely: most Balkan states, Poland, Hungary, and in part Slovakia. It certainly does not apply to the Czech Republic or East Germany (former German Democratic Republic). These countries and their societies experienced the modernization process much earlier. At the time when modernization was initiated top down by the communist governments, these two countries showed clear signs of possessing a modern society. These were countries with highly developed industries and a high percentage of the population living in urban areas, a relatively well-established middle class and an internally differentiated society. The modernization process not only started several decades earlier, but most importantly, happened under different conditions. The communist-incited modernization led to the equalization of the whole region on similar levels, but lots of indicators have pointed to significant structural differences, which began to disappear with the emergence of political, economic and cultural changes in the region following the year 1989.

The role and position of religion in specific societies is a very good indicator of this differentiation. If we want to pursue Tomka's concept of modernization in the region, we have to considerably modify it. A more suitable approach would be to speak of a two-degree or a two-speed modernization of central and Eastern Europe, where its western part, corresponding to the territory of pre-war Germany and Cisleithania (western part of Austro-Hungarian monarchy), went through the process of intense modernization as early as the 19th century. In the eastern part, the modernization process started to manifest itself over the next century and more intensely after 1945. This conception of the two-degree modernization model is crucial for an adequate understanding of the transformation in the relationship between religion and Czech society. Through this interpretation we can better understand why the current religious situation in the Czech Republic resembles the situation in countries such as France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia more than the situation in most states of the former Soviet bloc (see for example Greely 2003, p. 131). Hopefully it also refutes the deeply rooted and widespread conviction that the high secularization and "*atheisation*" of Czech society is a result of its communist past. I would like to present evidence in support of this statement with the help of data gathered over the last two censuses (2001, 2011).

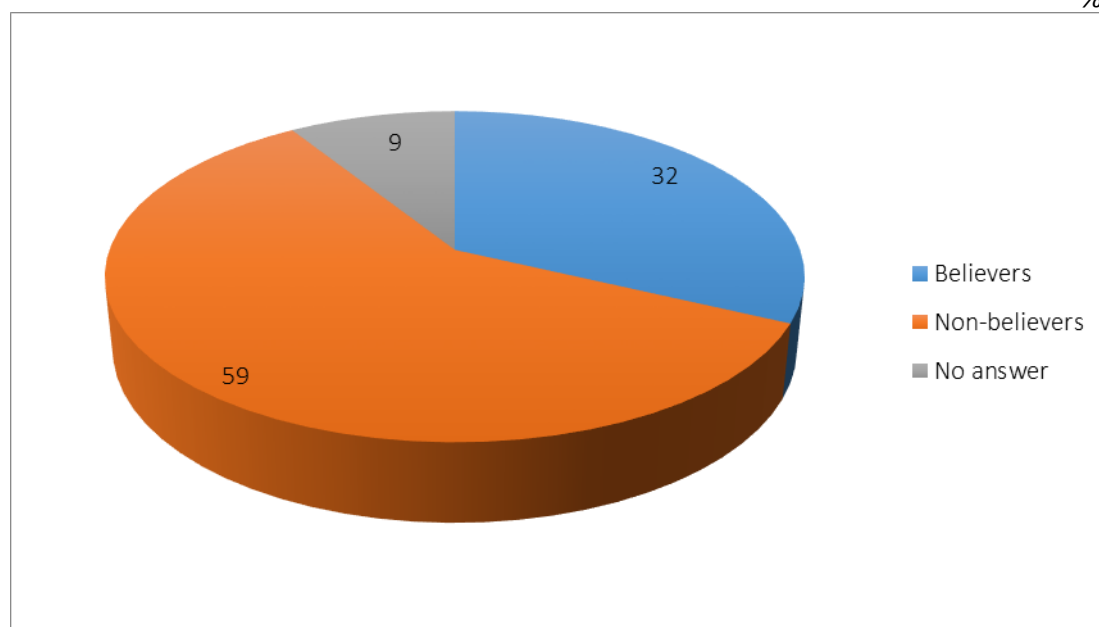
II.

At first sight the results of the 2001 census confirmed the validity of the continuing secularisation thesis for Czech society, which is accompanied by

the decline of traditional Christian denominations and the progressive pluralisation of the religious scene, connected with a de-traditionalization and privatization of religion. Figures from this census showed a strong decline of members of concrete religious groups (44 % in 1991 and 32 % in 2001). Opposite to this tendency the number of people, who declared themselves as “unaffiliated”, increased radically from 40 % in 1991 to 59 % in 2001. Some scholars (see Václavík 2010, p. 154) argued that these changes in religious affiliation were in part caused by “specifics” in the 1991 census and in part by political, social and economical changes during the transition of the Czech society in the 1990s.

The 1991 census was the first, which included questions about religious affiliation in 40 years. It was also held at the very beginning of a process of transition from a totalitarian communist society toward a liberal democracy. Religion, and mainly some traditional religious groups, including the Catholic Church, was considered by a significant part of Czech society as important opponents to the communist regime as well as guarantors of the transformation of values within Czech society in that time. However, this “elation” didn’t last long. A growing distrust toward religious institutions and traditional religious conceptions was reported by a majority of surveys since mid 90s. Many authors argued that Czech society returned to its “typical” anti-religious attitude but, they also argued that the situation for the majority of religious groups would stabilize in the first decade of the new century.

Figure 1: Religious affiliation according to census in 2001 (in %)



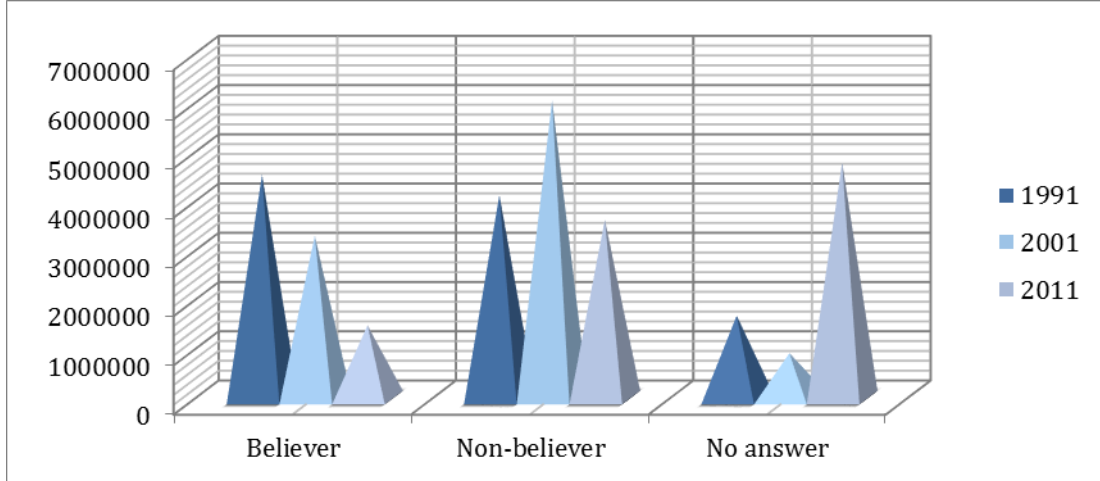
(Source: Czech Statistical Office)¹

The last census, in 2011 pointed to a rather different reality. The decrease in people who declare their membership or other type of affiliation to a religious group or even tradition was stronger than in the 1990s! Only 14 % of Czechs

¹ <http://www.scitani.cz/csu/2003edicniplan.nsf/p/4110-03> [May 28 2014]

declared their affiliation to a concrete religious group or denomination, 7 % declared that they are religious but unaffiliated, 34 % affirmed that they are irreligious and unaffiliated and 45 % declined answering questions about religious preferences and affiliation (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Religious affiliation in the Czech society according censuses in 1991, 2001 a 2011



(Source: Czech Statistical Office)²

If we express these changes in numbers for the years 1991 – 2001, it becomes clear that religious groups lost more than 1.2 million members. Surprisingly, between 2001 and 2011, this number increased to 1.8 mil. It has to be noted though that the outflow of members was more noticeable among traditional religious denominations such as the Catholic Church or the main protestant denominations. For some of them this outflow signified (for example in the case of the Silesian Evangelic Church of the Augsburg Confession) their potential end and for others (among them Catholic Church and the largest non-Catholic denominations like Czechoslovak Hussite Church and Czech Brethren Evangelic Church) it possesses a serious threat to their future existence.

For example the Czechoslovak Hussite Church lost 45 % of its members between 1991 and 2001 and another 60 % between 2001 and 2011, the Czech Brethren Evangelic Church lost 43 % of its members and again 56 % between 2001 and 2011 and Catholic Church, which lost “only” 32 % of its members between 1991 and 2001, was deprived of 60 % between 2001 and 2011.

² [http://vdb.czso.cz/sldbvo/#!stranka=podle-tematu&tu=30628&th=&v=&vo=H4slAAAAAAAAAGWPP0vDUBTFb1tj-m-oDm5-hRItFDd9NQkJSfNK8hoxk08bWiU2MbmpmQQXHVx1d3DslxA_gauTuDs76qugDI64Fw78Dufc-TtIWQorJ3zG2zkeR22DZ5M-TyT55fFp7eC5AmUd6IHMRzo_wjg1oYaTNMwmcTQqku0dWEzzvCpuS2wDoTb0NHdAXNLPzuAC4B8DhYA8g-59QwgIB0E2qOpQRhCWOspmF2HZouqu6SFUNhQFoa4SRn3iEZUkCzcjPrWobQo3FZrtDwLac0kgNBNmhxi2pi7iJQTJ19xA-_0y4tNx25xiOA7T1bf7h4_L660yIEyQZjzKwyKF1h_n5KeHYXo1v1tv3L7eIEX35FMMQINE6m7_J1VmpDe0LdG_aqqawwa-qCUHvuUqnW7xBWVvzG9mAQAA&vseuzemi=null&void= \[May 28 2014\]](http://vdb.czso.cz/sldbvo/#!stranka=podle-tematu&tu=30628&th=&v=&vo=H4slAAAAAAAAAGWPP0vDUBTFb1tj-m-oDm5-hRItFDd9NQkJSfNK8hoxk08bWiU2MbmpmQQXHVx1d3DslxA_gauTuDs76qugDI64Fw78Dufc-TtIWQorJ3zG2zkeR22DZ5M-TyT55fFp7eC5AmUd6IHMRzo_wjg1oYaTNMwmcTQqku0dWEzzvCpuS2wDoTb0NHdAXNLPzuAC4B8DhYA8g-59QwgIB0E2qOpQRhCWOspmF2HZouqu6SFUNhQFoa4SRn3iEZUkCzcjPrWobQo3FZrtDwLac0kgNBNmhxi2pi7iJQTJ19xA-_0y4tNx25xiOA7T1bf7h4_L660yIEyQZjzKwyKF1h_n5KeHYXo1v1tv3L7eIEX35FMMQINE6m7_J1VmpDe0LdG_aqqawwa-qCUHvuUqnW7xBWVvzG9mAQAA&vseuzemi=null&void= [May 28 2014])

Table 1. Changes in membership in chosen religious groups between 1991 and 2011

	1991	2001	2011
Catholic Church	4 021 385	2 740 780	1 083 899
Czech Brethren Evangelic Church	203 996	117 212	51 936
Czechoslovak Hussite Church	178 036	99 103	39 276
Jehovah's Witnesses	14 575	23 162	13 097
Orthodox Church in Czech Lands	19 354	22 968	20 628
Silesian Evangelic Church of Augsburg Confession	33 130	14 020	8 162
Brethren Church	2 759	9 931	10 872
Seventh Day Adventists	7 674	9 757	7 394
Greek Catholic Church	7 030	7 675	9 927
Christian bodies	3 017	6 927	3 458
Apostolic Church	1 485	4 565	4 934
Brethren Unity of Baptists	2 544	3 622	3 208
Methodist Evangelic Church	2 855	2 694	1 952
Old-Catholic Church	2 725	1 515	1 736
Federation of the Jewish Communities in the Czech Rep.	1 292	1 515	1 132
Neo-Apostolic Church	427	449	98

The drop in membership did not affect all religious groups. Some of them contrarily grew or at least saw a stabilization of their membership. This was the case for smaller Christian denominations of evangelical origins and groups with close connections to Pentecostal movements. Typical representatives of

these groups are, for example, the Brethren Church and the Apostolic Church. The former swelled four times in membership between 1991 and 2001 and increased by yet another 10 % between 2001 and 2011.

I think that we can use the moniker “neo-Christian” for those religious groups. This concept was introduced by the British theologian and historian of religion Alister E. McGrath (2002). According to him neo-Christian groups are successful because they accept the pluralistic landscape of the spiritual marketplace, which is typical for modern Western societies. That’s a reason why they, more than traditional religious groups, are able to flexibly respond to the wishes and needs of potential converts. These neo-Christian groups use the more effective methods and approaches of progressive evangelization, which becomes some kind of religious marketing. In addition, they also offer emotional religious services with an emphasis on religious experience and they facilitate more intensive social relations among their members than the traditional religious groups. In short, this type of Christian group is better prepared for the process of individualisation in modern society, and in addition deals effectively with some of the challenges of late modernity like, for instance, social and cultural rootlessness, existential uncertainty and emotional emptiness.

Other results from the census (but also from other surveys)³ confirm this. Neo-Christian groups are relatively successful, not only in regions with higher levels of religiosity, but also in the borderlands, formerly known as Sudetenland, which show the highest levels of non-believers and mistrust toward religious institutions. This part of the Czech Republic faces substantial social, cultural and economical problems including high rates of unemployment, massive demographic changes, ethnical confrontations and low education levels. It is a little bit paradoxical that representatives of some traditional religious groups label this region as a spiritual desert, whereas for Neo-Christian groups it is de facto a “Promise Land”.

Neo-Christian groups are not the only types of religious groups, which are, according to the latest census, relatively successful. Non-traditional groups, the so-called New Religious Movements, grew extensively as well, with the number of their members increasing tenfold between 1991 and 2001 and three times between 2001 and 2011. According to the latest census more than 1/3 of the believers declared themselves as members or sympathizers of this kind of religious group.

It is, however, necessary to note that some of the groups in this category should be interpreted as an expression of protest against traditional religious institutions rather than “real confessions”. A typical example is the *Church of Jedi*, which has, according to the last census, almost 13,000 members, making the Church of Jedi officially larger than the majority of the Christian churches.⁴ The vast bulk of the “members” of this group are young people

³ For example *International Social Survey Programme* (2008), *European Value Study* (2008) or *Detraditionalization and Deinstitutionalization of Religion in the Czech Society* (2006).

⁴ Only six churches or religious groups have more than 10.000 members. These are Catholic Church (1 083 899), Czech Brethren Evangelic Church (51 936), Czechoslovak Hussite

from larger cities with relatively high levels of education, who have very critical attitudes toward official institutions. They also regard traditional religious groups as too corrupted and Neo-Christians as fundamentalist. The majority of them have no specific relation to the religion or its spiritual worldview.

It is also necessary to note that the abnormally high number of members of the Church of Jedi was definitely affected by an intensive campaign on Facebook and other popular social media a few weeks before the census. The case of the Church of Jedi is a very good example of the disputability of this type of census. It beautifully demonstrates one of the problems in the interpretation of religious affiliation or the role of religion in contemporary modern society.

The above mentioned does not mean that the majority of religious groups are involved in this type of expression of social, cultural or political protest without religious connotation. It's in fact an exception. The rest of them are "regular" religious groups or spiritual movements, which offer a religious, social and cultural alternative to both traditional religious groups and the non-religious majority. Groups that profess sets of ideas connected with New Age are common among them, as well as a wide range of Buddhist groups.⁵

The last census also showed or, to be more precise, confirmed the previously observed tendency toward *believing without belonging* (Davie 1994) in contemporary Czech society. It was the first census, which offered the possibility: *believer without affiliation as a concrete religious group*. This option was chosen by more than 0.7 mil. people. These people are mostly from Bohemia (the Western part of the Czech Republic), live in larger towns and are relatively higher educated. In some regions of the Czech Republic, this group of "believers without belonging" is equal in size to groups of believers-members of concrete religious groups. These regions, which are mostly in the borderlands (former Sudetenland), are also characterized by high numbers of people, who declared that they are non-believers (more than 75 %).

This group of believers without belonging is probably larger because the Czech Statistical Office included answers like "I am a Christian (without specification of concrete affiliation) or "I am Catholic but I am not member of the Catholic Church" among "believers with affiliation". This group, in fact, is not marginal in the context of the Czech society. It comprises about 60 thousand people.

The most "enigmatic" category is a group of people, who declined answering questions on religion and religious affiliation. This group was dramatically larger in 2011 than in two previous censuses.⁶ For some scholars this figure was as surprising as the unanticipated decrease of membership of the majority of religious groups. They (see for example Václavík 2010, Nešpor 2010) argued that in 2001 the relatively low number of people who declined

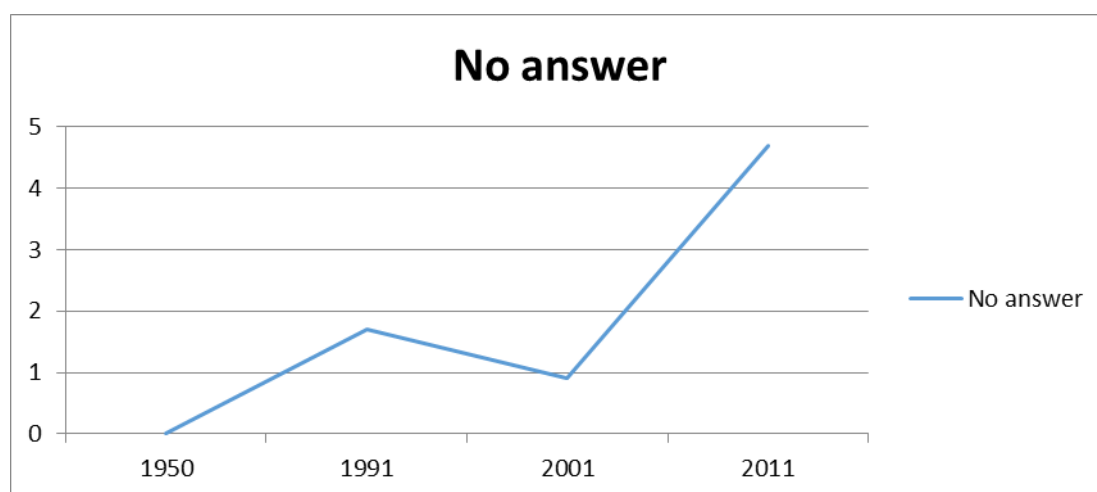
Church (39 276), Orthodox Church in Czech Lands (20 628), Jehova's Witnessess (13 097), Brethern Church (10 872).

⁵ Buddhism is the biggest group. Almost 7,000 Czechs declare themselves as Buddhists.

⁶ This group had 45 % in 2011, about 9 % in 2001 and almost 17 % in 1991.

answering the questionnaire was proof that the position of religion in Czech society has stabilized and the majority of the people considered their relation to religion as an important thing in their life.

Figure 3: Growth in “category” no answer between 1950 and 2011⁷



(Source: Czech Statistical Office)⁸

These results brought into question the claim, which some scholars made,⁹ that the “typical” attitude of the Czech people is based on indifference and that the Czechs don’t regard spiritual or religious questions as important in their lives. I suggest that we can interpret the growth of this category as a consequence of “reinforcement” of *apatheism* in Czech society, which is related to the diminution of traditions and social rituals. This is supported by the almost 40 %, of burials and cremations, which are performed funerals or other rituals.

The last census has confirmed the results of some other surveys, which showed the very weak position of religion, not only in social and political life, but also amongst individuals. I think that this is closely connected to the typical Czech mistrust of institutions in general and with the question of so-called diffuse religiousness. However, for its interpretation we need further quantitative and qualitative research into religion in the Czech Republic that would focus on non-institutionalized, diffuse religiousness of a privatized type (both within traditional forms of religion, as well as in connection with the emergence and existence of new religious movements, which have a low statistical significance but a high social impact). It is also necessary to verify some methodologically important aspects of research into religion under the specific conditions of the Czech Republic (such as differing connotations of the terms ‘religion’, ‘religious person’, ‘religious belief’, ‘believer’, etc.).

⁷ To answer on religious affiliation was obligatory in census in 1950 and even in 1991 (but during this census wasn’t strictly required). It is facultative since 2001.

⁸ http://www.czso.cz/csu/2003edicniplan.nsf/o/41110-03--obyvatelstvo_hlasici_se_k_jednotlivym_cirkvim_a_nabozenskym_spolecnostem [May 28 2014]

⁹ For example David Václavík (Vaclavík 2010) or Zdeněk Nešpor (see Nešpor 2010) or Dana Hamplová and Blanka Řeháková (Hamplová & Řeháková 2009)

References

- Davie, Grace (1994) *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- Fiala, Petr (2007) *Laboratoř sekularizace. Náboženství a politika v ne-náboženské společnosti: český příklad*. Brno: CDK
- Greely, Andrew M. (2003) *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millenium*. New Brunswick – London: Transaction Publishers
- Hamplová, Dana, Blanka Řeháková. (2009) *Česká religiozita na počátku 3. tisíciletí. Výsledky Mezinárodního programu sociálního výzkumu ISSP 2008 - Náboženství*. Sociologické studie / Sociological Studies 09:2. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i.
- McGrath, Alister E. (2002) *The Future of Christianity*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Nešpor, Zdeněk R. (2010) *Příliš slábi ve víře. Česká ne/religiozita v evropském kontextu*. Praha: Kalich
- Tuček, Milan (2003) *Dynamika české společnosti a osudy lidí na přelomu tisíciletí*, Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON)
- Tomka, Miklós and Zuhlenner, Paul (1999) *Religion in den Reformländer Ost(Mittel)Europas*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag
- Václavík, David (2010) *Náboženství a moderní česká společnost*. Praha: Grada