



TOMÁŠ BUBÍK, ATKO REMMEL, DAVID VÁCLAVÍK (Eds.):
Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe.
The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion
Routledge, Abingdon & New York, 2020, 348 p.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.4.43> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i.
© 2022, Bahdan Serdziuk. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

When we think of atheism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the first thing that comes to mind is Marxist “scientific atheism”. However, the history and (not least) the theory of atheism and freethinking go far beyond the framework of the socialist period in the history of CEE. This was perfectly demonstrated by the team of authors of this edition.

Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe. The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion is the result of the collective work of more than twenty researchers from twelve CEE countries. The study brought together scholars from various schools, approaches and fields of the humanities. Tomáš Bubík, Atko Rimmel and David Václavík edited the publication.

The phenomenon of atheism after the fall of socialism acquired a negative connotation. It was a painful topic and largely left the scientific discourse for a long time. This publication, which for the first time brought together modern CEE researchers of atheism, speaks of a change in the “scientific generation” and the beginning of a new era in the study of atheism and freethinking in CEE.

Atheism is a rather “elusive” concept. In modern research, scientists often abandon attempts to build a comprehensive definition of the concept of atheism and define it based on the needs of their research. The same applies to this edition. The book does not begin with the words “atheism is...”. Moreover, a number of authors of the book do not even have a single definition of atheism within their own thematic block, and, following the approach of C. Campbell, use different definitions, depending on the historical or social context being described (Campbell, 1971).

The study of these phenomena of irreligiousness is complicated by the fact that often one definition describes ideas that differ significantly from each other. In addition, we often deal with moving boundaries between freethinking, atheism, theomachism, godlessness, irreligiosity, rationalism and anti-clericalism. Although each of these terms means something different, in practice (usually in controversy) they are often confused, especially when they function as epithets. Some of the authors of this publication summarize these terms under one umbrella term, while others go into details and shades of meaning. This feature gives the reader a chance to see the palette of different approaches to understanding the phenomenon of atheism in all its diversity.

Nearly all the case studies included in the book have shown that during the course of the 20th century the category of atheism or irreligion underwent a fundamental transformation. While at the beginning of the 20th century it was understood primarily as an ideological stance that rejected traditional religious interpretations and institutions as unsustainable and obsolete (anticlericalism), at the end of the 20th century atheism was more of a form of ignoring religion due to its inappropriateness, inapplicability in personal and social life.

The history of CEE atheism in this study is divided into a number of stages (the number depends on the approach of the authors). These stages are chronologically approximately the same in the CEE countries, however, the local cultural characteristics of the regions have formed in different CEE countries not only a different history, but also a different theory of atheism. It is important to emphasize here that in addition to the ambiguity and versatility of atheism in CEE, the study once again demonstrates that, despite the apparent homogeneity, the CEE region itself is a fairly differentiated space.

For instance, the publication substantiates that the productivity of the ideas of anti-clericalism at the first stage of the development of atheism in CEE depended on geographical, linguistic and cultural proximity to the main centers of the Enlightenment, i.e. to France and Germany. Thus, those CEE countries that were under German cultural influence were logically affected earlier and to a greater extent than countries more distant from such influence (for example, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Ukraine).

In addition, speaking of the first stage of the development of atheism, the authors note that in the 19th century the main theorists of “romantic” nationalism in a number of CEE countries were concurrently prominent theorists of atheism. It is worth noting that the issue of the relationship between nationalism and religiosity has a fairly long history of study (Schulze Wessel, *Ed.*, 2006). This edition offers a perspective and promising look at the relationship between nationalism and irreligion. This relationship is discussed in particular detail in the chapters on the Czech Republic and Estonia and is an important contribution of this study.

The next stage in the development of atheism in CEE was associated with the establishment of Marxist-Leninist “scientific atheism” in the CEE countries in the paradigm of dialectical materialism. Based on many examples, the authors show that, depending on the local political and cultural characteristics of countries, the methods of spreading this ideology varied. In addition, and not least, the study emphasizes that this form of atheism was not monolithic, but developed, changing directives and methods of implementation. For instance, if in the early stages of spreading this atheism meant an open struggle against religion, then at later stages it began to act through enlightenment and the creation of a secular alternative to religious actions (rites of passage, etc.).

In the description of this stage in the development of atheism in CEE, the reader will find a lot of valuable material. For example, in the “Polish” and “Lithuanian” chapters there is an excellent description of the process of socialist secularization of the rites of passage. An important contribution of this publication is the part of the “Russian” chapter, which presents an analysis of the philosophy of scientific atheism. The part of the “Ukrainian” chapter of this edition, which presents a unique analysis of the methodology of the Marxist analysis of theology of the 20th century, is also very valuable.

The authors repeatedly emphasize that due to the different individual characteristics described in the book, the reaction to state and forced atheization in the CEE countries was different. The general observation at the same time is that atheization was not as completely successful as the Communist Party wanted and reflected in the censuses and reports.

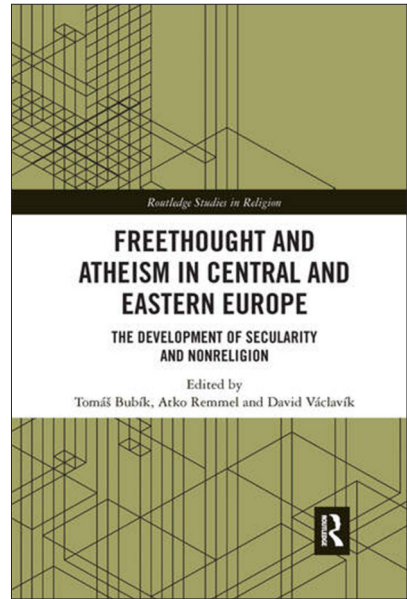
At the end of the 20th century, after the collapse of the socialist bloc, a religious “renaissance” occurred in the CEE countries. In a period of paradigm break and identity crisis, a return to traditional values offered by traditional churches was expected. Nevertheless, the authors show the difference in the course of these processes in the CEE countries. The significant role of the nationalist aspect in the return / non-return of the post-socialist population to the bosom of the church was again perfectly shown.

Among religious scholars, there is an ongoing discussion about the methods and criteria for determining and counting the number of believers and non-believers in modern society. Some researchers consider respondents’ self-identification to be a reliable criterion, others consider participation in religious practices to be critical (Zuckerman, 2006; Pasquale, Galen, Zuckerman, 2016). Be that as it may, the authors of the thematic chapters agree

that the number of people who consider themselves atheists is very small. This is attributed to the fact that atheism was discredited during the socialist period. The data show that at the present stage, a significant part of people (especially in the Czech Republic and Estonia) prefer to call themselves non-religious. This “non-religiousness” is no longer associated with any form of active theomachism, but represents indifference to religion. However, the author of the “Estonian” chapter has perfectly shown that this “irreligion” often means only non-membership of the traditional church. Thus, the “typical atheist” or “non-believer” in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is no longer a person who consciously and actively opposes religion and the institutions that represent religion, but rather someone who ignores religion, does not consider it important and, in a sense, doesn’t really understand it. In fact, both traditional religion and atheism, as stratified systems of values, retreat in confusion under the onslaught of diverse, eclectically mixed “spirituality”. Thus, this publication in a sense actualizes the study and analysis of the beliefs and practices of the “unbelieving” part of the CEE population.

It should only be noted that the brief observations of ideas, theories and approaches mentioned above are illustrated in the book by an analysis of a vast array of data. This edition is replete with a significant amount of statistical data, survey results, and textual, sociological and cultural analyses. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are actively used, which is very important when studying such an “elusive” phenomenon as atheism.

It should be noted that one of the omissions of this publication is the absence of a chapter on atheism and freethinking in Belarus. Especially considering that Belarus has both a rich history of Marxist atheization and radical religious persecution, as well as a number of researchers studying the phenomenon of freethinking in Belarus (V. V. Starostenko, T. P. Korotkaya, etc.). Within the framework of the international conference “Religion and Society” (Mogilev, Belarus), an annual section dedicated to the study of freethinking is held, and the academic discipline “Freethinking in Belarus” is included in the curriculum of state universities (Starostenko, 2006). Located on the cultural borderland between the West and



the East, between the Orthodox and Catholic worlds, Belarus could be a promising object for the study of the connection between nationalism and irreligion presented in this book.

Speaking about the structure of this volume, it can be noted that the editors managed to largely avoid the frequent danger of such publications: the book is not just a “collection of articles”, but rather a unitary study, the chapters of which are subject to a single structure and have internal consistency. However, the reader may notice some imbalance in the structural parts of the chapters. This feature is almost inevitable in the preparation of such publications, because it is expected that specialist authors will pay more attention to their professional area of interest. So, a number of authors pay more attention to the analysis of statistical data, and some concentrate on the presentation of the philosophy and history of atheistic movements. This imbalance does not in any way detract from the value and importance of this publication, but on the contrary allows us to look at the phenomenon of atheism from various perspectives of humanitarian knowledge.

Summarizing, it can be noted that the book *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe. The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion* certainly became an important milestone in the study of atheism, which obviously needed such a publication. The edition made a notable contribution to the CEE study. It will be useful to anyone interested in the history and theory of atheism, as well as the characteristics of both individual countries of the former socialist bloc, and the entire CEE region as a whole. By identifying a number of promising issues, this publication has paved the way for further research on religiosity in CEE. The materials of this study will also be useful to researchers of enchantment, disenchantment and re-enchantment. It can also become an important tool for researchers of nationalism in the CEE countries.

BAHDAN SERDZIUK,

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of SAS in Bratislava

REFERENCES

- Campbell, C. (1971). *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Pasquale, F. L., Galen, L. W., Zuckerman, P. (2016). The Study of Secularity and the Nonreligious. In: P. Zuckerman, L. W. Galen, F. L. Pasquale (Eds.), *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (pp. 11–29). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schulze Wessel, M. (Ed.) (2006). *Nationalisierung der Religion und Sakralisierung der Nation im ostlichen Europa*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Starostenko, V. (2006). *Svobodomyслие i svoboda sovesti v Belarusi* [Freethought and freedom of conscience in Belarus; Старостенко В., *Свободомыслие и свобода совести в Беларуси*, Могилев: МГУ им. А. А. Кулешова]. Mogilev: MSU.
- Zuckerman, P. (2006). Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns. In: M. Martin (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (pp. 47–66). Cambridge University Press.