CZECH REPUBLIC: THE PROMISED LAND FOR ATHEISTS?

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In recent years, the sociology of religion has faced an increasing interest in the topic of non-religion (Bullivant, Lee 2012). Among the main impulses for this trend, we can name a paradigmatic shift from the secularization paradigm approaching non-religion in modern societies as a "norm", while seeing religious phenomena as representing a "problem", to alternative perspectives that "problematize" the opposite pole. In the new context, secular societies are viewed in a different light – not as "automatic" products of advancing modernization, but as results of non-self-evident social, cultural and political factors (Wohlrab-Sahr, Burchardt 2012).

I. The most atheist nation?

The Czech Republic is regularly rated among the least religious countries in many international comparative surveys countries (Lužný, Navrátilová 2001; Greeley 2003; Voas 2009; Smith 2013). In a sense, the country may thus symbolize "the promised land for atheists".[1] For illustration, the data from the 2008 *European Values Study* (EVS) and the *Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism* study (GIRA) of 2012 can be used. In the first study, 16.6 percent of Czechs labeled themselves as "a convinced atheist"; a higher percentage among the surveyed countries was found only in the former East Germany (23.6 percent). In the second study, the Czech Republic ranked third in the list of the most atheist countries in the world: 30 percent of Czech respondents consider themselves "a convinced atheist"; a higher rate was recorded only in Japan (31 percent) and China (47 percent). Moreover, if we count the percentages of respondents who indicate "a convinced atheist" and "not a religious person" identity, the Czech Republic would move to first place worldwide (78 percent), followed by China (77 percent), France (63 percent) and Japan (62 percent) (see Table 1)

[1] The article entitled "The 8 best countries to be an atheist," published in 2012 at Salon.com, ranked the Czech Republic first (http://www.salon.com/2012/08/29/eight_of_the_best_countries_to_be_an_atheist/, retrieved June 5, 2015).

Table 1:

Percent saying they think of themselves as convinced atheists:

Countries	A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Don't know / no response
China	14%	30%	47%	9%
Japan	16%	31%	31%	23%
Czech Republic	20%	48%	30%	2%
France	37%	34%	29%	1%
Korea, Rep (South)	52%	31%	15%	2%
Germany	51%	33%	15%	1%
Netherlands	43%	42%	14%	2%
Austria	42%	43%	10%	5%
Iceland	57%	31%	10%	2%
Australia	37%	48%	10%	5%
Ireland	47%	44%	10%	0%

Source: Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012: 3)

Many sociological studies have noticed that the secular profile of the Czech Republic is exceptional even within the region of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, whose religious development was strongly formed for almost a half-century by an explicitly anti-religious regime (Zrinščak 2004; Müller 2011). Special attention is merited by the noticeable difference in the religious profiles of the populations of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, two countries that constituted one state for a significant period of the twentieth century (Greeley 2003; Froese 2005; cf. Váně, Štípková 2013). In this respect, it could be said that the Czech Republic represents a "special case" comparable with the position of East Germany (the former GDR), generally believed to be the most irreligious place in Europe (Pollack 2002; Froese, Pfaff 2005; Wohlrab-Sahr 2011).

Table 2: Belief in God and Religious Self-Assessment, 1990-2008 in Central and Eastern European Countries (Müller 2011)

	Belief in God			Religious Self-Assessment		
	1990	2008	*Diff.*	1990	2008	*Diff.*
Poland	95	95	*0*	96	88	*-8*
Slovakia	64	78	*+14*	74	80	*+6*
Croatia	77[a]	90	*+13*	71[a]	83	*+12*
Lithuania	73[a]	71	*-2*	55	84	*+29*
Slovenia	55	62	*+7*	73	72	*-1*
Hungary	58	67	*+9*	57	53	*-4*
Czech Republic	31	30	*-1*	40	33	*-7*
Latvia	67[a]	71	*+4*	54	76	*+22*
Estonia	46[a]	46	*0*	21	44	*+23*
East Germany	33	19	*-14*	37	18	*-19*
Romania	89	95	*+6*	75	82	*+7*
Bulgaria	36	68	*+32*	36	60	*+24*
Serbia	61[a]	85	*+24*	60[a]	89	*+29*
Moldova	86[a]	98	*+12*	82[a]	83	*+1*
Russia	35	71	*+36*	56	76	*+20*
Ukraine	65[a]	85	*+20*	64[a]	87	*+23*
Bosnia	80[a]	93	*+13*	70[a]	94	*+24*
Albania	91[a]	90	*-1*	45[a]	88	*+38*

Sources: **Belief in God**: EVS 1990-1993 ([a] WVS 1995-97); EVS 2008; 2-point scale („yes"/„no"); those answering „yes" in percent. **Religious self-assessment**: EVS 1990-1993 ([a] WVS 1994-1999); EVS 2008; 3-point scale („religious" – „not religious" – „convinced atheist"); those who consider themselves as religious.

However, several studies by Czech scholars have been published in recent years (Hamplová, Nešpor 2009; Nešporová, Nešpor 2009; Nešpor 2010; Václavík 2010; Hamplová 2013) that oppose the widely shared thesis that Czech society is the most atheist society (at least) in contemporary Europe. They argue that this thesis is based on a misunderstanding of the character of Czech religiosity, which is distinguished by a strong tendency towards privatization and individualization and high levels of distrust of traditional religious institutions, mainly the big Christian churches. This scholarly critique is grounded in empirical data that they interpret as evidence for the unsubstantiated mistaking of atheism for individualized and privatized spirituality. Hamplová and Nešpor (2009: 594), with the support of data from the Czech survey *Detraditionalization and individualization of religion* (DIN), claim that "despite low levels of church membership and attendance, Czechs are not indifferent to religious and spiritual phenomena". According to them, only a relatively limited part of the Czech population can be regarded as convinced (real) atheists. Many people from the "non-religious" category represent, in fact, a heterogeneous group often showing signs of various forms of alternative religiosity or privatized spirituality.

In this article, we pursue two basic goals: first, to analyze in more detail the nature of Czech non-religiosity with the intention of detecting its character more subtly than the interpretations operating with the term "atheism"; and second, to answer the question about the social origins of the position where the Czech population is situated in relation to religion. As a result, we hope to be able to understand more thoroughly "Czech atheism" and its embeddedness in the wider socio-cultural context.

II. Modern history of Czech (non)religiosity

One of the key factors influencing the growth of ambiguous attitudes of the majority of the Czech population towards religion are social and demographic changes experienced by Czech society in the course of the twentieth century.

The direction of the later development was already foreshadowed during the era of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938).[2] Its main features include rising mistrust of religious institutions, the tendency to religious privatization and an increase in religious indifference. These developments also demonstrate the decisive role of opposition to the dominant Catholic Church in the transformation of the relationship of Czechs to religion. This relationship had developed most dramatically in the first years of the existence of the new state (cf. Paces 1999). A comparison of census data from 1910 and 1921 shows a rapid decrease – more than 1.2 million – in Catholic Church membership (Srb 2004).[3]

After World War II, the trends were reinforced by two factors: the expulsion of the German minority (about 2.6 million people) from Czech borderlands in 1945–1947, and the installment of a Communist regime in 1948. With the expulsion of the Germans, the renewed republic lost a substantial part of its population, of which a majority belonged to Catholic Church. The expulsion, however, also affected other denominations (such as the German Evangelical Church, the New Apostolic Church and the Old Catholic Church).

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[2] After several centuries of Austrian (Hapsburg) political domination, Czech statehood was renewed in 1918 with the establishment of a new democratic state of Czechs and Slovaks – Czechoslovakia. Though the existence of this state de facto ended in 1938 with the annexation of Sudetenland by Nazi Germany, and the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and a quasi-autonomous Slovak state in 1939, respectively, 1918 has been perceived by the majority of Czechs as the founding moment of modern Czech history and the beginning of Czech political independence up to the present day.

[3] A massive exit from the Catholic Church after 1918 (by almost 1.5 million members) and the establishment of national Czechoslovak in 1920, absorbing a large number of ex-Catholics, played an important role (Václavík 2010).

However, demographic and socio-economic changes brought about by the expulsion were even more profound. A continuous area of the Czech borderlands (Sudetenland) was practically depopulated, and later re-populated. This re-population of the borderlands was directed from above and carried out by the transfer of individuals, not whole communities, as was done in Polish Silesia. These individuals tended to come from lower social classes with lower education and a leftist political orientation. Often, they were "politically reliable" and sympathized with the Communist Party, which indicated a high probability of their non-confessionality.

The process of re-population of the formerly ethnically German borderlands led to the rupture of historical family and community bonds and decomposition of local religious memory (Spalová 2012). New social conditions prevailed; typically a nuclear family had been "embedded" in this region for only one generation, without any ties to the place and local community. As a result, local religious and cultural traditions (such as pilgrimages or collective celebrations of holy days) disappeared almost at once. Due to the rupture of social bonds, the gradual devastation of material expressions of religious life (churches, chapels, shrines) was soon set in motion. An intensive encroachment on religious infrastructure, leading to almost complete paralysis of religious groups' activities in some regions, took place as well. The majority of German priests had to leave their parishes, and many monasteries shut down.

After the installment of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the social, demographic and cultural transformation of Czech society continued, which was reflected in a substantial decline in religious participation. This dynamics accelerated not in the 1950s – when the harshest clash between the Communist regime and religious organizations (primarily the Catholic Church), with massive persecutions of priests as well as laymen, was under way – but in the 1960s and later, when the war and post-war generations came to a productive age (cf. Václavík 2007).

A clear decline was registered in relation to significant religious rites (baptism, weddings, etc.). In the 1970s, a majority of districts in Bohemia showed less than 30 percent of children were baptized and less than 12 percent had church weddings. In Moravia[4], the

[4] Located to the east, where fewer Germans were expelled, and thus a less affected part of today's Czech Republic.

number of the baptized oscillated between 50 and 60 percent, on average.[5] Church weddings reached between 30 – 50 percent in most Moravian districts and only in a few of Moravian districts surpassed 50 percent (Boháč 1999: map no. 104). Later in the 1980s the decline persisted.

At the same time, church attendance decreased considerably, especially among non-Catholic denominations. In the late 1960s, between 8-10 percent of believers attended masses regularly and in the late 1980s the percentage dropped to less than 6 percent. As with baptisms and church weddings, significant regional differences in regular church attendance existed – with the lowest rates in Sudetenland regions and the highest in the traditionalist areas of southern and central Moravia.

Another important factor, directly connected with state anti-religious policy, was reducing space for religious instruction at schools. The subject's position started to change significantly after 1952 with modification of its status from compulsory to optional (Horák 2011).[6] While before 1948 a large majority of children attended religious instruction at school, by the mid-1950s the rate dropped under 50 percent. Within ten years, this percentage had decreased sharply towards the ten percent line. A certain revival could be identified in the late 1960s during the period of liberalization of the regime (in the school-year 1969-70, 25 percent of children were enrolled in religious instruction). Nevertheless, with the end of the "Prague Spring", another rapid decline occurred; thus, in the late 1970s the involvement of children in religious instruction was hardly even 5 percent.

In the period of the 1970s and the 1980s, traditional religiosity continued to lose its position and for an increasing share of the population it definitely ceased to be attractive. Ideologically and politically grounded, explicit "atheization" of the society was, however, supported only by a minority of people. According to a survey carried out by the Institute for Public Opinion Research in 1979, "only 15 % of respondents agreed with state atheisation policy, while 67 % held the opinion that religion should simply be ignored" (Dražilová 1979: 78). These trends did not change until the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 and after a

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[5] Only in the districts of Žďár nad Sázavou, Uherské Hradiště, Hodonín and Vsetín were the percentages over 80 percent.

[6] In the previous period, religious instruction was compulsory for children who were members of churches officially recognized by the state, with the option to be de-registered by parents. It was not compulsory for non-confessional children (Horák 2011). According to the census data from 1950, 76.3 percent of inhabitants declared themselves Roman Catholic, 8.7 percent Evangelical, 7.7 percent Czechoslovak, 2.1 percent Greek Catholic and 0.5 percent Orthodox. Only 4.3 percent of Czechs declared "no confession" (Czech Statistical Office).

short religious revival in the early 1990s, we can observe the same trend even in contemporary Czech society (e.g. Václavíková Helšusová, Václavík 2006).

III. Atheism and non-religiosity

One of the basic problems for analysis of atheism in society is vague and theoretically inadequately anchored usage of the concept as a generally comprehensible and unambiguously applicable category. This state reflects the current situation of the scientific study of non-religion, where "theoretical and conceptual understanding is yet to catch up with the empirical work starting to amass" (Lee 2012: 129).

Cliteur (2009) understands atheism as the denial of theism, identified with Abrahamic religious tradition of one, personal, almighty and perfectly good God. Thus defined, atheism is not necessarily against religion as such, but only against a specific kind. Atheism is a "negative doctrine" and means "nothing more than the denial of the claims of theism" (Cliteur 2009: 5). In doing so, Cliteur distances himself from the understanding of atheism as a "secular belief", as when he refuses to see atheism as an elaborated alternative worldview competing with theism. At the same time, he attributes to it the status of a conscious, explicit position produced by weighing all the choices on the matter, while distinguishing between content and the motives for it.

Smith (1979: 9) defines atheism as the "absence of theistic belief", whereby theism is "belief in any god or number of gods". Similarly to Cliteur, he stresses that atheism in its basic form is not a sort of belief (typically in the non-existence of god or gods), but *absence* of belief. Theism and atheism thus represent descriptive terms designating the presence or absence of belief in god/gods without specification of reasons for the belief or unbelief. Simultaneously, Smith distinguishes two broad categories of atheism: implicit and explicit. *Implicit atheism* is characterized by the absence of theistic belief without its conscious rejection. *Explicit atheism*, on the contrary, describes the absence of theistic belief as a consequence of its deliberate rejection.[7] The related term *agnosticism* is not understood by Smith as "a third alternative" or "a middle-way between theism and atheism", but as a position associated with a different problem than the existence of god/gods. Agnosticism

[7] This position presupposes familiarity with theistic conceptions, so it could be also labeled "anti-theism".

“refers to the impossibility of knowledge with regard to a god or supernatural being” (Smith 1979: 10) and can have theistic and atheistic forms.

Gervais et al. (2011) argue against the notion of the “naturalness of religion”, which views atheism as something “unnatural”. If this notion is valid, “then atheists might be able to sustain their disbelief only through the continual exertion of cognitive effort” (Gervais et al. 2011: 403). The authors admit that analytic reasoning may contribute to the weakening of religious belief, but they add that “it does not follow that all religious disbelievers must use cognitive effort to maintain their atheism” (ibid.: 404). Cognitive effort is just one possible path to atheism. Another is to grow up in an environment with an absence of cultural support for theistic or supernatural-agent beliefs. Gervais et al. formulate a context biases approach that can be sum up as follows: “Religious belief is the natural product of cultural contexts in which learners receive clear clues that their models hold religious belief; atheism naturally results from contexts in which these clues are absent” (ibid.: 404).

Norenzayan and Gervais (2013) propose a typology that distinguishes four forms of atheism according to different psychological qualities. The first, termed *mind-blind atheism*, expresses the mental incapacity to conceptualize mindful supernatural agents (a God or gods) intuitively. This sort of atheism is usually produced by a cognitive disorder associated with the autism spectrum. Therefore, it is a rather unique form of atheism with a limited social and cultural impact.

The second form is called *analytic atheism*, meaning a rejection of religious conceptions arising from a rational and analytic approach which blocks or even rewrites intuitive support for religious conceptions and promotes religious skepticism. As examples of this kind of atheism we can see the so-called New Atheism and older systems of thought such as the Enlightenment scientific atheism of Freethinkers or Marxist atheism.

By *apatheism* is meant an attitude towards religion produced by a sense of existential security that transforms a person’s relationship with religion into one of indifference, resulting in a decline in the social significance of religion. This version of atheism relates to the comfort theory of religion (Norris, Inglehart 2004) with its basic axiom of the decisive impact of physical and social security on the degree of secularization in society. Sufficient levels of saturation of security needs, the theory says, leads both to a decrease in the social desirability and individual attractiveness of religion. Using this concept, it is possible to explain the low levels of contemporary religiosity in European countries with their

historically uniquely high level of social welfare and social equality and, at the same time, with the high degree of predictability of life and perceived existential security (cf. Zuckerman 2009).

The fourth type is known as *inCREDulous atheism*, which emerges in situations of a lack of cultural inputs for encouraging and maintaining the belief that supernatural agents are potent or real. The concept is based on the works of Henrich (2009) and Lanman (2012) and suggests that humans' preference for following ideas and behaviour that are regarded as normative and commonly shared in a given culture, expressed by significant persons within the group and supported by credibility enhancing displays (CREDs), explains the decline in religiosity.[8] Religion that is not "performed" – and thus maintained, confirmed and transmitted culturally – tends to succumb to marginalization and to gradually fade away. According to Lanman (2012), it is the low level of "performed religiosity" in Western European (especially Scandinavian) countries that plays the key role in explaining the increasing number of non-believers in the overall population.

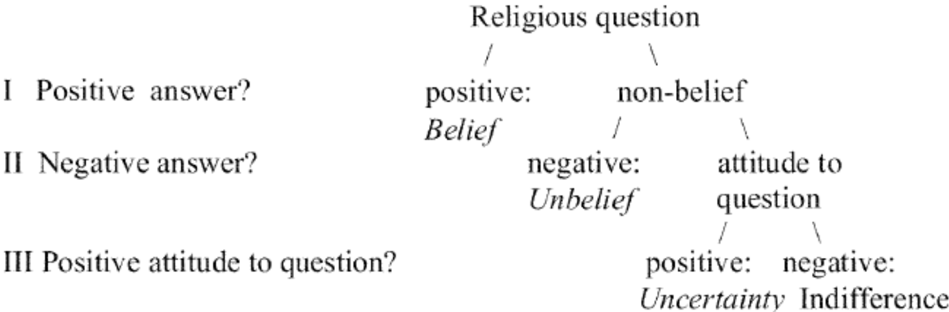
These types of atheism need to be understood, according to Norenzayan and Gervais, as ideal types. In real societies, we can find combinations and variations among them. Existing research shows that mainly the last two types – apatheism and inCREDulous atheism – are often intertwined and create a particularly favourable milieu for the decline of religion in public life, as well as for individuals.

Meulemann (2000, 2004) argues with respect to the religious question that it "grows out of the human condition itself" and "cannot be answered immanently, neither by experience nor reasoning, nor by science or philosophy", but "by a *belief*, that is, by the assumption of truth where truth cannot be proven" (Meulemann 2004: 47), and therefore each person may make series of responses (see Figure 1). With *unbelief*, the religious question (for example, about the existence of God) is answered negatively. However, when the religious question remains relevant for an individual, but no clear answer is conceivable, this produces *uncertainty.* And when the religious question loses its all relevance, it is meaningful to speak about *indifference*. Meulemann also connects various forms of non-belief with the social circumstances that produce them. *Spontaneous secularization*, so characteristic of Western European societies in the second half of the twentieth century,

[8] This fact is confirmed by psychological and anthropological experiments (cf. Krátký 2013; Xygalatas 2013).

arises from the differentiation of social spheres and constitutionally granted freedoms, and widens the range of personal options in relation to the religious question. In contrast, state-controlled *enforced secularization*, prevalent for most of the period Eastern European countries, leads to the predominance of unbelief over belief and indifference over uncertainty.

Figure 1: Responses to the religious question



Source: Meulemann (2004: 48)

Zuckerman (2012: 8) writes that like religious belief, “both atheism and irreligion come in a fairly wide variety of shapes, sizes, and textures”. The same applies to the “intermediate” category of people who are neither religious nor nonreligious and for whom the term “fuzzy fidelity” has been coined (Voas 2009; Storm 2009; cf. also Lim et al. 2010). Apart from individual, psychological or family factors, cultural and social influences play a role in molding the various forms of non-religious orientation (or atheism). Zuckermann documents this assertion by comparing the non-religious in the United States and Scandinavian countries (Denmark and Sweden) on three levels: experience of the rejection of religion, opinion concerning religion and personal beliefs and articulations concerning the non-existence of God. He concludes with the following findings:

> First, non-religious Americans are much more articulate about their rejection of religion, and see it as a major transition in their lives, whereas most non-religious Scandinavians don’t give it much thought, and see their loss of faith a something fairly mundane. Secondly, most non-religious Americans are much more critical of religion – and religious people – whereas most nonreligious Scandinavians exhibit a much more laid back, non-judgmental, and even sometimes positive view of religion and religious people. And finally, many non-religious Americans are much more likely to express a

> convinced atheistic orientation, and even self-label as atheists, whereas many non-religious Scandinavians are much more likely to express a non-committal, open-minded agnostic orientation (Zuckerman 2012: 17-18).

These conclusions – especially the third one – remind us that "being an atheist" is not only a matter of content, but also a matter of function. Actually, atheism also works as an identity embedded within a specific social, cultural and political context (Edgell et al. 2006; Smith 2010; LeDrew 2013; Beaman, Tomlins 2015).

IV. Roots of Czech atheism

In the context of Czech society where, for almost half a century, atheism constituted a part of the official state doctrine and was systematically promoted by various means, the influence of explicit atheist ideology might be seen as a decisive factor in explaining the current high level of non-religiosity. Yet, there are reasons to approach to the explanation as primarily a consequence of enforcement of *analytic atheism* with caution.

Firstly, the fact is that analytic atheism is linked with a specific intellectual stance whose real influence in society is generally overrated. This kind of atheism requires perpetual rational-critical reflection which should not be supposed to be practiced on a large scale and will probably always be limited to relatively narrow circles of the intellectual elite. Though such elites may have at their disposal sufficiently effective tools of power to enforce their opinions as official, due to difficulties in the transmission and preservation of such notions and attitudes their long-term effect will be rather weak and their influence determined by external circumstances. The noticeable difference in the relationship of contemporary Czech society to religion in comparison to that in Slovakia illustrates this fact (cf. Kvasničková 2006; Tížik 2012). Secondly, many analyses document that the Communist regime was not the source of the ambiguous relationship between Czech society to religion; its efforts rather only deepened the historical distrust of religious institutions and reinforced religious indifference for a substantial part of the Czech population (cf. Václavík 2010).

Therefore, it is an open question whether contemporary Czech "atheism" is not a product of the advanced modernization of Czech society, with an important role played by a paternalist state, characterized by a relatively extensive and functional social welfare system, supplemented by some other factors, such as demographic changes after 1945

resulting in the ethnic and cultural homogenization of Czech society, rather than a result of direct and purposeful political-ideological action. Czech "atheism" would, then, represent mainly apatheism expressed by high rate of indifference to the religious question, not a conscious rejection of religious belief.

During communist times Czech society was among the economically most advanced of the Soviet bloc, and according to some indicators (GDP per capita, industrial production, education), and especially in the period between the two world wars, even among the most advanced societies in the world.[9] Despite forty years of a centrally planned economy, which left a strong mark on the country's economic potential and lowered the standard of living of its inhabitants, Czechoslovakian (and then Czech) society entered the post-1989 era of economic and social transformation as a relatively stable nation with a high potential for growth and development. Unlike the majority of post-communist countries, Czech society after 1989 preserved many features of the paternalist state by maintaining a rather low unemployment rate[10], extensive social welfare programs, strong egalitarianism and one of the lowest rates of poverty.[11]

These facts support the modernization thesis about the influence of existential security on religiosity in society. Nevertheless, to confirm this assumption sufficiently, one needs to look at other relevant indicators like trust in public institutions, the corruption perception index and the quality of life index. While the quality of life index situates the Czech Republic regularly roughly in the middle of the list, trust in public institutions is among the lowest not only in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, but in the whole European Union.[12] Similarly with the corruption perception index[13], whose results show the Czech people perceive a high level of corruption in comparison with other developed countries (25th place in the EU, 53rd place in the world in 2014).

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[9] Concerning GDP per capita, the Czech Republic was at the level of countries like Austria and even higher than some of today's most developed countries like Finland, Norway and Denmark (cf. Rákosník 2008).

[10] The highest unemployment rate was recorded in March 2000 (9.3 percent). For comparison, in Poland it was 20.3 percent (September 2002), in Slovakia 19.7 percent (July 2000) and in Estonia 19.0 percent (April 2010). The average unemployment rate in the Czech Republic oscillated around 6.5 percent in the period 1994-2015 (Eurostat).

[11] With respect to the whole population, the lowest proportion living in poverty, according to the OECD, is in the Czech Republic (5.8 percent), Denmark (6.0 percent), Iceland (6.4 percent) and Hungary (6.8 percent) (OECD Pensions at a Glance 2013).

[12] See http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org [Retrieved May 3, 2015].

[13] Cf. http://www.transparency.cz/vysledky-zebricku-zemi-podle-indexu-vnimani-korupce-2014/ [Retrieved May 3, 2015].

Apart from these “specifics” which distinguish Czech society from (similarly non-religious) Scandinavia, another important fact should be noted which is related to the differentiation between borderland and hinterland. Available data from the most recent censuses (1991, 2001, 2011) show the lowest level of religiosity in the borderland regions of the former Sudetenland. These are, at the same time, among the most economically underdeveloped regions in the Czech Republic, with high levels of unemployment, crime, poverty and ethnic tensions on the one hand, and low levels of life expectancy and quality of life on the other.

These facts suggest that a high degree of existential security cannot be viewed as the main (or the only) source of the low level of religiosity in Czech society. Rather, it seems that the gradual weakening of cultural and social support for religious notions and active religious participation has played and still plays an important part. No matter how ethnically and culturally homogeneous Czech society is in the contemporary European context, it is evident that with regard to religion the country is far from homogeneous. This is true not only along the borderland-hinterland axis, but also geographically/regionally (west vs. east). These differences lead us to the hypothesis that Czech “atheism” should be understood primarily as *inCREDulous atheism*, and analysis of Czech religiosity should emphasize the role of changes in credibility-enhancing displays and conditions for (religious) socialization.

V. Religiosity and the influence of the social environment

Sociological studies have found that the crucial mechanism helping to explain the extent of religiosity’s presence in a population is *religious socialization*, which functions particularly within the relationship between parents and children (Sherkat 2003; Guest 2008; Stolz 2009). Religion as a cultural or symbolic complex comprised of values, norms, meanings and behaviour patterns is adopted by an individual sometime during his life. Socialization mechanisms thus become a central focus of empirical sociological analyses of religiosity (Hoge, Petrillo, Smith 1982; Myers 1996; Bader, Desmond 2006; Collet Sabe 2007; Bengtson et al. 2009; Merino 2012; Petts 2015).

When examining the impact of the social environment on individual religiosity, it is useful to distinguish between *socialization* and *social influences* (Sherkat 2003; Merino 2012). Religious socialization strongly influences an individual’s religious preferences,

whereas social influences "affect how individuals act upon those preferences" (Merino 2012: 3) and "provide an explanation for religious dynamics in spite of or in addition to the impact of socialization" (Sherkat 2003: 153-154).

Scholars point out that in the analysis of the impact of religious socialization on an individual we must take into account macro-structural variables. Among them, *national context* plays a prominent role (Kelley, De Graaf 1997; Ruiter, Tubergen 2009; Muller, Neundorf 2012; Müller, De Graaf, Schmidt 2014). The national character may reinforce or weaken the influence of the environment of primary socialization (i.e., the family). According to Kelley and De Graaf (1997: 655), "a nation's religious environment shapes the way in which religious beliefs are passed on from parent to child." More specifically, the effect of family religiosity tends to be strong in secular national environments, while the effect of national (macro)context is relatively weak. Conversely, in a more religious nation, family religiosity tends to have a weaker influence than the national (macro)context.

The impact of national context relates to the network principle and socialization costs (Müller, De Graaf, Schmidt 2014). The environment that shapes individual religiosity involves not only close family, but also a larger network of (potential) friends, teachers, colleagues or partners on the one hand, and the complex of national culture (including the education system, the media and state policy) on the other. In a secular national context, Kelley and De Graaf (1997) argue, family background plays a powerful role, because parents try to control the impact of the secular environment on their children. Under such circumstances, religious socialization costs are high. By contrast, the costs decrease in a religious national context, for parents do not need to make such efforts to control the social environment surrounding their children. The mechanism works inversely for irreligious parents, albeit most of them are not completely anti-religious, because their worldview is rarely strictly atheist.

The model also aims at explaining the operation of the secularization process. The historically long period of high levels of religiosity was a result of the effects of the general religious environment where (religious) socialization of individuals took place. "[E]ven when parental socialization failed, the religious atmosphere of the nation and the devout beliefs of the overwhelming majority of potential friends, teachers, colleagues, and marriage partners inculcated belief" (Kelley, De Graaf 1997: 655-656). A major transformation began with the external forces of modernization that reduced the general level of religiosity in the population. "A self-reinforcing spiral of secularization then sets in, shifting the nation's

average religiosity ever further away from orthodoxy" (ibid.: 656). Under such conditions, children from more secular families become strongly secular, whereas for religious families the costs of successful religious socialization rise.

Müller, De Graaf and Schmidt (2014) find this explanation insufficient due its inability to account for religious change, or the secularization process. Instead, they focus on other (macro)structural features that might influence religious socialization costs, such as anti-religious state policies, the degree of economic development and income inequality. With anti-religious policies, modernization (associated with disintegration of "a sacred canopy" and the rise of existential security) and diminishing income inequality, religious socialization becomes more difficult. The authors, though, emphasize that they are not "so much interested in the main effects of these factors", but "in how contextual characteristics interact with individuals' religious socialization to produce a certain level of religious beliefs" (Müller, De Graaf, Schmidt 2014: 741). Their analysis of the factors mentioned above concludes that the strongest impact on socialization effects is associated with income inequality, and that economic development has no substantial effect. As a preliminary interpretation they offer a hypothesis based on the role of social capital: "As long as inequality is high, people have an incentive to invest in relational social capital that might be provided by religious organizations" (ibid: 757). Concerning the effects of anti-religious policies, Müller, De Graaf a Schmidt state, these led to suppression of religiosity in general, thus also to weakening of religious socialization in families.

The significant role of these mechanisms is supported by current findings of cognitive approaches in the study of religion (Gervais et al. 2011). The cognitive sciences, just as the sociology of religion, seek to answer the question of how people acquire (explicit) religious belief (Lanman 2012). While the former focus on the role of universal human cognitive pre-dispositions (cf. Gervais et al. 2011), the latter turns its attention to the impact of the environment where people live. Their cooperation may then shed light on the principles of acquisition and diffusion of religious belief. On these grounds, Lanman formulates the following hypothesis: "one of the most important variables determining whether an individual explicitly believes in non-physical agents is his/her degree of exposure to religious action, that is behavior that indexically signals to others that one actually believes in non-

physical agents”[14] (Lanman 2012: 51-52). To accept a certain religious notion, it is not enough to receive confirmation by an authority. Agreement between the notion and the action of the authority – its practical confirmation – is also needed.

Lanman lays out a theory of religion and secularization that aims at correcting comfort theory, which assumes a close relation between the rise of existential security and the decline of religious belief, but lacks anthropological and psychological persuasiveness. Lanman’s theory claims “that threats increase religious actions and that these actions, as CREDs, instill religious beliefs in each new generation. Conversely, when threats are reduced, so, too, are religious actions and, subsequently, levels of belief in subsequent generations” (Lanman 2012: 57). Specifically, perception of an existential threat has a triple effect on religious action: increased commitment to in-group ideologies and identities, motivation for extrinsic religious participation (e.g. rituals) and “superstitious” behaviour. Lanman’s perspective reminds us of the important role of commitment to in-group ideologies and identities – not only the religious, but also the secular, which are not, however, examined by Lanman.

Here, supply-side theory utilizing the notion of *religious demand* proves to be a suitable theoretical complement. Froese and Pfaff (2005: 402) take this to be “a macro-level concept describing the presence of a segment of population open to religious explanations”, which might be indicated empirically by the share of potential religious adherents in a population.[15] Another indicator of religious demand is the share of atheists in society, i.e. those “individuals who are convinced that religious goods have no value and in fact prefer explanations that are nonreligious in character” (ibid.: 402).[16] The authors cite the case of Eastern Germany, regarded as the most atheist country in the contemporary world, to demonstrate the key role of an intentional and active political action whose objective was not only to attack established religions, but also the promotion of a secular ideological alternative to religion, and, thus, reduction of the level of religious demand. The potential success of atheization is related to two main factors: “atheism will become a convincing alternative to religion for most people only when religious freedom is suppressed and they

[14] Lanman defines religion as “explicit beliefs in the existence of non-physical agents” (Lanman 2012: 50).

[15] Froese and Pfaff are inspired by the supply-side theory of Stark and Finke (2000), but don’t accept their assumption of a constant level of religious demand in society.

[16] The authors emphasize a principal difference between atheists and agnostics who, as “unconvinced”, remain a part of the religious marketplace.

are convinced of the necessity of making an exclusive ideological commitment to atheism" (Froese, Pfaff 2005: 415).[17] In the absence of such an alternative worldview, religion is replaced not by atheism, but agnosticism or indifference: "To put this in terms of the socialization of religious preferences, the children of atheists would not necessarily remain committed atheists unless real efforts are made to communicate the absolute rejection of religion" (ibid.).

Another important aspect of the communist regime's anti-religious campaign is reported by Wohlrab-Sahr (2011). She agrees that the case of secularization in GDR was an "imposed" process implemented by various means of state repression. Without repression, the process would not have been as rapid and profound as it was. However, she adds, the policy's success was substantially reinforced by the fact that "it was able to develop inner plausibility that could be separated out from its context of implementation" (Wohlrab-Sahr 2011: 64). The regime succeeded in following the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism, scientism and the critique of religion and, at the same time, instigating a conflict of loyalty between religion and politics (the state), and religion and science at the individual level. "Enforced" secularity, thus, became a subjective plausible meaning structure for a large part of Eastern German society.

Many sociological analyses point out that the success of communist regimes in promoting forced secularization and establishing atheism in the Central and Eastern European countries varied (Zrinščak 2004; Müller, Neundorf 2012; Borowik et al. 2013). In addition to the previously mentioned factors, the duration of atheization, the strength of linkage between religious and national identity and the functioning of churches during the communist period contributed to the variation observed among communist societies. The effectiveness of anti-religious campaign is has an influence on the potential for religious revival after the fall of the regime.

VI. Belief in God and religious socialization

In the following pages, we analyze empirical data related to respondents' religiosity and how it is linked with their religious socialization utilizing data from the *ISSP 2008 – Religion* collected for the Czech Republic.

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[17] The strong rootedness of atheism in Eastern Germany and the success of the atheization efforts of the communist régime are explained by the authors with reference to the pre-communist tradition of anti-religiously oriented socialism and the considerable weakening of the Lutheran church during the Nazi era.

The religious belief of respondents is indicated by variable q16 - *Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.* The answers were then recoded[18] into four categories: atheism (item 1), fuzzy fidelity (items 2, 4, 5), non-theistic belief (item 3) and theistic belief (item 6).[19]

Table 3: Belief in God

1 – I don't believe in God	41 %
2 - I don't whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	14 %
3 - I don't believe in personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	16 %
4 – I find myself believe in God some of the time, but not at others	7 %
5 – While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	11 %
6 – I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it	11 %
	100 %

Source: ISSP 2008

Apparently, 11 percent of individuals in the current Czech population believe in God, 16 percent in a Higher Power, 32 percent fall into the "fuzzy fidelity" category and 41 percent do not believe in God. If we expand the meaning of "atheist" to all those without an explicit belief in God or a Higher Power (including respondents with "fuzzy fidelity"), 73 percent of respondents fall into this category. In any case, with or without such expansion, the percentage of those who could be classified as atheists clearly outnumbers the percentage of the self-declared convinced atheists mentioned at the beginning of this paper (16.6 percent in EVS 2008, 30 percent in GIRA 2012). We can infer from this fact that a significant part of

[18] Our coding differs from that of Meulemann (2004: 50); he coded items 6 and 3 as "belief", 1 as "unbelief", 4, 5 and no answer items as "uncertainty" and item 2 as "indifference".

[19] Respondents with no answer (1.1 percent of the total sample) are not included in the analysis.

those who declare unbelief in God or indifference to the religious question do not perceive their position as an expression of "atheism", but rather simply as "non-religiosity".

Another analyzed variable was stability of (un)belief in God, indicated by question q17 – *Which best describes your beliefs about God?*.

Table 4: Stability of (un)belief in God

I don't believe in God now and I never have	61 %
I don't believe in God now, but I used to	11 %
I believe in God now, but I didn't used to	5 %
I believe in God now and I always have	23 %
	100 %

Source: ISSP 2008

As we can see in Table 4, the Czech population is relatively stable in its (un)belief in God in the course of time. During their lives, 23 percent of respondents haven't changed their belief in God and 61 percent of them have remained stable in their unbelief. Some change did occur only in the lives of 16 percent of respondents: 11 percent of them left their belief, while 5 percent became believers.

An interesting fact emerges from comparison of these answers with the answers to the previous question. If we count up first two items, which represent current unbelief in God, we have 72 percent of respondents – versus 28 percent of those who currently believe in God. But for the previous question (see Table 3), we indicated only 41 percent of respondents directly declared unbelief in God. A closer look at Table 5 reveals that of those who never believed in God, 74 percent chose the answer "I don't believe in God", while 16 percent opted for some of the "fuzzy fidelity" items and 10 percent even for non-theistic belief. It is also remarkable that only 16 percent of those who left their belief chose the answer "I don't believe in God"; almost half of them (49 percent) opted for "fuzzy fidelity" and more than a third of them for non-theistic belief (35 percent).

In the next step, we inquire into the influence of religious socialization in the family. From the variables related to religious affiliation and the church attendance of both parents

in each respondent's childhood[20], we created the variable *Family of origin* with five categories: mother without affiliation, mother with affiliation, both parents with affiliation, mother with affiliation and regular attendance[21] and both parents with affiliation and regular attendance. This (quasi)ordinal variable indicates increasing intensity of religious socialization (or exposure to religion) in the family of origin.[22] Percentage values of the likelihood of belief in God in relation to family of origin's religiosity are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Belief in God and family of origin

	Theistic belief	**Non-theistic belief**	**Fuzzy Fidelity**	**Atheism**
Mother with no affiliation	4 %	28 %	23 %	62 %
Mother with affiliation	2 %	10 %	8 %	6 %
Both parents with affiliation	13 %	32 %	31 %	23 %
Mother with affiliation and participation	18 %	14 %	13 %	5 %
Both parents with affiliation and participation	63 %	18 %	25 %	4 %
	100 %	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**

Source: ISSP 2008

Current adult believers in God have a 63 percent probability of coming from families where both parents were affiliated and who had regular church attendance in the respondent's childhood. The other types of families represented here exhibit much lower likelihood, and this likelihood diminishes with the decrease in parents' (mother's) religiosity. In contrast, current adult atheists have a 62 percent probability of coming from families with

[20] Variables q20+q21 (*What was your mother's/father's religious preference when you were a child?*) and q24 + q25 (*When you were a child, how often did your mother/father attend religious services?*).
[21] At least once a month.
[22] The independent influence of the father was not studied, since existing analyses have proved the primary influence of the mother (cf. Paleček, Vido 2014).

parents without religious affiliation and church attendance; as parents' religiosity increases, the likelihood of respondents' atheism decreases considerably, with the exception of families in which both parents have a religious affiliation. The situation of families of origin for fuzzy fidelity respondents is more complex. The observed variability may be explained by the internal heterogeneity of the category. Also, the likelihood of non-theistic belief is not associated with family of origin's religiosity in a linear fashion. Non-theistic believers most often (33 percent likelihood) come from families where both parents have a religious affiliation but without regular church attendance; this might be interpreted to mean that the religious affiliation of parents influences the relationship of their children to the supernatural in only a general way, and children's belief in a (personal) God is reinforced only by the parents' regular attendance.

We also analyzed religious socialization in childhood with regard to its extent, utilizing an ordinal variable with three categories: socialization without affiliation and regular attendance, socialization with affiliation and without regular attendance and socialization with affiliation and regular attendance.

Table 7: Belief in God and religious socialization

	Theistic belief	Non-theistic belief	Fuzzy Fidelity	Atheism
No affiliation, no participation	5 %	49 %	38 %	86 %
With affiliation	13 %	30 %	31 %	9 %
With affiliation + participation	82 %	21 %	31 %	5 %
		100 %	**100 %**	**100 %**

Zdroj: ISSP 2008

Four percent of adults who declared a belief in God were primarily socialized without affiliation, 11 percent with affiliation and with the highest probability (85 percent) they are products of primary religious socialization with affiliation and attendance. Conversely, 87 % of current adult atheists come from families where they were socialized without affiliation or attendance. The likelihood of atheism sharply decreases for respondents with families in which they were socialized with affiliation or with affiliation and attendance (5 percent and 8

percent, respectively). The impact of the extent of primary religious socialization on (un)belief in God is evidently strong. The situation is different for respondents with fuzzy fidelity; here (un)belief in God is not apparently influenced by the extent of primary religious socialization. It is also interesting that individuals who believe in a Higher Power are more likely to come from families without religious socialization.

Though primary socialization influences a person throughout his/her lifetime, in adulthood s/he is emancipated from the direct influence of the family of origin and his/her (un)belief in God might change depending on other social influences. One thus may maintain his/her (un)belief, convert from unbelief to belief, or turn away from belief to unbelief. The proportion of respondents who have preserved their belief and unbelief or changed from one to another in relation to the extent of primary religious socialization are displayed in Table 8.

Table 8: Stability of (un)belief in God and religious socialization

	Never believed	Always believed	Didn't believe, believe now	Believed, don't believe now
No affiliation, no participation	87 %	3 %	25 %	26 %
With affiliation	10 %	21 %	43 %	36 %
With affiliation + participation	3 %	76 %	32 %	38 %
	100 %	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**

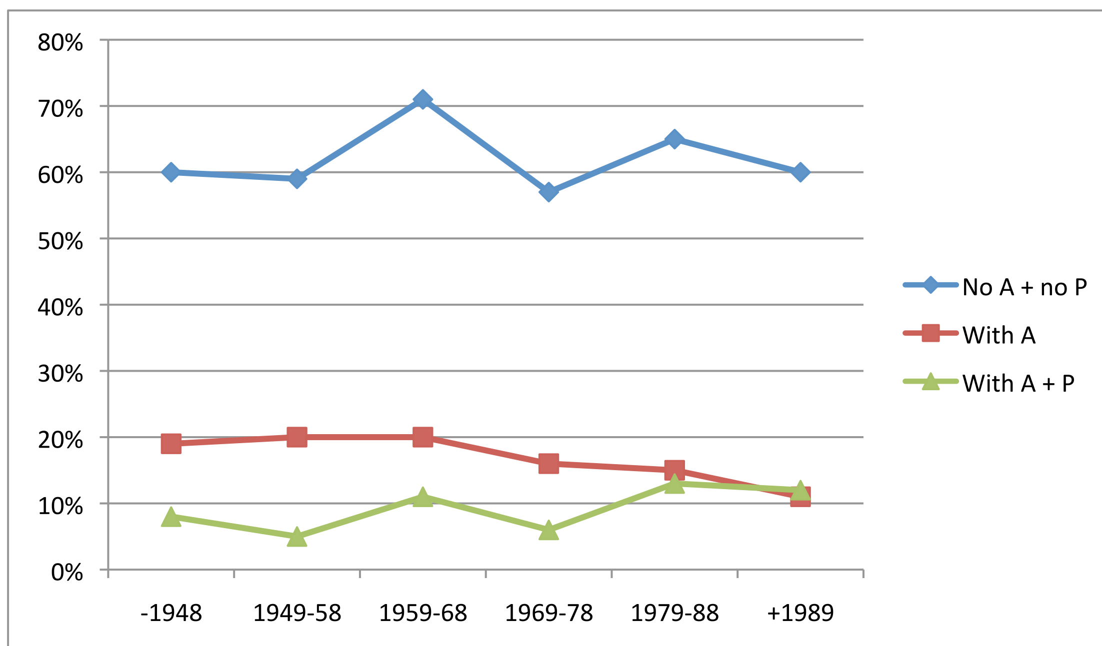
N=1254, Likelihood Ratio=914,5, df=6, sig<0,00
Source: ISSP 2008

Adults who have never believed in God are most likely (88 percent) to come from families that socialize them without religious affiliation and (regular) attendance. In contrast, those who have always believed in God, are most likely (77 percent) to come from families that socialized them with affiliation as well as attendance. Adults who converted from unbelief to belief were most often primarily socialized with affiliation and without attendance (43 percent). The likelihood of the opposite change – from belief in God to unbelief – is not notably differentiated with respect to extent of primary socialization. However, it is a bit higher for people socialized at least with religious affiliation.[23]

[23] The data do not allow us to find out when the change occurred.

As was suggested, parents are the most important agents of socialization; though personality formation, including the relationship to the supernatural, is influenced by other factors, as well. First, despite being socialized with religious affiliation or even regular attendance, a person's socialization might vary by quality or intensity. Second, in addition to the belief transmitted by parents or experience of belief that developed due to church attendance, the (religious) worldview can be also mediated to children by other agents – including the education system, peer groups, the media, etc. A child is thus confronted not only with family religious background, but also with macro-societal culture. During the communist period, secular (even atheist) culture was enforced by command. So it is rational to ask what was the influence of the clash between socialized religion and state atheism on people's attitudes towards God in their adulthood.

Chart 1: Generational distribution of atheism and religious socialization



n=, Likelihood=, sig<0,00
Source: ISSP 2008

Chart 1 shows rates of atheism (compared to theistic belief, non-theistic belief and fuzzy fidelity) in adulthood in relation to the extent of primary religious socialization by

cohorts. At first glance, it is obvious that these values are relatively stable across cohorts. Fifty-seven to seventy-one percent of individuals who were socialized without religious affiliation and regular church attendance are atheists in their adulthood. For individuals socialized with affiliation the likelihood declines considerably to 10-20 percent and for those socialized with affiliation and attendance the likelihood of atheism decreases further (with the exception of the youngest, it is under 10 percent of respondents). None of the three curves changes across cohorts, which suggests that generational embedding of primary socialization had no significant effect on the potential atheism of a person in adulthood.

VII. Conclusion

Our analysis reveals a high level of unbelief in God in contemporary Czech society and offers a sociological explanation. The exact extent of *atheism* depends on how we approach those individuals who do not declare an explicit belief in God but, at the same time, do not embrace an answer that directly rejects this belief. The incidence of atheism in the Czech population is thus dependent on the breadth and character of its definition. In any case, it is demonstrable that the level of conscious atheism expressed by self-identification as "convinced atheist" is far below the number of non-believers in God or non-religious people. This fact may indicate at least two things: a) distance from the label "atheist", perceived as obscure or ideologically (or otherwise) unacceptable; or b) non-identification with atheism in the sense of analytic atheism. In both cases this signals a limited impact of analytic atheism on people's worldview in Czech society. The reported non-religiosity of a significant part of the Czech population, therefore, must spring from a different source.

Our analysis confirms the significant impact of primary socialization within the family of origin on the presence or absence of belief in God in one's adulthood. These findings are in tune with the hypothesis on the increased impact of religious socialization in secular societies and supports our expectation that the high level of non-belief in God in the Czech population might rather be an expression of inCREDulous atheism, or, alternatively, apatheism – i.e., the absence of cultural support for the diffusion and preservation of religious conceptions combined with a reduction of religious demand in people's lives. Those who have gone through a more thorough primary religious socialization have been able to retain their belief into adulthood. The surrounding secular (atheist) society has not been so

influential as to discourage them from their belief. On the other hand, those without primary religious socialization have a very limited likelihood of converting to religious belief later in life. The relatively strong resistance of people with religious socialization in the highly secular Czech society is also seen in their relatively low likelihood of atheism in adulthood across cohorts.

On the basis of presented data, we can characterize the Czech population as situated close to the populations of the Scandinavian countries, which are also distinguished by a prevalent non-religiosity that does not overlap with conscious atheism and leaves space for various intermediate positions ranging from indifference to various forms of individualized and non-institutionalized religiosity. The low social and political significance of institutionalized religion (churches) in post-1989 Czech society has not provoked explicit opposition to religion and assertive identification with the label of "convinced atheist". As the works of other authors document (Spousta 2002; Hamplová, Nešpor 2009; Nešporová, Nešpor 2009), there is a wide social space for diverse forms of alternative spirituality and orientations toward the supernatural. But engagement with them is not necessarily framed by actors in terms of "religion", a label which tends to be reserved for traditional institutionalized (Christian/church) forms.

In this article, we have offered a basic outline of the current religious situation in Czech society without delving into the complexity of socio-demographic and/or geographical differences, which would undoubtedly be valuable. Still, we hope that even such a limited attempt gives a clue to answering the question about the position of atheism in today's Czech Republic and enables the assessment of the validity of the country's classification as the "promised land for atheists". The profession of conscious (or analytic) atheism does not lead to social conflicts or marginalization/ostracization. In this sense, the Czech Republic is, in an international context, really a hospitable place for the irreligious. But this does not automatically mean that conscious atheism is a dominant worldview or attitude within the Czech population.

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