

Cultural and Social Continuity and Discontinuity as Factors of Non-religion. The Case of the Czech Borderland

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The Czech Republic is considered one of the most atheistic countries globally. One of the reasons used to explain the high level of secularization of Czech society and the high level of distrust in religion and religious institutions is the specific historical conditions. In this context, the political anti-Catholicism of a large part of the Czech political elite during the period of the so-called First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) and the influence of the communist regime are mentioned in particular. In my paper, I will try to show that other factors probably played a key role, especially the significant socio-demographic changes associated with the displacement of the German population after the Second World War. World War II and the disruption of traditional ties in the Czech countryside as a result of the so-called collectivization of the countryside (the top-directed elimination of private agriculture and the dismantling of traditional rural structures). Along with this, I will try to show that most of the existing explanations overestimate the role of ideological arguments against religion and, on the contrary, underestimate the influence of factors such as the disruption of collective memory, the reduction of the public visibility of religion and the role of (non-) religious socialization.

Key words: religion, memory, continuity, discontinuity, atheism, Sudetenland, secularity, homogeneity

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Introduction: Genesis and forms of the “Czech” atheism

In the past several years, a series of Czech studies and treatises have been published, dealing with analyses of the attitude of the Czech public towards religion (cf. for

example Václavík, 2010; Václavík, Hamplová, Nešpor, 2018; Nešpor, 2010; Nešpor, 2020; Havlíček, 2020; Váně et al., 2018; Havlíček, Klingorová et al., 2020) and they involved rather a harsh view on the wide-spread notion claiming the Czech society to be the most atheistic one in current Europe (cf., e.g., Greely, 2004; Borowik, Ančić, Tyrala, 2013; Keysar, Navarro-Rivera, 2013). The nature of such criticism is based on the argument stating that the idea of a high rate of atheisation of the Czech society comes from an inadequate understanding of the characteristics of the contemporary Czech religiosity, the key aspect of which is a relatively significant tendency to privatize and individualize religiosity linked to a strong mistrust of traditional religious institutions and organizations. This argument, however, is grounded on historic-anthropological analyses as well as selected research (ISSP, DIN, EVS,¹ PCE), which the aforementioned authors claim to prove the unfounded and no longer sustainable attitude of mistaking the “Czech atheism” for the “Czech individualized and privatized spirituality”.²

Results of this research cast doubts on the deeply rooted and often proclaimed stereotypes of Czechs as the most atheistic nation in the world. Simultaneously, they show the necessity to perceive the “Czech example”, at least within the context of the countries of the former Soviet bloc, as a specific example of a kind requiring searching for another “alternative theoretic framework” so as to interpret the relation of a religion and society in the present time Central and Eastern Europe (cf., e.g., Václavík, 2010).

In order to adequately understand the complicated and not always clear relationship of Czechs towards religion, at least a brief description is required to present some key events that shaped its current form throughout the 20th century. These concern predominantly dramatic political, social as well as demographical changes, which took place in the Czech society for the past one hundred years.

It was already the era of the so-called first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) that indicated, which direction the attitudes toward religion and religious institutions might take. The main aspects may be a growing distrust of religious institutions, tendency to privatize religion and a developing religious indifferentism. The development in that period showed that it was the position vis-a-vis the dominant catholic church, which played the crucial role in the changing relationship of Czechs toward religion. The most dramatic events took place in the first years of the existence of the independent state, i.e., approximately until 1925 (cf. Paces, 1999). Comparing the population census data of 1910 and 1921 shows that the catholic church lost more

1 ISSP = International Social Survey Program, DIN = Detraditionalization and Individualization of Religion in the Czech Republic, EVS = European Value Study.

2 These authors tend to quote a relatively frequently quoted project *Political Culture in Central and Eastern Europe* (hereinafter as “PCE”) led by the German sociologist Detlef Pollack, which focused on the position of religion in eleven post-communist countries. According to this research, only 28% of Czechs declared themselves to be members of a church or a religious society, only 31% trust churches, 11% participated in religious ceremonies frequently, at least once a month, but also 41% of respondents claimed to believe in God. At the same time, 41% of Czechs believed in reincarnation fully or partially, 64% in the functioning astrology and 43% in the possibility to be healed by faith. For more details, see Pollack, Müller, 2006.

than 1,200,000 its members in this period. This decline was rather differentiated though, given religious and national differences. It concerned almost exclusively Bohemia, much less Moravia and Silesia and “renegades” were predominantly of Czech nationality, with a negligible percentage of Czech (Sudeten) Germans. For those, however, an intensified identification with religion might be one of reactions to changes of the political situation, in which they lost the position of a dominant nation and became a much-weakened minority.

After the World War Two, the described trends were strengthened by two factors: removal of the German minority (approx. 2.6 million people) from the Czech border regions in 1945–1947, and establishment of the communist regime in 1948. Consequently, to removing the German population, the renewed republic lost a sizeable portion of inhabitants who declared their support for catholic faith. Yet, the removal had a noticeable impact on other denominations, too, some of those ceased to exist in Czechoslovakia (e.g., the German Protestant Church). This issue will be dealt with in more detail in the following parts of the study, as it is essential for the main topic thereof.

After 1948, when communist regime was established, social, demographic and cultural changes of the Czech society continued, which became evident e.g., in a significant decline in participation in religious activities, which took place in 1960s and then in mid-1970s. In this respect, it is necessary to note that the communist regime did not bring a distinctly new concept of the relationship towards religion, it just used the already established and known trends and the ideological anchoring thereof (e.g., anti-clericalism of numerous intellectuals). In other words; in the Czech context, the classical Marxist interpretation of religion was linked to the nationally oriented anti-Catholicism of the first republic, which added credibility to that. Still, it did not cause any radical change of position of the Czech society towards religion (cf., e.g., Bubík, Václavík, 2020: 76). It only deepened the distrust of religious institutions, enhanced the religious indifferentism of a substantial portion of the population and succeeded in spreading and intensifying the “religious illiteracy”, yet it did not induce a conscious atheisation of the Czech society (cf., e.g., Nešpor, 2018; Václavík, Hamplová, Nešpor, 2018).

The deepening indifference towards religion had rather ambivalent consequences. On one hand, it caused the position of religion to be marginalized also in a personal life of an average Czech, on the other, religion was still considered to be “anti-regime”, thus it involved attraction of a protest and an alternative, yet it did not equal identification with religion as a life-long stand. This fact showed itself fully when the communist regime lost last bits of legitimacy after 1968 as perceived by vast majority of population. Gradually, at the latest since the late 1970s and early 1980s, religious entities, especially the catholic church, but in a sense religion as such, became statement of alternative, otherness and, in a way, of hope for not a negligible part of the society. The hope was “political” though, not linked to an attempt to find a new way of life. That was increasingly influenced by consumerism and individualized materialism.³

3 In the 1970s and 1980s, many countries of the so-called Soviet bloc underwent a social and cultural transformation towards a society based on a culture of consumption, especially, but not only, material

The situation following political changes brought about by the fall of the communist regime at the end of 1989, except for certain “turbulences” in the early 1990s, pursued the trend started before. In some respects, this was confirmed both by the data of the census and specialized research. Basically, all confirm several clearly identified trends. (1) Significant decrease of influence and confidence in traditional religious institutions and systems of ideas and values they represent,⁴ (2) gradual increase of alternative and privatized forms of religiosity,⁵ (3) sustained regional differences over two axes – West-East axis and border areas – inland axis⁶ and finally, (4) relatively high rate of lack of interest in religion.⁷ Trends under 1, 2, and 3 were and often still are taken for evidence or causes of high rate of atheisation of the Czech

consumption and the preference for individual needs and interests over collective and social interests. Due to the economic constraints imposed by a centrally controlled economy, these preferences were not as visible as in countries with developed market economies.

- 4 All large, so-called traditional denominations have been losing their membership from 1991 until present. With some, the speed is so fast that they become marginal religious groups. To corroborate this trend, it is possible to compare membership numbers of three main traditional churches – Catholic Church, Church of Brethren and Czechoslovak Hussite Church. While in 1991, Catholic Church counted some 4 million Czechs, in 2021, the number was only 741,000. Even worse situation is that of the other two churches – Church of Brethren counted 204,000 believers in 1991, while it was 33,000 in 2021. In 1991, Czechoslovak Hussite Church had 178,000 members, in 2021 only 24,000. For more information, see <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/religious-beliefs> (accessed July 15, 2022).
- 5 In terms of methodology, it is quite difficult to quantify this category. Thus, it was appropriate to divide it into several sub-categories – (1) In the Czech environment, historically non-traditional small Christian churches (usually based on the protestant tradition). Included here are groups like Church of Brethren, Jehova’s Witnesses or Unity of the Brethren Baptists. Generally, this concerns smaller groups having several hundred up to 15,000 members. As opposed to traditional churches, these groups have grown in terms of membership numbers for the past thirty years. (2) This sub-category includes groups linked to some of large religious traditions, e.g., Buddhism, Islam or Hinduism. These groups were marginal and unorganized before 1989. They too have seen a boom after 1989, which is evidenced by growing numbers of members of different Buddhism-related groups. (3) People who consider themselves to have religious or spiritual leanings but refuse to declare themselves explicitly as followers of a specific church or tradition. While in 1991, this category involved 21,000 inhabitants of the Czech Republic, in 2021, the number rose to 960,000. For more details, see for instance Havlíček, 2021; Havlíček, Klingorová, 2019; Nešpor, 2018; Váně et al., 2018.
- 6 The first axis, i.e., the West-East one was apparent already under the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). In the Western part forming a historical area of Bohemia, there were lot more people declaring themselves as nondenominational than in the Eastern part formed by historical regions of Moravia and Silesia. Exceptions were found in districts with the German minority, where a higher religiosity rate was perceived than in those where the Czech population lived. The other axis, border area – inland, appeared as a consequence of demographic changes brought about especially by the post-war removal of the German speaking inhabitants. The creation and consequences of that will be treated in the following parts of this study.
- 7 Even for this sub-category, the quantification is rather tricky. It is impossible to rely on census data only, mainly the item concerning the number of inhabitants who did not answer the question of religious denomination (Váně et al., 2018: 58). Other data have to be used, too, which concern trust in religious institutions, willingness to take part in activities linked to religion and organizations, which tend to be connected to that, or the importance of religious activities for an individual human life. In all these areas, both relevant international (ISSP, EVS, AUFBRUCH) and national (DIN, CaDRM) sociological surveys show a large number of people, their relationship towards religion being indifferent rather than explicitly refusing.

society. The reality is much more complicated, however. The following chapter shall try to present that as well as the issue of how to grasp the phenomenon of atheism in contemporary social sciences.

Methodological discussion

For a long time, the notion of atheism was used with reference to the application of the term in a modern and contemporary philosophy (cf. Gray, 2018; McGrath, 2005; Watson, 2014). Because of this, atheism was considered to be rather a comprehensible and clearly applicable category. The notion of atheism, in this context, is defined as knowing, explicit and ideologically/opinion-related refusal of existence of a supernatural reality (cf., e.g., in Craig, 1998; or Lyngzeitson, 2003). Or, as in line with one of the modern theoreticians, George Hamilton Smith, a distinction of agnosticism and atheism is made.

Agnosticism reflects generally Smith's category of implicit atheism, which is claimed to be such an attitude, which is characterized by absence of theistic concepts without a knowing refusal of these. The proposed definition of explicit atheism, however, is such a stand, which refuses such concepts knowingly (cf. Smith, 1979: 13ff). This way of using the term and concept of atheism in the Czech environment corresponds in many ways, unknowingly though in many respects, to the contemporary world debate devoted to this phenomenon (cf., e.g., Dawkins, 2008; Haidt, 2012).

Author of this study believe however, that in order to explain the ambiguous and complicated relationship of the contemporary Czech society towards religion,⁸ and to identify the elementary aspects, bases and determinants, it is necessary to re-evaluate the use of the afore-mentioned idea of atheism and apply rather more subtle concepts connected to this notion as well as use knowledge conferred to the study of the atheism phenomenon in the past years by psychology, anthropology or sociology.⁹

A certain base is offered in the typology of atheism presented by two present psychologists of religion, Ara Norenzayan and Will Gervais (Norenzayan, Gervais, 2013). According to them, it is possible to use reference to some current psychological and socio-psychological concepts of religion to differentiate several key mechanisms behind religious faith creating the framework to interpret religion as a system involving religious views as well as behaviour and systems of values and symbols linked to these. This refers mainly to cognition, motivation and cultural learning. In their view, religion is perceived as group culturally evolutionist adaptation increasing

8 Similarly, to, e.g., Jörg Stolz I deem it appropriate to distinguish *religion* and *religiosity*. Considering religion as a term denoting the entire system of culture and symbols including ideas, practice, values and symbols, religiosity is understood as individual preferences, emotions, views and actions related to the existing religion (cf., Stolz, 2009: 347).

9 The following classification has been used in the published study *Czech Republic: The Promised Land for Atheist?* (Vido, Václavík, Paleček, 2016).

cooperation and cohesion within a group, while religious non-worldly elements are viewed as proximate mechanisms used to motivate this group adaptive behaviour (Kundt, 2014: 63n).¹⁰

For this concept of religion and its role in eliminating social anomies, Norenzayan proposes to distinguish four rather distinct forms of atheism referring to older theories and concepts. The first one, which he calls a “mind-blind atheism” (cf., e.g., Norenzayan, 2013: 178) and which is in a way related to Smith’s category of implicit atheism. This type expresses the cognitive inability to imagine and work with concepts, which religion is built on. This concerns mainly the concept of God or Gods as supernatural agents and the inability to personalize them and form a relationship towards them (Norenzayan, Gervais, 2013: 21). Such a type of atheism is often expressed as cognitive disorders linked to autism spectrum. Thus, it is understandably rather an isolated form of atheism having specific impact on society, its social and cultural importance is quite low, and it is worth dealing with only when studying individual religiosity.

The second one, defined as “analytic atheism” is understood both as explicit and implied refusal of religious concepts based on a rational and analytic approach, which tends to block or even obliterates the intuitive support of religious ideas, supporting rather the religious scepticism. This type of atheism is expressed by the so-called new atheism linked to authors like R. Dawkins, Ch. Hitchens, S. Harris or D. Dennett. It involves older systems, too, such as enlightenment-scientistic atheism promoted for example by the Freethought movement or the Marxist atheism.

The social and cultural impact of this type of atheism is much larger than that of the preceding type. Within the context of a society where Marxism and its version of atheism (so-called scientific atheism) was present for the larger part of the 20th century (1948–1989) and part of the official ideology and systematically enforced by many different means (for more details, see Bubík, Václavík, 2020), it may seem to be elementary and decisive in a significant manner. Yet, there are several important reasons to refuse to interpret the current religious situation in the Czech society as a manifestation or consequence of the analytic atheism.

The first one is the fact that this type of atheism is linked to a specific intellectual attitude, the real influence of which on society and its activities is often overestimated

10 It is on this basis that Norenzayan conceives his theory of religion, which he understands primarily as group adaptive behaviour, the elementary function of which lies in eliminating so-called deadheads. He notes that in small communities these dangerous disruptors of social solidarity are eliminated mainly because of personal and immediate experience and knowledge of individual community members. Moving towards large and, basically, anonymous communities, this defence mechanism stops working and its role is played very effectively by religion in a new transformed form, which Norenzayan defines as religion of great Gods (cf., e.g., Norenzayan, 2013: 23), i.e., religious systems based on faith in powerful to omniscient beings, ruthlessly enforcing a fixed moral and social order and being able to punish any trespassing or disturbance even after death. He believes that it is such religions of great Gods and groups related to those that helped create first states and became more successful in terms of culture, society and politics than others.

as it requires continuous rational reflexion and correction related thereto (cf., e.g., Václavík, 2021). This is impossible to expect on a wider scale and will always be confined to a relatively small circle of intellectual or political elites, which may have sufficiently efficient tools of power to turn their attitudes official. Yet, given the exigence of the mechanism of passing over and preservation of such ideas and attitudes related to them their real and long-term influence will be rather small and, above all, will be determined by other external factors in a significant manner. This may explain why the contemporary Czech society's attitude towards religion is so different from those of the Slovak society, while both were parts of a single state, communist Czechoslovakia with the Marxist state ideology (cf., e.g., Tížik, 2011; Nešpor, 2020).

Another reason is the fact that majority of contemporary analyses, be it sociological or historic, show rather well that the communist regime was not the main cause of the problematic relationship of the Czech society towards religion and that it only helped deepen the former distrust of religious institutions and strengthen the religious indifferentism of a significant part of the population, yet it did not cause a knowing atheisation of the Czech society (cf., e.g., Václavík, 2010; Václavík, Hamplová, Nešpor, 2018; Nešpor, 2018).

The third and fourth types of atheism seem to have socio-cultural roots and are related to the shift of the society towards a differentiated community with strong institutions, which take over the pro-social functions of religion (Norenzayan, 2013: 185). The first one may be called "apatheism" and the other incREDulous atheism.

Apatheism refers to such a stand and related decrease of the influence of religion and personal religiosity, which may be generally defined as the consequence of demotivation to sustain and develop religion. In this respect, the attitude towards religion becomes increasingly indifferent and the influence in the society decreases correspondingly. Yet, it is not a demonstration of the process of individualization or privatization of religion, it seems to lead to its social and existential redundancy. In a way, this is a variant of the secularization theory presented by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Norris, Inglehart, 2004), the first axiom of which is the claim relating security to the level of secularization of a society.¹¹

11 Security is understood rather broadly by Norris and Inglehart as a freedom from different types of fears and dangers combining in itself the existential security (systematic or too accidental limitation of the personal freedom, elimination of a danger of a war, possibility of self-development and self-fulfilment), and the social security (socio-economic development and resulting wealth of the society, education, social equality level, working health system, working social system). A sufficient saturation in these areas results in a clear, long-term and stable feeling of security helping to decrease social need as well as individually existential attractiveness of religion. Both authors formulate this succinctly and clearly, e.g. in the study *Why didn't religion disappear? Re-examining the secularization thesis*: "Evidence from 80 societies indicates that due to rising levels of human security, the publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies moving toward more secular orientations. 'Modernization' (the process of industrialization, the rising levels of education and the transition from agrarian to industrial and post-industrial society) greatly weakens the influence of religious institutions making religion subjectively less important an people's lives" (Inglehart, Norris, 2007: 255).

Norenzayan states that a low level of religiosity in many countries of Europe, especially in Scandinavia, may be explained using the concept of apatheism. Norway, Sweden or Denmark are countries with possibly highest indicators of social certainty and social equality in the history of humankind and countries where an elevated level of predictability of one's own life and the feeling of existential security led to a decrease in motivation to perceive God or Gods as source of support (Norenzayan, Gervais, 2013: 21). The American sociologist Phil Zuckerman comes to similar conclusions in his work *Society without God* (Zuckerman, 2008). The absence or low need to participate in religious life is claimed by Zuckerman to be caused by several factors, among which the key role is played by the ability of the society as such to propose a credible secular alternative to the cooperative-cohesive function of religion. The paternalistic social state of the Scandinavian type with a working state administration, police, system of courts and other institutions (e.g., schools) lead the population both to a prominent level of trust in the operation of such institutions and, as a consequence, in the state, and the elevated level of personal satisfaction, happiness and self-fulfilment.

The final fourth type of atheism is the so-called "InCREDulous" atheism. It is caused by the fact that people fail to receive sufficient cultural impulses to strengthen and sustain their belief that any supernatural beings are sufficiently powerful or even real (cf. Gervais, Shariff, Norenzayan, 2011). This type is based on work of Joseph Henrich (Henrich, 2009) and Jonathan Lanman (Lanman, 2012), which show that people in general prefer following such ideas and concepts and mirroring such ways of behaviour, which are considered to be normative and generally shared and are presented and supported by key or significant figures of their own group. In other words; we imitate such behaviour models and patterns, which increase credibility enhancing displays (CREDS) in the given community.¹²

This is the hypothesis, which the anthropologist Jonatan Lanman used to explore some Western-European societies, especially the Scandinavian ones, as he is convinced that it is the low level of the "demonstrated/displayed religiosity",¹³ which plays the key role in the growing numbers of unbelievers in the entire population of these countries. He presents the fact that it is highly probable that parents, who declare themselves formally as followers of a religion without participating in key activities of their religious groups, tend to have children who will declare themselves as unbelievers (Lanman, 2012: 49–65). Such conclusions correspond to many notions

12 Joseph Henrich considers CREDS to be specific but socially particularly important and wide-spread way of behaviour, i.e., such behaviour, which may be very costly in some cases (e.g., celibacy or fasting), and it can only be accepted, shared and adhered to by those who are sufficiently devoted to the group's values. For such manifestation to be successful from a cultural point of view, it needs not only to be promoted verbally, but it has to be mirrored in a real behaviour (Jerotijević, Maňo, 2014: 163).

13 I use the term demonstrated/displayed religiosity to refer to a set of visible manifestations of religious behaviour and actions, such as active participation in religious services and other collective rituals, the visible performance of other religious acts (e.g. personal prayer), but also the use of sacred gestures and symbols as meaningful and intelligible parts of everyday life.

gathered in relation to the research of the role of (other than) religious socialization in modern societies (Inglehart, 1997; McCaffree, 2017) and which have already been applied to the Czech society partially (Paleček, Vido, 2014; Vido, Václavík, Paleček, 2016; Váně et al., 2018).

The afore-mentioned categories or types of atheism have to be perceived as ideal types in a Weberian sense of the word. In the real-live society, I can find mutual combinations and possible variants thereof. The current research activities show that the two last mentioned types – apatheism and inCREDulous atheism – get often combined and strengthened. They form a specific milieu that significantly increases the plausibility of religion's declining role in public life and religiosity in personal life. In many contemporary societies, the economic, social and existential safeties are intricately linked to a state-guaranteed social and healthcare systems anchored in the concept of a state of law, which guarantees both elementary human rights ensuring personal freedom and security, and social rights presenting people with basic social certainties at a relatively elevated level.

I argue that a similar starting point may be applied to the contemporary Czech society as well so as to examine whether the so-called present Czech atheism is not caused by specific political and historical events but that it is rather a product of a modernization of the Czech society, where an important role was played by paternalistic state concepts, a broadly conceived and relatively working social system complemented or even significantly stressed by other aspects including pronounced demographical shifts in the second half of the 20th century, which helped to increase the influence of the state and to “cling” to a certain form of a collective paternalism and brought about the almost absolute ethnic and cultural homogenisation of the Czech society.

While I realize the narrow structural cohesion of apatheism and, as a consequence, of the role of existential security in the broadest sense of the word, and the inCREDulous atheism, I believe that in the case of the Czech society, it is demotivation and gradual loss of understandability to present religious acts and active participation in these, which played and still play a much more important role. At the same time, I suppose that while the Czech society is one of the most homogeneous societies in the present day Europe and possible in the world,¹⁴ the area of religion shows that this homogeneity does not apply in many cases, not only in the relatively obvious comparison of cities to countryside, but especially in broader regional differences, which may be defined using the two aforementioned axes of differentiation.

14 While before the Second World War, more than 40% of the population of the Czech lands were ethnic minorities (mainly Germans, Jews and Poles), today, more than 95% of the population in the Czech lands claim Czech nationality. The cause of this change is the significant socio-demographic changes brought about by the Second World War and its aftermath. These changes will be analysed in more detail in the following chapter. However, as in other European countries, the importance of different types of collective identities, such as religious identity, is also decreasing.

Sudetenland as a laboratory

Aside from a several times quoted study *The Czech Republic: The Promised Land for Atheist?* (Vido, Václavík, Paleček, 2016), one of the first systematic attempts to explain the so-called Czech atheism in another way than simply as a consequence of the communist regime or influence of anti-religious elites was the study by A. K. Willard and L. Cingl *Testing Theories of Secularization and Religious Belief in the Czech Republic and Slovakia* (Willard, Cingl, 2017). In a convincing manner, the authors try to analyse the application of aforementioned models on the environment of Czech and Slovak societies. For me, the most important is the analysis of applicability of the so-called apatheistic model, which is largely used by a series of authors – from psychologists to economists and sociologists.¹⁵ At first sight, this model seems to be sufficiently relevant to explain the prominent level of “atheisation” of the Czech society.

Similarly to the case of Scandinavian societies, to which it was generally applied (cf. Zukermann, 2008; Norenzayan, 2013; Norris, Inghart, 2004), it stresses a relatively high level of socio-economic equality, working and robust social system, low level of extreme poverty and generally rather a low proportion of relatively poor people in the overall population (cf., e.g., Minárik, 2014; World Bank, 2021). Also, the study by Willard & Cingl concludes that presented factors have measurable impact on the level of religiosity but cannot be used to explain the low level of religiosity as such. To relevantly confirm this assertion, they present comparison of the situation in the Czech and Slovak societies, which show similar characteristics in other indicators bar one (unemployment rate). Yet, these are societies, which differ largely in the overall level of religiosity (Willard, Cingl, 2017: 610).

I suppose that the general applicability of existential security model (see above), which is truly relevant in Scandinavian societies, fails for two principal reasons. The first one is a strong arbitrariness of data especially when it concerns definition of poverty and extreme poverty. Using long-established methods of international organizations like IMF, WB or EU, the rate of poverty is relatively low in the Czech society (even lower than in most Scandinavian countries). Yet, it has to be noted that a relatively substantial portion of the Czech society lies in the category where it is the matter of a few tens of Euros per month whether they will be considered poor or not. The level of their real uncertainty can therefore be as high as with those, who have already fallen below the poverty line from the statistic point of view (cf., e.g., Prokop, 2020). Another reason is that the majority of authors promoting this model uses the level of economic and existential certainty to define trust in non-religious institutions. Simply put, the secular state and its institutions become more trustworthy if they are able to eliminate existential threats efficiently (poverty, crime, diseases, etc.). Thus,

¹⁵ Specific authors tend to define the said model quite differently. Aside from the term of apatheism used herein, we may see for example the notion of an existential insecurity model (Norris, Inghart, 2004).

they lower the need for and importance of religious institutions, which causes the role and importance of religion in a society to weaken. It seems that this positive correlation is true in societies such as the Scandinavian ones. In the Czech society, as well as in the Slovak one and other so-called post-communist ones, it is certainly not the case. According to available data, the level of trust in the state institutions is exceptionally low in the Czech Republic (cf. CVVM,¹⁶ 2022) while trust in religious institutions is also extremely low (CVVM, 2021), and, when compared to other states of Europe, the trust in other important institutions of the modern society, such as science, is also very low (Science, 2019).

Let me add another reason to the two aforementioned ones, however specific it may seem. This is based on a characteristic of regional differentiation of (non)religiosity in the Czech society, mainly that related to the border areas – inland axis. According to the said model, the level of religiosity should be lowest where there is an elevated level of existential uncertainty and vice versa. This is not the case of the Czech society, however. Rather on the contrary. The lowest level of religiosity can be found in regions, which manifest a prominent level of existential uncertainty for a long time.¹⁷ These regions overlap the area of former Sudetenland, i.e., areas, which some eighty years ago were among the more religious ones. The obvious question then is: What is the real cause of this change? Or: Can we understand better the shift of the relationship towards religiosity in the whole Czech society by finding it?

The Czech border areas called often as Sudetenland from the turn of the 20th century was a weak spot in the Czech history. This relates to a relatively continuous strip of land along the Northern, Western and Southern border of the Czech land, which was gradually colonized by German speaking population since the 12th century. Given its specific history and characteristics, Sudetenland may be considered as landscape, not just a region. The majority of the population of Sudetenland declared support for Catholicism, even when other than catholic denominations prevailed throughout the country (15th–17th centuries) (Kůrka, 2016: 206). It is there that influential places of pilgrimage were found, the importance of which reached beyond the region or even the country (Macek, Boháč, Boháč, 1995). Throughout the Modern times, the network of monasteries and church-order houses was denser as opposed to the Czech inland areas (cf., e.g., Bobková-Valentová, Janiš, Ondo Grečenková, 2016: 217; Vlček, Sommer, Foltýn, 1997). The situation did not change much after the religious restrictions were weakened (1781), which were in force from 1627 in the country, and which, except for small exceptions (the region of Aš or Těšín), prohibited any other than catholic church (cf., e.g., Šebek, 2006: 83).

16 CVVM = Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (Centre for Public Opinion Research).

17 For a long time, in the areas of the former Sudetenland there is a higher unemployment rate, highest proportion of the so-called socially excluded localities, lower education, higher crime and other socially pathological phenomena (e.g., alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, etc.). Also, key services such as healthcare, secondary or university education, social services, etc. are much less available here (for more details, see Prokop et al., 2019; Korychová, 2017).

The significant shift took place as late as in the second half of the 19th century, when the sizeable portion of Sudetenland became quickly industrialized and urbanized. A generous portion of this area reaching from the town of Aš to Opava in the north-eastern part of the present Czechia was part of an industrially significant and mature zone of the former Austria-Hungary. These socio-demographical changes had significant impact on the form of religiosity, which had been rather traditional and conservative. Primarily, already at this time, rather important shifts of population take place, with the Czech speaking inhabitants moving into new industrialized regions searching for better life perspectives there. This is typical mainly of the mining area around towns of Most, Litvínov and Duchcov, in the so-called Most coal basin. Given the fact that in the second half of the 19th century the Czech speaking population was far more anti-Catholic and anti-clerical, it explains why some parts of Sudetenland saw important anti-religious tendencies already at the beginning of the 20th century (Václavík, 2010: 66–69; Malíř, 2007: 14). This trend grew intense after 1918.

With the creation of Czechoslovakia, the position of the German speaking population at the territory changed. From day to day, it became ethnic minority, which played a much less important role in the new state.¹⁸ It is therefore not surprising that the German speaking population refused to accept the creation of the new state and even tried to separate regions with a German speaking majority from Czechoslovakia shortly after the 1918 proclamation and attach these regions to Austria or Germany (Tóth, Novotný, Stehlík, 2012). This did not concern only changes affecting the political position of Germans brought about by a change in the national composition of the newly established state. Numerous changes impacted religion, too. Given a significantly anti-Catholic rhetoric of a dominant part of mainly Czech political elites, the Catholic Church saw a mass decline of membership numbers during the first years of the independent Czechoslovakia (so-called Exit movement). For three years, more than a million members left Catholic Church (cf., Nešpor, Vojtíšek, 2022a). The vast majority of those came from the Western parts of Czechoslovakia and declared being of Czech nationality. Gradually, most of them entered the newly created Czechoslovak Church (Urban, 1973; Nešpor, 2018)¹⁹ and the rest declared themselves as non-denominational. Thus, it is no wonder that members of the Czechoslovak Church in Sudetenland were few and mostly it concerned Czechs representing the new state (clerks, police officers, soldiers, etc.).

18 In the new Czechoslovakia, in 1921 when the first census took place, there were approximately 7.3 million Czechs, some 2.2 million Slovaks, 3.2 million Germans, 0.7 million Hungarians, 0.5 million Ruthenians and 0.2 million Jews (Demografická ročenka, 2021). For political reasons, the Czech and Slovak ethnic groups were merged into the newly created category of the Czechoslovak nation. The main motivations included to lower the “statistical” proportion of Germans in the newly proclaimed state in an effort to legitimize the weakening of their political influence.

19 Czechoslovak Church (CČS) was created as the so-called “national” church at the beginning of 1920 when a part of clergymen and believers left the Roman Catholic Church, after this church refused to acknowledge their reformist requirements. During that year, the church became recognized by the state. Within a few years, it became second largest Czech church (Nešpor, Vojtíšek, 2022b).

Similarly, the percentage of so-called non-denominationals was much lower than in the Czech inland regions, with one exception only, the region of the Most coal basin, where a numerous Czech community lived (Nešpor, Vojtíšek, 2015: 603–611; Burda et al., 2019a).²⁰ On the other hand, the German speaking population seemed to adhere to own religious traditions as a form of strengthening own identity in the new state. This corresponds to tendencies, which were observable in the following years at other ethnic groups, like Slovaks or Poles (Kvasničková, 2005: 10; Tížik, 2011: 40–44).

This did not mean only demographic changes and shifts caused by the political situation after the Great War. Another key factor, which influenced the religious situation in Sudetenland for years to come, was the growth of the ethnic and religious pluralism. Due to this, the otherwise rather homogeneous area of Sudetenland became much more varied at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries not only from the point of view of ethnicity and nationalities,²¹ but also from the religious point of view. In Sudetenland of that era, apart from the dominating Catholicism and in some regions (especially surroundings of the town of Aš), traditional Lutheranism, it was possible to find several smaller protestant denominations, flourishing Jewish communities and, due to some specific industries (glass production, balneology), some religious traditions exotic to Czech lands, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. Thanks to export-oriented sectors, some parts of Sudetenland were an imaginary window through which new religious traditions and ideas were coming to the Czech lands (Jemelka, Štofanič, 2020: 35).

After the accession of Nazis in Germany in 1933 and especially after 1935, when the nationalist Sudeten German Party (SdP) acquired political monopoly, the majority of German inhabitants started to identify themselves with an aggressively racial nationalism. Strong irredentist tendencies from the post-Great War were restored, too. As a consequence of the aggressive politics of the Hitlerian Germany and appeasement of Western powers, Germany annexed the area of Sudetenland. This resulted in further dramatic shifts. A large part of the Czech population and an important percentage of Jews left Sudetenland. This amounted to more than 170,000 people (Benda, 2013: 130). Further tens of thousands followed after the World War II had broken out. Sudetenland approached the pre-modern homogeneity.

The consequences of the World War II were even more dramatic and, for Sudetenland, fatal. Similarly to many other countries of the Central and Eastern

20 Czech population kept migrating to Sudetenland after 1918, too. Aside from the aforementioned Most coal basin, they moved to other industrial areas, like the agglomeration of Liberec (Burda et al., 2019b: 179). In addition to workers who were leaving for Sudetenland in large numbers already before 1918, new groups of population fled to regions with German speaking population, to represent the newly established Czechoslovak state. This concerned mainly clerks, government employees (post, railways) or members of police and army.

21 Apart from the said Czech population coming to Sudetenland in larger numbers due to industrialization and then to proclamation of Czechoslovakia, the numbers of inhabitants declaring themselves as being of Jewish nationality grew as well. Various towns in Sudetenland, e.g., Teplice, Liberec or Carlsbad had some of the largest Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia (cf., e.g., Čapková, Kieval, *Eds.*, 2022).

Europe, mass moving of population became part of the new political order, which was understood within the Czech context as the basis of the final solution of the Czech-German confrontation and the final fulfilment of the vision of Czechoslovakia as an ethnically homogeneous state (cf., e.g., Staněk, von Arburg, 2006; Křen, 1990; Brandes, 2003: 367). Within a noticeably brief period of two years, majority of German population was removed from Czechoslovakia. In total, this affected more than 2.6 million German speaking people (Frommer, 2010: 61).²² Sudetenland became depopulated region. Given this area's great economic importance it was necessary to repopulate it as quickly as possible. As opposed to the neighbouring Poland, whose borders moved significantly Westward due to the outcome of the Yalta conference, leaving its Eastern regions to Soviet Union, it was impossible to repopulate Sudetenland by moving population from the areas which became part of another state. Thus, it was required to motivate distinct groups of people to accept this "task" and adopt it. To this end, a large scale of tools was used from advertisement to financial and property motivating factors (cf., Wiedemann, 2016: 110–182). At first, however, the aim was especially to populate the border regions as quickly as possible, only then (since the end of 1946) attempts to systematically populate the area using vital groups of professions appeared.

The removal of Germans and repopulation of border regions connected to that happened in several phases, while the first one, disorderly, also called a wild removal, took only several months (approximately until autumn 1945), yet it had the most violent characteristics and most of German victims died during that phase. It was at this time, that mass pillaging and destruction of property took place. After the victorious powers finally approved the plan to remove German population at the Potsdam conference, another phase began, that of an organized removal, which ended in 1947. Czechoslovak authorities attempted to ensure economic operation of essential businesses as smoothly as possible, which turned out to be a very uneasy task.

At the beginning, border regions, attracted people who were not qualified for specific industries. Very often, these were young people looking for an unspecified future, or even adventure in the border regions. New inhabitants quite often returned back to inland after several months or a few years since their ideas of a new life were not fulfilled. Economic reasons played a role in it, too, since border regions offered lower wages than inland. Inland settlers came from all parts of the republic. Their origin was dissimilar, but their social characteristics showed a kind of a homogeneity. Who had things to lose and did not hope to obtain much, did not leave their inland homes. If, however, there was a hope to improve one's social position, even though the situation in the place of origin was stable and economic situation not bad, moving was an option (Wiedemann, 2016: 299).²³

22 In 1930, 3.2 million Germans lived in Czechoslovakia. In 1950, this number fell to only 0.17 million Germans.

23 The idea that new settlers from inland districts came only from socially weak, worse off layers from agricultural regions and an impoverished urban proletariat, is not quite fitting. New settlers included

The important fact was that the population of the Czech border regions took part by a transfer of individuals under the supervision from above, it did not concern whole communities as it was the case in populating Silesia in Poland (cf. Eggers-Dymarski, Gizewska, Lenk, Pfeifer, 2016). The exception was some groups of re-emigrants from the Eastern Europe, especially communities of Volhynian Czechs who settled in border regions in larger communities.²⁴ In this respect it is worth noting that the newcomers from different parts of the republic had to create the whole network of social links (Školl, 1983) and reset the social capital, which otherwise takes very long to build (Bourdieu, 1977). New social capital started to form and cumulate in specific conditions of a certain value, social and cultural disruption usually regardless of traditional patterns and mechanisms.

Another key factor of populating Sudetenland was that it happened *de facto* in obedience to orders from the communist party, which controlled two key ministries for the task – Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Agriculture. Here, it was not only the question of filling the most important positions in settlement institutions, as the communists insisted, but also that of taking control of this political sphere. There seems to be another question, whether communists did not use border regions as a kind of an experimental field to build and reconstruct Czechoslovakia in a socialist state system after 1948 (Wiedemann, 2016: 59).

The said way of populating the originally German ethnic border regions had several crucial consequences. The first one was the shift in a demographic structure of population. It was not obviously only the fact that the German speaking inhabitants were replaced by the Czech ones, but mainly that new settlers brought new attitudes towards religion with them. Most of them had rather a complicated position. It was mainly two substantial facts that played a role in that. First, as discussed above, a large part of settlers were young people who were born or grew up after 1918 and their socialization took place under the influence of the official anticlericalism and anti-Catholicism of the Czech political representation of the first Czechoslovak Republic. The result was that a large part of new inhabitants of Sudetenland did not identify with the predominant Catholicism. Very problematic was also the identification with protestant traditions as most protestant denominations were intricately linked to the German environment (Heinke-Probst, 2012). Some denominations actually ceased to exist after Germans were removed from Czechoslovakia.²⁵ A part of newcomers

members of urban middle classes who aspired to become national administrators in medium and large companies. It is necessary to distinguish settlers who came to border districts in the first weeks and months after the war from those who came in terms of the organized settlement policy (Wiedemann, 2016: 300).

- 24 From the perspective of the studied topic, it is to be noted that this concerned mainly Orthodox faith followers, who contributed largely to forming of the new aspect of the Orthodox Church in Czechoslovakia. After 1945, Sudetenland became therefore one of centres of the Orthodox faith, however marginal it had been before (cf. Havlíček, 2017: 68).
- 25 The German Church of Augsburg Confession ceased to exist. The removal affected also other non-Catholic denominations, e.g., New Apostolic Church or Old Catholic Church, which had to undergo a fundamental change.

declared their support of the Czechoslovak Church, especially in the surroundings of Liberec. This is caused by the fact that an important percentage of settlers came from Czech regions, which adjoined the German ones (Wiedemann, 2016: 230). The Liberec region welcomed Czech from a region, which used to be one of centres and strongholds of the Czechoslovak Church since its creation in 1920.²⁶ A larger part had rather a half-hearted or strongly indifferent attitude towards religion. Second, given the influence and role of the Communist party in the process of populating the region, the settlers, who were close to the party, were privileged obtaining therefore better positions, which caused them to stay longer in Sudetenland than others. Gradually, the Communist party acquired rather an exclusive position among settlers, long before the communist coup in 1948.²⁷

The aforementioned processes weakened the role and position of traditional religious groups in the region of Sudetenland. This has to be completed by the fact that the removal of the German speaking population resulted in almost complete elimination of the “religious infrastructure”. Together with the others, the priests, friars, nuns and preachers were removed (Kocian, Němeček, Zudová-Lešková, 2016: 454). Churches, if they existed and were allowed to operate legally, lacked human resources and means to compensate for the losses. The result was not only a limitation of ritual activities but also that of pastoral work and simple maintaining of church-related buildings and religious objects.²⁸

These facts became to appear even more radically after 1948, when the Communist party took power in Czechoslovakia. As opposed to inland, mainly countryside regions (Moravia, Highlands, Southern Bohemia), where the Catholic Church was traditionally very strong, the Catholic Church was unable to rely on strong communities in Sudetenland. Thus, the spiritual and material devastations were even more dramatic here.²⁹ With reference to this, quite an important change affected the environment to form the cultural capital (cf., Bourdieu, 1986).

All this weakened religion not only on the institutional or infrastructural levels, but also in everyday life of new coming inhabitants of the border regions. The willingness and ability of new inhabitants of Sudetenland to identify with the traditional religious milieu were exceptionally low. The same applied to efficiency and need to bring religious

26 The founder of the Czechoslovak Church, Mr. Karel Farský, came from the Semily region, which is adjacent to the Liberec part of Sudetenland. This region was and still is one of strongholds of the Czechoslovak Church, today called Czechoslovak Hussite Church.

27 In Sudetenland, the Communist party obtained 53% votes, which was 10% more than the rest of the Czechia. Conversely, the Popular party traditionally connected to Catholicism failed tragically. It obtained more than 20% in the whole Czechia, in Sudetenland only 9% (Sláma, Kaplan, 1986: 58). It was so mainly because a majority of peasants in the newly populated Sudetenland belonged more to the rural proletariat, which was in opposition vis-a-vis the traditional Catholicism and its traditional connection to peasantry.

28 The most affected parishes, in regions of Litoměřice and Olomouc, 371 clergymen were removed but only 88 new priests were ordained until 1963 (Boháč, 1999: 45).

29 Only between 1945 and 1960, 130 villages, almost 3,000 settlements and almost 50,000 other buildings were lost (Kovařík, 2009: 6).

behaviour and acts from the newcomers' regions of origin. In short; an outright discontinuity took place both in the region of religious memory and in processes of the religious socialization. Overall, the trustworthiness of religion and institutions declined together with patterns of acting and behaviour connected to them. Referring to the fourth, so-called inCREDulous model of the contemporary atheism I can declare that the aforesaid facts dramatically shifted the ability of religion to maintain, or even strengthen its credibility. In other words: if, in Sudetenland, there was a situation when people stopped actively participate in religious activities (rituals, religiously interpreted pro-social activities, religiously motivated self-sacrifice), their willingness and ability to take these activities for important and useful declined as well. For Sudetenland, it is important that the reasons of this specific situation were combined and as mentioned above, did not depend on a single factor. In this case, it was the combination of a remarkable weakening or even purposeful elimination of the religious infrastructure, disintegration of religious groups as functional communities helping to create and support social capital, as well as the fatal disruption of the religious memory with its impact on cultural capital just as on the overall comprehensibility and need for religious activities. All this became increasingly apparent in the case of further generations for which the very declaratory appurtenance to a religious tradition or institution became void of meaning. In a way, to describe the consequences of changes, which Sudetenland went through in the past eighty years, I may use a metaphor of a trauma and call this part of the Czech Republic a traumatized land.

These facts help us to explain and understand one more specific aspect of the contemporary religiosity in the region of former Sudetenland. From the point of view of traditional religious groups as the Roman Catholic Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren or the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Sudetenland may be seen as a "spiritual desert". From the point of small and alternative groups these areas may be perceived rather as a very perspective area. In any case, many Northern Bohemian towns like, e.g., Liberec, Jablonec nad Nisou, Ústí nad Labem, Teplice have a very colourful religious life where non-traditional and alternative religious groups seem to play an increasingly key role. For example, the city of Liberec with a hundred thousand inhabitants, indicated one of the largest numbers of "unbelievers" (cf., Census, 2022). As opposed to traditional religious groups, which experience a sensible decline in numbers of members, a series of smaller and alternative religious groups settled and succeeded in this town including one of the most dynamic and charismatic churches, the Unity of the Brethren, as well as, e.g., Transcendental Meditation, which chose Liberec for its Czech headquarters.³⁰

While the said groups differ from one another in terms of their origin, goals, strategies, etc., they still have a lot of substantial aspects in common – they are capable of a relatively effective mobilization, motivate their members or supporters to

30 Many alternative or new religious movements, which are active in Liberec or were so at the beginning of the new millennium include, e.g., Bahá'í Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, Grail Movement, Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishna Movement, Yoga in Daily Life, Cultural Association New Acropolis, Golden Mind, Vajradhatu-Shambhala, Diamond Way Buddhism, International Association of Reiki.

participate actively and often stress the role of a community for the religious as well as personal life of an individual. Coming back to the metaphor of Sudetenland as a traumatized land, I can say that successful groups³¹ will include those, which will be able to propose a trustworthy model to detraumatize this land and stabilize it as a functional, existentially secure and meaningful environment both for a life of an individual and a community.

Final discussion

The area of the so-called Sudetenland provides several precious facts for a better understanding of the changing relationship between modern society and religion. Above all, it allows us to analyse more precisely the complex social, political, economic and cultural processes leading to the various forms of contemporary non-religion. In the preceding pages, I have attempted to show that the many-layered phenomenon of non-religion, which is often affectionately confused with atheism, rarely takes the form of a conscious and deliberate rejection of religion. At the same time, however, I have also tried to show that many other attempts to find a universal model to explain the weakening of religion, especially in its traditional forms, often fail. This is probably mainly because it comes from quite specific environments (e.g. Scandinavian) and is very difficult to transfer elsewhere. Many of the apparent similarities (poverty rates, levels of social inequality, social system capabilities, etc.) prove to be of little consequence on closer inspection. Equally, it turns out that it is crucial to consider other factors, such as the degree of trust in public institutions.

It, therefore, proves necessary to develop somewhat mixed models that take into account both likely 'universalising' principles (e.g. the relationship between the guarantor of existential and existential security and the role and position of religion in different societies) and regional specificities (e.g. dramatic social, demographic and cultural changes). Concerning the latter (regional specificities caused by significant socio-demographic changes), it is important to underline their impact on the (re)creation of collective identity. In the case of the analysed case of the Czech borderland, it is primarily about the significant discontinuity in historical memory and the (re)construction of the locality as a cultural space. With the displacement of the indigenous population (Sudeten Germans), many of its key points (culturally and historically significant places) cease to be comprehensible and often even acceptable. The "network of meanings" that this cultural space creates is thus changing dramatically. Considering that religious places and institutions have also played a significant role in this network of meanings, which are being significantly reduced

31 The degree of success, in this case, cannot, of course, be measured by the ability to reach the largest possible population but rather by the ability to reach various socially and culturally marginalised and traumatised groups. A particular, quantifiable indicator is the degree and dimension of activities (religious, social or cultural) over a longer time series.

either by external interventions (e.g. the destruction of the infrastructure of religious institutions) or by their gradual abandonment, as they have no greater meaning for the newly emerging communities, it is pretty understandable that the above changes are reflected in the character of religiosity of the newly emerging society.

The example of the former Sudetenland shows how essential and valuable such a combined approach is. In many ways, this specific area (not only in the context of the Czechia but also in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe) is actually a kind of imaginary laboratory that allows us to understand better the role played by other important phenomena. In particular, phenomena include discontinuities in cultural and historical memory, social and cultural trauma, or the breakdown of natural communities. That is, phenomena that are very close to what the Hungarian scholar of religion and sociologist of religion András Máté-Tóth calls wounded collective identity (cf. Máté-Tóth, 2019; Máté-Tóth, 2022; Máté-Tóth, Nagy, Szilárdi, 2020).

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